

The background of the book cover is a collage of vibrant, colorful floral and abstract patterns. A central rectangular photograph shows the lower legs and feet of several people standing in a row. The text is overlaid on this image.

futura publikacije

SVENKA SAVIĆ &
Marija Aleksandrović
Stanka Dimitrov
Jelena Jovanović

ROMANI WOMEN

Svenka Savić and
Marija Aleksandrović
Stanka Dimitrov
Jelena Jovanović

ROMANI WOMEN

Oral Histories of Romani Women in Vojvodina

Translation coordinator and editor Aleksandra Izgarjan

Translators
Aleksandra Izgarjan
Diana Stankić-Prodanović
Anka Vidačić
Edita Jankov
Tatjana Perić



Novi Sad 2002

Serie: Oral Histories, 5

Publisher
FUTURA PUBLIKACIJE
Novi Sad, S. Musića 24

Cover design: Relja Dražić
Photo detail on cover: Judith M. Horváth

Publication was helped by
FUND FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY
and research and work on the book during 2002 was helped by
OXFAM

Oral Histories Of Romany Women In Vojvodina

*Oral history has for its subject the
most brilliant topic – human being*

Vojvodina is a region (21.506 km²) on the north of Yugoslavia where various ethnic groups have lived for three centuries. Today it has 1.143.723 inhabitants who are members of different nationalities, apart from Serbs who constitute the largest national group, there are also Albanians, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Romani people, Croats, Germans and ethnic minorities as Jews and Vlachs.

Coexistence of various groups in this region dates from XVII century when this part of Yugoslav territory belonged to the former Austro – Hungarian empire. The area close to the border with Turkish Empire, south of the rivers Sava and Danube, was populated by various national groups, mostly Serbs, Slovaks and Ruthenians whom the dominant Hungarian and German population treated as minorities. Romani people migrated from India and inhabited this region in middle ages. Unlike other minorities who were granted some reliefs by Austro – Hungarian empire, they had very few rights and there was a set of rules which excluded them from the community (for example they had limited freedom of movement and their settlements had to be built outside towns.) There were other kinds of migrations due to various reasons (economy, job possibilities) which affected arrival of Romani people to Vojvodina between World War I and II and after.

Today in Vojvodina live Romani people who inhabited this region coming from the east, then those who came after the disintegration of the former Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (1990), most of them came to Vojvodina after wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo during the previous decade (1990-2000). Unlike other national minorities in Yugoslavia who after the World War II had their minority rights in the fields of education, information, and legal proceedings, Romani people did not have these rights because they were considered an ethnic minority. In 2002, Yugoslavia passed the new law on minorities which treats Romani people as national minorities. Yugoslavia is the eighth country that granted this status to Romani people.

Romani people in Vojvodina can be divided into groups according to the directions they followed when they migrated from India to the Balkans. They are all however united by Romani language which has distinct dialectal differences. Thus it can be concluded that from dialectal and religious point of view this community is not homogeneous in Vojvodina today. Vlach Romani

people belong to one dialectal group, they adopted a large number of dialectal characteristics from Romanians whose territory they crossed when coming to the Balkans and more specifically to Vojvodina. Names for their dialects vary, we can just say that those Romani people who inhabited this region in earlier period speak the Gurbet dialect and those who came from Kosovo speak the Arlian dialect. The degree of mutual understanding varies. These groups also have different religious affiliations: those who have been in Vojvodina for a longer period of time profess Christian religion and those from Kosovo Islam. (One should not confuse Romani people with Askali who have their specific cultural and dialectical characteristics). What is common to all Romani dialectal groups is that there still does not exist a written standard. At this moment there are several suggestions how this orthographic and lexical standard should look like. (For more data about Romani people see the book *Romi in Serbia* (1998) published by Centar za antiratnu akciju and Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja, Beograd).

During the previous decade (1990-2000) a large number of publications on the status of Romani population in Yugoslavia has been published. It is obvious that the majority (Serbian) population has a discriminatory attitude towards Romani population which can be concluded by a number of stereotypes (Bora Kuzmanović, 1991, p. 121). For example Romani people are described as having a good sense of humor, as being cheerful, temperamental, sloppy, noisy, dirty, resourceful, lazy, ready to steal, eloquent, irritable, etc. At the same time answers of the interviewed young people in Serbia show that Romani people are not perceived as: aggressive, chauvinist, thrifty, well organized, rough, stingy, inhospitable and uncommunicative. These researches do not show data according to sex, that is, they do not show in what measure majority population accepts or does not accept Romani women on the one hand, and on the other in what measure Romani people accept others, especially women from majority population (Serbian women).

A young group of Romani women enrolled in Women Studies and Research "Mileva Marić Einstein" during the school year 1990/2000. At the same time they enrolled at various faculties at the University of Novi Sad (scholarships were provided by the Fund for an Open Society) They participated in two year long research, training and educational program (coordinated by Svenka Savić).

The following year (January 26 – 27, 2001), Women nongovernmental groups organized in Belgrade international round table "Romani Women and Gender" (financed by the Fund for an Open Society) and they agreed upon a number of recommendations, the most important will be mentioned here. The state is expected to pass the laws which would make racial, national and gender discrimination a visible social problem, which would stipulate measures for

elimination of this and which would make the participants in such discrimination accountable. The state is also expected to abolish all existing laws and practices which constitute discrimination against women as is stipulated in the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women CEDAW which Yugoslavia ratified in 1982. The state is asked to pass gender sensitive regulations which would protect rights of women and to adopt a law against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion and sexual orientation. Romani organizations and women organizations are asked to integrate gender and Romani issues in their activities and consultations. A number of concrete measures regarding health, education, violence and right to work and social security have been offered.

In the beginning of 2001 students (non-Romani) of Women Studies and Research "Mileva Marić Einstein" conducted a small poll (mostly among young people). They interviewed representatives of the dominant nation (Serbian women in Novi Sad). On the basis of random sample a total of 100 women answered the question: "What is your first association when I say Romani woman?" The answers were then classified in several semantic groups: personal characteristics, appearance, clothes (most often colors), national affiliation, occupation (material status), religion, closeness or distance.

The data confirm those from earlier researches, young women from dominant national group in multinational and multicultural town like Novi Sad (population around 500.000) have a biased perception of Romani women and have ethnic distance towards them although they meet them in town every day. First association in relation to Romani woman is difference between cleanliness and race, that is dirt and whiteness of skin. These are patriarchal criteria which divide the community into two groups: those who are good and desirable and those who should be isolated and rejected. Positive association in relation to Romani woman is her beauty.

Having in mind all these data we decided to conduct a research (financed by OXFAM) in order to ascertain who Romani women are. The project was based on interviews which young Romani women (students of Women Studies and Research "Mileva Marić Einstein") had with elderly Romani women from their immediate surroundings. The questions were created with the goal to incite Romani women to tell their own life stories:

1. Family to which the woman belongs: childhood, rearing, ties with mother, grandmother or daughter/granddaughter;
2. Education, profession/professions, equality in the working place and in different periods of life;
3. Partner, husband/husbands, love life, marriage, sexuality, contraception, divorce;
4. Children: labor, motherhood, maternity leave, kindergarten, school,

differences in bringing up male and female children, example of father or mother in the family;

5. Financial state of affairs in the family during the years, real estates (house/apartment), issues of equality, household, everyday problems, workdays and state holidays;
6. Free time: does a woman have free time for herself, her friends, cultural events, how she spent holidays, weekends;
7. Public and political life: her participation in it, mostly in relation to war, World War II and wars in the region of ex-Yugoslavia. In Vojvodina period immediately after the World War II: confiscation of property, agrarian reform, conflict with USSR in 1949, new politics of self-management, Josip Broz Tito's death, wars in ex-Yugoslavia, sanctions against Yugoslavia, crises in Kosovo, intervention of NATO pact in Yugoslavia and air strikes.
8. Religion, role of the church;
9. Important changes in the life of the woman after 1990 and economic crisis in 1993.
10. Key moment in the woman's life, the happiest and saddest moments, possible crises, the woman's ambitions and dreams when she was a girl and which came true, the way she sees herself now, her recommendations to daughters and granddaughters;

Apart from these questions the interviewers also asked other questions depending on the story of the woman.

Each young Romani woman chose the elderly Romani woman whom she wanted to interview and during their first meeting she explained to her that she had the right to control the work on the material. She also informed her that in the end the woman had the right to say she did not want the material to be published.

Twenty women (born in Vojvodina in the period between 1917 – 1942) told the stories about their lives, how they managed to survive in the society where they grew up and which they consider their own.

Our definition of oral history is transmission of personal experience into verbal form. There are various methods of gathering oral histories and here we present to you ours. The project consisted of several phases: the students were first trained to conduct interviews and prepare material. The students then met elderly Romani women they wanted to interview and talked to them in order to gain their confidence. The interviews were then recorded. At least one audio-cassette (90 minutes) was recorded and interviews were continued if a particular woman wanted to talk more. Recorded material was then transcribed (the story recorded on tape was transferred into written text according to the rules

in relation to the goals of the project). Then the written material was typed and saved as a computer file. The focus was on the analysis of the contents of the story and not procedures (repetition, addition, bad start) or grammar and phonetics (pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology etc.), thus the students who transcribed the material noted all words, pauses, and unfinished sentences. Graphic representation of material was determined first: words were noted as they were spoken. Each story consists of three accompanying documents: protocol (data about the ways the recording was made), biogram (biographical data in chronological order of the oral history) and summary (most important facts of the story presented in such a way to enable researchers to find elements they are interested in (for example motherhood, employment etc.) In short all data which can be relevant for future interpretation of the recorded data are documented.

Mentor edited each story in the corpus. This process of gathering of oral histories demanded adequate method of representation – both dialectal and standard form had to be present. After editing, the text was given to the woman whose story was recorded. She made her remarks, and afterwards returned the text to the researchers to correct it. After giving her consent, the texts were published.

Romani students who participated in the project went through all these phases thus learning the importance of succession in the process of research and elements of teamwork. The total sum of joint efforts is huge. One story of 90 minutes demanded: two hours of preparatory talk, two hours of recording, twelve hours of transcription (depending on the person who transcribed), six hours of additional talk with the woman, three hours of correction of material, six hours of editing, eight to nine hours of translation if the story was translated into another language, two hours of making additional material (protocol, biogram, summary) – thus we can conclude that it took approximately 40 hours of team work for one story (one should also include the time the researchers spent traveling to visit women who live outside Novi Sad).

What are the benefits of this method?

Possibility for young Romani women to encounter elderly women from their own ethnic group is valuable for exchange of experience, gaining knowledge about their cultural lore and tradition, but also about individual efforts of women to gain trust of other women and knowledge about their lives. New friendships have been made especially between younger and older women. Secondly, young Romani women did not have other possibilities to become computer literate and they managed to learn how to use computers during the time they spent as students of Women Studies and Research “Mileva Marić Einstein”. They also traveled from their small villages to bigger towns. They had

a chance to work intensively with an experienced researcher who was always ready to answer all their questions. All this helped young Romani women to become more self confident, gain knowledge from various fields of their interest and maybe most importantly to feel that what they do is valuable for the community they live in.

On the other hand, the mentor who worked with these students learned many things about them and elderly Romani women, she changed her prejudices and understood the ways they approach work and responsibility: if a Romani woman is interested in the outcome of the activity she undertakes, she will surmount all obstacles.

We leave it to the reader to decide what is interesting, valuable and essential in the oral histories of elderly Romani women. What is evident in all of them are three (crucial) points in their lives: marriage (sometimes arranged), Word War I and II (when their fathers or husbands were killed so they had to raise children on their own) or those more recent wars (which took their grandsons), and old age (women lead lonely lives, they are often ill and without any means of support).

When we compare answers of women from majority groups (above mentioned project) who pass by Romani women in the street everyday with the stories of Romani women who sit in the street (they beg or tell fortune and thus earn their living) we realize how little they know about each other. That is why one should always ask oneself: why do these women sit in the street even when it is so cold they are chilled to the bones. They are trying to get warmth because they have no other warmer place to go to. They can feel warmth when we pass by them – they are all around us, only we do not see them. We, women who belong to the dominant national group, must not allow any group of women to be completely invisible in the structures of education, power, wealth ...

Our work continues. In August 2002 Women Studies in Belgrade organize Regional Gender Studies Mini School for Romani women students (financed by the Open Society Institute. It should help young Romani women (between age 18 – 30) from the Balkan region to understand gender theories in order to become successful leaders in their communities. Examples are already there: Jelena Jovanović, Marija Aleksandrović and Stanka Dimitrov who participated in collecting of oral histories of Romani women founded the Romani NGO “Mir” – Young Romani Researchers in 2001. Jelena Jovanović is a member of the team of the Ministry for National Minorities of the Province of Vojvodina. Marija Aleksandrović is the president of “Mir”. Stanka Dimitrov is a member of the board of Romani Student Organization of Novi Sad University.

We would like to thank all elderly Romani women who told us their stories, we learned a lot about life thanks to them. We also thank the Fund for an Open Society on its support and belief that project of this kind can be success-

ful, for their financial help in publishing of this book in Serbian (2001) and in English (2002). We thank OXFAM for helping us make the oral histories of elderly Romani women part of the data base about Romani people in our country. We thank the translation team and Milena Nikolich and Hannah Slavik who helped with their advice in editing. We would also like to thank Relja Dražić on his cooperation in publishing of this book.

July 11, 2002
Novi Sad

Svenka Savić

Problems In Translating “Romani Women”

When I was little my family used to live at my grandma's house. My grandma always had a lot of friends and one of them was Ana. In the spring and summer granny would undertake massive operation of cleaning the house, washing carpets and windows which usually took her and my mother couple of days to finish since we did not have washing machine at the time. Ana would always come to help granny clean. Every now and then they would take a break and sit under the huge walnut tree in our yard, sipping coffee, talking about their children and grandchildren and gossiping about neighbours. I loved to slop around on wet carpets that were spread in the yard and eavesdrop. Growing up listening to their stories I never could understand my friends who were told by their parents or grandparents that if they were not good, Gypsies would come to take them away. I would think of Ana, her wrinkled face and scarf on her head as she joked with my grandma. A couple of Romani families lived in a street near ours in houses that were painted in bright colours. Granny would send me there to invite them for a cup of coffee. When I became older we moved to a new block of flats and Romani people were no longer my neighbours. Granny kept me up to date with what happened to Ana's family but it was not the same. I didn't have an opportunity to meet them. Until now.

The project on collecting oral histories of Romani women was already going on for a year in Women Studies and Research when I learned about it and thought I would contribute by translating a story or two. When I started translating I could not begin to comprehend the challenges it would bring, but soon I was too drawn into it to let it go. I offered Svenka Saviaë my help as editor and translation coordinator. As I was translating I would grieve over the sad and hard life some women had, but then I would laugh at some funny situation or a witty remark and most often frown puzzled by some problem in translation. I would phone other colleagues to discuss that particular problem and end up retelling them what the Romani woman whose story I was translating said. And while we talked the solution would just crop up.

It is a widely held belief that translators should translate only into their native tongue. While I see good sides of this recommendation, the work on translation of this book led me to some new insights into the practice of translation. Recent works in Translation Studies and Cultural Studies are concerned with the problem of interventions the translators from the West make when translating the Third World texts. Consciously or unconsciously, some of these translators mould the source texts to fit the mainstream target culture or they introduce changes in the text in order to make it correspond to their preconceived no-

tions of the source culture. For them, the source culture is the Other and they need it to stay that way. During this project I have had the peculiar experience of the otherness. Yugoslav culture is in the West perceived as the Other, thus I know what it feels like to see your native tongue and culture marginalized. On the other hand, in Yugoslav community Romani people are perceived as the Other and in the stories of the Romani women this sense of marginalization is often present. In my opinion, this feeling of marginalization Romani women and I share contributed to my work as a translator. I was at all times careful not to make interventions in the text. I rather made an unusual construction or collocation in English than let the original meaning be sacrificed. This process was happening on two levels. At the surface level of the grammar and lexicology and on the deeper one of meaning, culture and tradition.

Most Romani women whose oral histories are presented here are uneducated, some are barely literate and most of them are rather old and ill. All this influenced the stream of their narration. Quite often they repeat what they said either using again the whole sentence or just the same words, they stop in the middle of the sentence without finishing it or they digress which sometimes makes their sentences hard to understand. I decided to preserve all these characteristics rather than try to make the text more coherent and smooth. Another problem was that again due to the above stated reasons Romani women use substandard language. This is evident on several levels, their words do not agree in gender, number and case as is prescribed by Serbian grammar so it can be difficult to understand their meaning. They often begin sentence in one tense (usually past) and finish in another (usually present). They use pronouns more often than nouns or mix cases which sometimes creates the problem of reference. They use words, expressions and constructions which are typical of local dialects or which are outdated. While formal characteristics of the sentence were preserved I decided not to try and translate the source text with particular English dialect or with substandard language. There is a number of reasons for this decision. First, I do not believe that it is good to translate one dialect with another. I think that it would be more beneficial for the readers to read these stories in standard, although informal English, then to try to make them believe that Romani women from Vojvodina speak Cockney or Southern dialect to name just two of more recognizable English dialects. I also opted for informal standard English simply because I do not speak substandard Serbian and English, thus I could not be sure that I would be able to use it properly, and consequently I would be running a risk to make the translation artificial. That is why there are still interrupted, broken sentences which speak of the narrator's confusion or some which are simply hard to understand together with contracted verbs and other characteristics of informal English, but I did not want to go so far as to introduce substandard language. I also did not want

to tone down swear words or translate them literally, instead I used most frequent equivalents in English.

The stories in this book are all steeped into tradition and customs. Most Romani women talk about customs related to Christmas, Easter and their patron saint's day, special meals that are made for those occasions and rites that are performed. I felt that we should not attempt to translate these customs. I think it would be completely unjustifiable to try to translate *korindjash* with Christmas caroler. The difference is so great it would take a couple of pages just to try to explain it. Or try to turn traditional *kolach* into a Christmas pudding. Instead all names for food and customs were kept in their original, only the spelling of words was changed because English alphabet does not have some letters present in Serbian alphabet, consequently the spelling was adapted to English pronunciation. Only personal names and names of places are kept in the original and the pronunciation of the letters that appear in them are given in the glossary at the end of the book. As it is evident from the stories most women are of Orthodox religion so their customs are the same with slight local variations. I can say that I am familiar with most of these customs because they are performed in my house, I watched my grandma, mum and aunt make the dishes mentioned and I make them myself. As an Orthodox Christian I am also familiar with the religious customs which Romani women mention. The description of customs is not always very detailed but instead of broadening the text, it was most often left to the reader to try to imagine the scene. The words which are most important for understanding of customs and which repeat themselves in most of the stories are given in the glossary. Some words related to customs which appear only once but without which it would be difficult for readers to understand the context are given in footnotes. The words which are strictly related to Romani customs are also kept in their original form and the translators did not want to give any further explanations for two reasons. Firstly, although familiar with it, none of the translators belong to Romani culture so we did not want to take the liberty to comment upon it, and secondly, just like in the case of customs which are common to both cultures, Serbian and Romani, the reader was left to decide on the meaning on the basis of the context. It is my opinion that the reader should be made aware at all times that they are reading a story about a life that does not belong to mainstream Western culture and as translators we did our best to preserve the feeling of two cultures which are often overlapping. Apart from customs related to religious holidays, weddings and funerals, the same principle was also applied to customs related to conjuring.

Another feature which is characteristic of most of the oral histories is that Romani women often speak in mixture of Romani and Serbian language. Romani words and sentences are preserved in the text and the translations are

provided in footnotes when necessary. The women also used Hungarian and Slovakian words and their translations are also provided in footnotes. This is done again in order to give the reader the feeling of multiculturalism of the community to which Romani women belong. Often Romani women use somewhat unusual constructions to explain their feelings of belonging to a particular nation or religion, for example one woman said she is of Serbian, Romani religion and these expressions are translated as such even if they are uncommon in English as well.

Social and historical aspects are an unavoidable part of oral histories and at times also presented problems in translation. Romani women talk about changes which have happened in Yugoslav society in the last fifty years. They witnessed Second World War, and regimes of Josip Broz Tito and Slobodan Milosević. Although most of them prefer Tito's rule to Milosević's, some women also remember repressive measures which were enforced during Tito's regime. Since I think it would be too demanding on the reader to know all the details from history of Yugoslavia and since they cannot be understood from the context, additional information are provided in footnotes and glossary.

I feel privileged for being able to do this translation. It enabled me to understand fully the importance of oral histories of women. Although it may seem that these women led ordinary lives, when we read their life stories we are able to gain profound insight into Romani communities, into our society and the changes it went through during the last half of the century. I think that books like this one can really help. Too often we hear reassurances on television and radio that there are twenty six nations living here in peace, but maybe we could really experience it just by reading a story of someone who comes from a different nation and culture but whose life was not that different from our grandmother's or aunt's. Both my grandma and Ana are no longer here but I know they would be very happy and proud to see this book.

June 23, 2002
Novi Sad

Aleksandra Izgarjan

Corpus: Biographies Of Elderly Romani Women

1920-1930				Birthplace	Student
1	Ljubica	79	(1921)	Gardinovci	Stanka Dimitrov
2	Radinka	78	(1923)	Stari Banovci	Svenka Savić
3	Cica	76	(1924)	Žabalj	Marija Aleksandrović
4	Gina	75	(1925)	Žabalj	Marija Aleksandrović
5	Kristina	74	(1926)	Stara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
6	Vida	73	(1927)	Stara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
7	Verica	71	(1929)	Kovilj	Stanka Dimitrov
1930-1940					
8	Marija	70	(1929)	Stara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
9	Ruža	68	(1930)	Stara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
10	Nada	66	(1932)	Žabalj	Marija Aleksandrović
11	Drenka	65	(1935)	Kovilj	Stanka Dimitrov
12	Živka	65	(1934)	Stari Banovci	Svenka Savić
13	Zlata	65	(1935)	Stara Pazova	Svenka Savić
14	Divna	64	(1935)	Žabalj	Marija Aleksandrović
15	Vidosava	63	(1936)	Slara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
16	Radmila	61	(1939)	Stara Pazova	Svenka Savić
1940-1950					
17	Jelena	60	(1940)	Žabalj	Marija Aleksandrović
18	Dragica	59	(1941)	Stara Pazova	Jelena Jovanović
19	Đurdica	55	(1946)	Vojka	Jelena Jovanović

Ljubica 80 years old, (1921)

I would like to know something about your childhood?

– I was born on January 6th, 1921. My mother went begging and this is how she raised us. I had five sisters: Julka, Sofija, Danica and Nina and two brothers. Those two brothers died, so did one sister, the rest of them are alive. They didn't go to school, but they taught themselves to read and write. They are very smart and reasonable. They are trading with great knowledge, they are skilled in all sorts of jobs although they never went to school. I finished three grades of the elementary school, I was a good pupil. At that time elementary school lasted for four years and then there was grammar school. They wanted me to go to the grammar school as well, but I got ill with night blindness. I couldn't see anything from four o'clock in the afternoon. So, my parents wouldn't let me go to school any longer. I was the best pupil, I was first in everything and I knew everything they asked me. Even today I know all sorts of things. I would go to school, then I would come home and I knew everything in school and at home whatever they asked me. You know, we were taught to go to church. We were also taught to go to our teacher's garden to weed. I didn't know how to weed a garden, so I pulled out onions in my teacher's garden. When she saw it, she almost fainted. We were also spanked when we weren't good.

I got ill as a young girl. I bore ten children. I got married once. My husband's name was Milan, we were of the same age. We got along well in good and bad times. We knew each other since we were kids, he used to come to Aradac to visit my family. That's how we met. So, when I was seventeen I married him and when I was eighteen I gave birth to Rada and Berislav.

Did you get married in church or at the registry office?

– We didn't get married at all. At the time it was not important to be married, but to live honestly and smartly. God forbid what is going on nowadays! They get children and put them into the orphanage. I delivered all my children at home, none in hospital. And healthy I was up until I was 70. Now I am 78, you see how old I am. I got a stroke 7 months ago. I got anemia and since I had not been having enough food to recover, I got a stroke. In my head. I am better now, because I take care of myself. Daliborka, my grand daughter looks after me. She does care, I can tell you, I eat just yogurt and sour cream, fried eggs, but I mustn't eat any meat. Neither can I eat any bacon, just soups and potatoes. That's what mostly I eat. It does well to me. Drenka, my daughter - in - law brings me soups, fish soups, too. I was taking medicines and got five injections. I was completely bent, my head was down next to my knees. Doctors were coming and giving me injections. That's how my head and neck became straight up

again. I used to work a lot, now I can't work any more. When I remember back, there used to be plenty of food, there was no dairy store, no milk to be sold, we used to get food from the village. We got all sorts of food from the village. I brought up ten children and two grandchildren, Daliborka and Boban.

What can you remember from the time when you were a little girl and went to school?

– I was very naughty. I liked to fight with boys. Then I would get five slaps on my palms with a willow stick. That's how children were treated. And my mum fought with my teacher because she had cut my hair. I was enrolled in Zrenjanin at the grammar school, because teachers didn't let me drop out. They wanted to support my education by all means, they gave me books and everything, but my parents wouldn't let me because of my night blindness. Now when there are newspapers with large letters, Daliborka brings me some, so I read in the evening till nine or ten, I turn the TV on, it plays some quiet music and I read. I also like to listen to the news. That's something I am interested in very much.

Well how come you dared to have fights with boys?

– I even had trouble with the police. A policeman came to me once to ask me why I had been cheeky. I picked up big china bowl with salad, threw it on him, broke the bowl and he was wet all over. He said, "Well thank you very much for being so cheeky." He didn't maltreat me. He didn't fine me, didn't slap me, he didn't say a word. He even said good-bye, gave me a kiss and left.

What was your wedding like?

– Your grandpa paid 1.500 dinars for me. It was a lot of money then. Girls had to be bought at that time, they couldn't just elope, Gypsy girls were bought. It was in 1937, and in 1938 I gave birth to Berislav. I had mother – in – law, two sisters – in – law, two brothers – in – law and father – in – law. He was such a dangerous man we could hardly cope with him. My husband beat him up. He beat him up and calmed him down. My husband was drafted and my father – in – law stayed at home as the man of the house. So he came and slapped me. And he kept hitting me. When Milan came home from the army, the he beat his father up. It was a shame then to fight with one's father. I buried both my father and mother – in – law. My brother - in - law had died before I got married. He was young, only 22, his lungs were ill. Lung diseases were frequent at that time, you could get ill just by passing him or by drinking from his glass. It was a seriously contagious disease. And there you have it, all my children have lung disease now. Only I don't. I am of another breed. I have stronger blood. My grandfather, mother's father lived as long as 105. My grandmother died when she just fell down and fell apart in childbirth. I have strong and healthy

roots, while my husband doesn't. Everybody in his family was ill: mother, father, brothers, and sisters – every one of them died. He also died from lung disease, when he was 40. He died in Pančevo, in hospital.

What happened when your old mad died?

– I went to hospital to visit him and he was hiding from me that he was spitting blood. I jumped over the wall to go inside the hospital. My daughter Bisa was also there. Boško and Djura, too. I went in at night to see them. Some Mrs. Bašić was head of the hospital. She went to England and I didn't hear anything about her afterwards. She didn't tell me a word. They thanked me for being such a good mother because I jumped over the wall and went to see my poor children.

So, then grandpa died. He took a shower, shaved, spruced up and went to watch TV with all other patients. Right there on the doorstep he fell and died. Blood suffocated him. He left his watch and wedding ring on the bed so that I would give it to Senija. I put it on my finger so that I wouldn't lose it, but I did. I gave the watch to Bora. He has it even now.

What kind of jobs did you do while grandpa was alive?

– We bought feathers, traded with goods, just as we do now. We had a lot of money. We lived very well, we weren't hungry or needy, but now we are both hungry and we need things. I also looked in cards and told fortune or in coffee drags and I earned money. I got everything from folks: flour, lard, bacon, meat, money, and all sorts of things. I had my pack of cards and I told fortune. And they believed me, they really did. I could guess everything. I told fortune mostly to girls, while those widowed women who whored always gave me most and I made my living thanks to them. Her husband dies and she whores around. I stumble upon her, tell fortune to her and I fill my bag with all sorts of things. They would give me cheese, bacon, meat, money, rings, necklaces, all sorts of things. That's how I lived. We would buy feather, spoil it, and bring it to a warehouse in Pančevo.

(The section below is spoken in Romani language.)

Let me tell you this in Gypsy language: Girls weren't whores then. A girl had to wait until a Gypsy man came to ask for her hand if her father wanted to sell her and if he didn't, she didn't dare to get married, because her father didn't let her. Your grandpa was a really good tradesman. And we spoiled feathers and sold them at Rada's warehouse in Pančevo. Rada, our warehouseman is now in England. We would put mud and geese dung into feathers. Before that we would gather dung into a tub and then we would use a small broom and spread it over feathers, to make them heavier. We would put them then onto a cart and bring them to Pančevo, sell them and return home with a purse full of money. I would hide money into the stove and I had a small shack without

an attic, so I put the money into a little hole, because I knew nobody would steel it from there. A purse full of money! And I was sent to force labor to some German, who was a tile maker, and he would say for himself that he was big German. Everything had to be as he ordered. He took me out three times to kill me. He was like Hitler! A Gypsy ratted on me, his name was Pica, from Rac family, from Elemir he told them that I was a communist. May God strike me dead if I lie. The police took me out three times to kill me, and my husband ran to some man to beg for my life, so that man came and told police to let me go. They cut my hair, shaved it off. I was going to work for that German, I cleaned the shed and chicken coops for him and he started to trust me. I also changed my name, I was Mary not Ljubica, I took a German name, telling them I was German, a German Gypsy woman, so that they wouldn't kill me. He said, "If you lay your hands on Mary one more time, I'll chase you out of Elemir, both you and the soldiers!" Somewhat later, I went to see his wife and I told her, "I put my money into a hole, but a child took the money from there and burnt it." He went to the bank to change those burnt bank notes and he brought them home. Such confidence they had in me! Mary, that German woman brought the money to me, her name was Mary. My darling! She went to England. Maybe I could write her a letter, she might answer. Maybe she died, she was already rather old. She had two daughters: Effi and Maggie, they respected me a lot. They would bring a bucket full of milk to me, some 5-6 liters, some bread, flour and bacon. They put all those things on cart and brought them to me to feed my children. Because I got ill after I got so scared when they wanted to kill me. They took me out to kill me, and my husband cried out, "Don't kill my wife, look how many children I have got!" And I cried, "I'm not a communist, I'm German." But I didn't speak German at all. So they asked, "How come you don't speak German, when you are telling us that you are a German?" I answered, "My mother was Serbian, my father a Gypsy, that's why I can speak only Serbian and Gypsy." That's how I stayed alive. But, ... well nothing. There was a Badandov, that's how they called that place, filled with water. It was a huge swamp with mud and water. They shaved my head and made me wash my head in that water. In freezing winter, frost and ice were all around. We had to wash our heads there, with no hair whatsoever. When we returned home, my father - in - law took some beans, warmed them up and put some embers into them. I sat by that fire and dried myself up. What will happen to me next, I was wondering. I recovered, I got up and went to work for that German family, for Mary, I had to clean chicken coops for a week. The man of the house couldn't clean it, high and mighty German, umperaco!¹ Our village was large with lots of Germans living there, so I had to clean. So he put some flour, lard, and bread

1 "Umperco" in Romani means someone who conquers, who wants to enslave.

onto a wheelbarrow and took it all to my home. That was how I brought up my ten children and two grandchildren. I didn't know there's any other kind of life, other life didn't exist then. And so many people were killed.

And what did you do when the war ended?

– There were hangings. It was on Christmas Eve; I was pregnant with Boško. My father was hanged on the Green Market in Zrenjanin. He was forty, when they hanged him. He left seven orphans behind. Nobody helped us, nobody. We got no pension. It just wasn't life and he was killed and burnt in Bagljaš, where those bones were dug out. It was on television, they showed dead men's bones which they dug out. Germans shot them and threw them into a hole as big as this room is, they just threw them in. My father told us, "If they hang us, you will know which one I am from by my shoelaces, I'll undo them." So we went to the bridge and we were watching Germans hanging them. Afterwards they threw them onto a truck and took them to Bagljaš. They killed them all and threw them into a pit. Then they threw quicklime onto them, spattered them with water, flesh fell off them, only bones remained. I was watching on TV how they took out dead men's bones in Zrenjanin. Many years afterwards. What could we do, we didn't dare go near, we didn't dare to come out. There was a vineyard nearby, so many people went into a shack there and watched Germans killing them and throwing them there, so that we could know it was them, and where they were thrown, buried, otherwise we wouldn't have known. Guards watched over the graveyard, we were not allowed to go there. If they saw a Gypsy there, they would kill him.

Did you have to wear that yellow ribbon?

– Yes, I did and I also had to go wherever they told me to. They would hit me, although I was pregnant, they didn't care. It was horrible. Nobody was allowed to go out after 5 o'clock, they would kill you instantly. German police! There was one among them with such teeth. He would always tell you, "How dare you talk back to me! You motherfucker!" He didn't speak Serbian. Afterwards, when he learnt, no one dared to say anything against him. Before he learnt Serbian, would say something in Serbian and he replied in German. We weren't allowed to go anywhere, anywhere at all. We weren't allowed and when we wanted to take feathers, we had to ask for a permit from head manager in Pančevo in order to take feathers there. Otherwise we couldn't go, God forbid! There was a man, Mile Brkic was his name. They tied him to a truck, there was a gun in the truck and German soldiers, and they dragged him in front of our Gypsy houses.

Did you live in the Gypsy lane?

– I lived in the Gypsy lane, in a small house, with no attic. We were so

poor, we were miserable. Some houses had power but we didn't. There weren't Gypsy houses with electricity. And that place, Badandov, was a trench where the communists were hiding. I fried dead pigs or cooked meat in a cauldron and brought them to partisans in the trench so that they had something to eat, I went every evening around six or six thirty. They would wait for me and I would give them food. We ate corn bread. My mother - in - law would bake four or five corn breads, so I would take that meat and corn bread and bring them to the partisans. There was Ljuba Zumbul from Elemir. I kept in touch with them as a communist. But then I had to confess to one Gypsy where I carried the meat. That Gypsy, who ratted on me for being a communist, was Pića from Elemir, he died. I had to confess to him that and he said, "I'm coming with you", so he came with me and we took those two bags with food to the communists. Little by little, he led the Germans to the trench to kill people. There were people from Srem and other places in Vojvodina. Then a communist came to me whom I didn't know before, he asked me to tell him his fortune by looking into cards. I looked into the cards and he gave me 10 dinars. It was quite a lot of money at that time, you could buy a kilo of bread for half a dinar. So I told him his fortune, "You'll go this way and you'll become an important man and you will return alive, but wounded." He came to me when the war ended, the war lasted for four years, and asked me, "Do you remember me?" I said, "You look familiar to me but I can't remember who you are." "You know you told fortune to me and you told me that I would go on a journey and come back wounded." "Well and so you did." "Where am I wounded?", he asked me. "You got shot in your back," I said. He then took off his clothes and showed me his wound on the back. But the bullet stayed inside, they didn't take it out. Who knows where that bullet hid itself, but still he had it in his back. So he kissed me and greeted my husband, who had already returned from the war and then he went away. "Well, why don't you stay for a while, I can get you some mineral water or fizz.", I told him. You could buy fizz then but you can't get such mineral water any more as we used to have. And fizz was made by people who make juice now. And that Badandov was next to the trench. By the trench, beside the rail there was a guardhouse, where communists were hiding. It was locked. Little son of that man was also with him. They took an iron bar, put it into the fire and broke into the guardhouse. But he put his hand under and the wire stabbed his hand. He didn't say a word. He said there was no one, so they didn't tear it down.

How did the Germans leave?

– They were invited to leave. There were Gypsies, Serbs, Tots, Germans and they left.

Who were the Tots?

– Slovaks. The war ended, but we still ate corn mush, corn bread, we

cooked stew, chowder and tick corn mush. We had to buy corn. At that time corn was not sprayed and corn bread was pure, one couldn't get ill from it or get a stain or something. But I got ill, I got typhus, typhoid fever. We cooked fish, but the fish wasn't properly cooked, I was hungry, so I got typhoid fever. How to cure myself, who will save me? There were no doctors, everyone was in the war then. My late uncle, father's brother found something like a potato, which grows in vineyards in the thorns, it was something black, and I ate that. I can't tell you what the name of that plant is. They put it on my soles, palms, on my head, stomach and typhus passed in a few days.

But I had no hair. How could I go out with no hair? So a woman gave a net to me. She knitted a net for me, thick, black one, so I tied it on my head as if I had some hair. The war was over and the children were born one by one, but no one was baptized. None. Just Bora was baptized, but Milan was not, neither were Boško and Toma. The girls weren't either. When Christmas came, we, poor Gypsies, beggars went singing as *korindjashes*², from one window to another. That is how we gathered some food and had something to eat. Once we ate enough, the police came and asked, "Why is this bread hanging over here?" And we said "We got it when we begged for food." And then one policeman, that same one with big teeth, said, "Don't you talk back, you motherfuckers!" I said, "Get out of here you son of a bitch! You ain't a man to me, but a dog, this is our food and that's that." So, he just turned around and left. After that I went to do housework instead of other people's maid, who didn't want to wash the floors. I had my stomach up to my nose and I washed the floor just to earn some bread. They put rolls, bread, coffee, sausages, meat, and all sorts of things into my bag and that's how I fed my children.

Refugees came from Bosnia. Bosnians. They fled from Bosnia. Mulberry was just ripe, but they didn't know what mulberry was. They picked full bowls of mulberry took them to the market to sell them. So I told them, "We make brandy from it, it isn't good as food." "But it's so sweet, it's very nice, buy some!", they said. I told them, "I don't want to buy any, I have a mulberry tree in front of my window." There were mulberry trees everywhere, but now people are planting walnut trees. I also have two walnut trees.

My late husband said, "Finally we are free." He went to the post office, called a friend and asked, "Am I free now and can I bring you some feathers?" "It's over. You are free now, just come and don't be afraid of anything," that friend said. We sprinkled water onto the feather. He bought it and sold it in Subotica, Hungary, England, who knows where. That's how the war ended. Half of the village was killed. There was a woman, Mara, who was going to the trench with me to fetch food for the partisans. We got five kilos of flour each

2 See the glossary at the end of the book.

month. Just to fry it, nothing else. And whenever I got the flour, I took it to her and sold. As soon as all of us, Gypsies, got the flour, we carried it to her to sell and she was feeding the communists. Nobody knew it. And then a woman came from the center, she was buried at the horse cemetery. She betrayed that woman. The Serbs killed her, that traitor, they cut her up in pieces as a dog. And they threw her into the mass grave with the communists, to be close to them, those ones buried in Bagljaš. We went to the place, where she'd been buried. We gathered women and children and shit onto her grave. Just to show how it felt to pour quicklime onto our people, just to show her how it felt to have shit on you. Her father and mother heard about it and hanged themselves.

The war was over and peace began, liberty began. We could live our lives as we wanted. We had plenty of everything, but most of all money. We did business with feathers and with pullovers. We traded. In all my life I didn't know how to do anything, but trade. I'm trading even today. I knew nothing about hoeing, sawing, I didn't know how to do anything else.

Did you send your children to school?

– I did, but German children would beat them up. Germans and Slovaks went together to school with them. They beat the children. I saw that my children suffered, so I didn't allow them to go any more. No one of them finished school, except Senija, who finished six grades of elementary school. Tito baptized her. I was wondering how to get rich. I thought, "Now that I have ten children, Tito will send me something". So I sent a letter to Tito. He baptized her, sent a name to her, Ksenija it was. She finished six grades of elementary school, nothing more. Rajko finished elementary school and left for Krčedin to be a locksmith. When he went there, the man was distilling brandy and there always was some of that fermented juice left. The lads were cleaning it up, had to throw it out. One of the lads drowned in that brew, then another one, five of them. My Milan crossed himself and has come back saying: "I don't want to work." So he came home and there he is in the trade business.

Where are your children now?

– Milan is at Belegiš, Senija at Kovilj, Milena also at Belegiš, Bisa is here, she didn't go to school at all. There's something wrong with her kidneys, she had treatment and she is coming out of the hospital today. Daliborka, my grand daughter, has three grades of elementary school, but knows more than those who went to university. She is very bright, when she is looking at you, she simply reads your thoughts. She is also clever, honest, she never goes out in the evening. She's heard about robbers in Vilovo who tied a woman to her bed, and tied a child to a chair, and they stole 700 DM. That's why she doesn't go anywhere.

I had no trouble giving birth to my children. My mother - in - law would

put down a tub, I would jump over it several times and the child was born. We had no diapers, we wrapped children in old rags, old shirts and skirts. That's how I raised them all. They are all big and fat, only they are ill.

Do you know any lullabies or old stories?

– I don't. I've always been serious, always angry, not a single man ever dared to look at me. I was so nasty. I liked to get into a fight, both with Gypsies and Serbs and with women, too. I had fights with everybody in this street. I beat up Daliborka so badly I almost killed her. Here behind the house I also got into a fight with a woman, her daughter, son - in - law, and their son as well. They provoked me and said, "You ugly Gypsy woman, you monkey face! You crazy woman!" So, I got hold of them and smacked them, there's no arguing then. There was a well here and we had no pump at all. Daliborka was little, she was just two years old. I had no water, how could I give water to the child? So, I went to the well to take out some water. But it was filthy with oil, shit, dust, all sorts of things. And one Croatian man came, he lived in second house from here, Zvonko was his name, "You won't take any water, I'll fuck your Gypsy mother and beat you up, just you wait!" I had a big screwdriver in my pocket. Bora was planting in the garden and had a hoe with him. He heard my voice and came out. Then, I took up a can, hit that man on the head and broke his skull. I took out the screwdriver to blow him in his head, but Bora took my hand and didn't allow it. "Mum, it's hard to serve a sentence. Don't go to Mitrovica.³ This will blow over." And they closed down that well. There she is now, that evil woman, who didn't let my children drink water. She is about to die from her heart. God is punishing her now. But this one, behind, she stole water and brought me some to drink. You see how much trouble I've seen. I waited to be seventy-eight and to be still on my feet. On my feet! My son Tomica has just died. He killed his wife and hanged himself. He said, "I'm not going to be in jail for twenty years." So, they both rest in peace now. It's better they did it than to become evil, rotten, scoundrels and bums. Now somebody can rape you if you are his sister, or his mother or if you just anybody.

How did Bora get married?

– Ruža was fifteen at the time. I was in prison then for getting into a fight with a Gypsy girl, my brother - in - law's daughter. I was sentenced for six and a half months. I was still breast-feeding Rajko. I had to leave my suckling child, the police took me into prison. I endured six and a half months. I beat her up so badly that she had to go to hospital. It was because she provoked me and I didn't let anyone provoke me. It was the way I was, saucy, everybody called me Hitler. Just as Hitler killed I could. A Bosnian woman came to me, she lived

3 The town of Sremska Mitrovica has a big prison.

near, she is dead now and she said to me, "You mother fucker, you Gypsy, I'll beat you up, I'll kill you!" We just bought that cottage, so I didn't want to make an enemy. It was just after grandfather died. I am as strong as the soil that is plowed, then hoed, then sowed! That's how strong I was. Strong! And I had such temper that when I hit somebody he immediately fell down. I hit her under her neck, she could die right away. I had strong hands as if they were from stone. And listen to this. I went to the well to fetch some water. "You won't get any, you Gypsy, fuck you, I'll kill you!", she yelled at me. "You'll kill me?" I asked her. "Yes, you.", she said. I always had a screwdriver or a knife with me. I knew what sort of trouble I could face in the street. "You'll kill me?" "You." I grabbed her by the hair and stepped on her hands. Her eyes popped out in pain. She called her brother - in - law and yelled in pain, "Brother come, this Gypsy is going to kill me!" But nobody came. When I beat her up, that Zonked whom I also hit and broke his head and that other man behind the house were laughing. He said, "It's a good thing you did, that mother fucker, bastard, you never had peace from her." Zvonko said, "You did a good job!" When her brother - in - law came, I hit him in the eye so he fell down immediately. 'You Gypsy mother fucker, screw you, do you want to kill us all?' I took out my switchblade to cut them all. My children ran about yelling at me, "Leave them alone, we'll go and fetch some water, from now on you won't be going any more."

There was a woman, Smilja was her name and she liked me a lot. She was a whore, really outrageous. And I looked into cards to tell her fortune. When I told her fortune, she gave me all sorts of things. It was good for me because then I could feed my children. So, she went out and said to that woman, "Oh, my God, why did make that grandma angry." "Why not?" "Cause she's taken out her knife, she'll cut your throat." One of my sons came running and so I went home. Again that woman's son - in - law passed behind our house and then I was ill. I had high sugar, I don't know what I had, I was ill. My youngest son Milan was picking spinach. And that man said, "I told you that I'll beat you up, you little fuck, now I'll beat you." As soon as he told that, Milan jumped behind my back. He hit him so he fell and raised his arms to ask him to leave him alone. "You'll beat my mother? You miserable scum! Now I'm going to beat you so you'll be good for nothing when I'm done!" His wife came to defend him. I grabbed his wife and slammed her against the wall, I broke her head. Both of them went in covered with blood and bent over. That's how I spent my whole life. I fed my children and defended them, I didn't allow anyone to touch them. No one dared hit my child. No one! I would have killed him instantly.

How did Boško get married?

– When I took his wife to be my daughter - in - law, she was very young. She didn't know anything, how to cook or wash. That's how young she was. So

we've been living together and living and living, and all the while she's been learning, learning and learning and now she is his wife.

You didn't get married after grandpa died?

– It never even crossed my mind to get married or to be somebody's lover. Never! I had no time to think about such things. I never allowed such nasty business. My eldest son is sixty now. He comes every morning to see me ever since I got ill. He peeps into the room to see if I'm still alive.

And the rest of your children?

– All my children came over last night to see me. Milena, Dejan, Boban, Milan and I can't remember who else. There were five or six of them, I had no bread to give them. And they were hungry. They didn't eat anything at home, they arrived hungry and I had no bread.

Do you remember, when we came once and then you made those...

– Yeah. Senija and Rada came to see me with all of their children. I didn't even have bread, only small pieces of crust. And I had some lard. What could I do with you, you were hungry as wolves. I fried those pieces of bread and little Danilo said, "You'll never make such good cakes like my granny made." He remembered that fried bread he ate so poor, hungry and miserable.

What do you call those cakes?

– Well you don't call them anything. Fried bread on lard. Everybody liked those fritters. Dane said when he came to see me last time, "When will you come around, granny, to make some fritters?" And I told him, "I can't come my dear, I can't bake or kneed any more. I don't have hands or legs now, I had a stroke." They all broke into tears, said good bye and left.

How did your daughters get married?

– Every one got married well. Senija eloped. I went to fetch her back, but late Bojka asked me, "Please, I'm begging you don't take away my daughter - in - law, I'll kill myself if you do." Rada said, "If she wants her, let her take her. Senija is still underage, her mother has the right to have her child. If she wants, she can take her." But I left her there. And she gave birth to you. After she had you I took her, but I left you there at your father's house. Rada was driving around with his truck, but he never dared to show up again. When she recovered a bit, she left. She left me a note saying that Rada came so she went with him and they've lived together ever since. Thank God, they managed to earn money. If you don't have a good housewife, your household isn't worth much. Your yard will be empty. If you have a good housewife and a good wife, you'll have everything.

What happened when you married grandpa?

– When I married grandpa, put a flower in his hair and I was wearing a

wreath on my head. I took the horse to the well to water it and his flower fell into the well. I said to him, "You shall die first, and I'll keep on living." And so it happened. He was just forty when he died and I am still alive.

What does a Gypsy wedding look like?

– It is very nice. You make a deal with your - in - laws, how many pigs they are going to slaughter, whether they'll give a cow or a bull, how much money they'll give. My sister's son has recently thrown a wedding party for his daughter in Zrenjanin. He got 10.000 DM for her hand. He got five pigs and he slaughtered a cow. The wedding party took place at a restaurant. He invited everybody by phone. And what can you do? Everybody has to bring a gift, it depends on what you have. Someone will give 1.000, some 2.000, depending how wealthy one is. Now that nephew of mine got ill and he is likely to die. Pacika. Where is he from? Yes, Elemir. He's got a house as big as a town hall, he is very rich. He and his two sons. Very rich. He just gave that wedding party, a month ago. Everybody talked about it. Gypsies from all over the world came by cars and trains and carts to see the wedding. Everything was very nice, very fine and very honest. There were no fights, nobody got beaten, nothing like that.

You have ten children, but how many grandchildren have you got?

– Let me count them for you. You are one, Danilo two, Igor three, Daliborka four, Ruška five, Dejan six, Boban seven, the other Boban eight, sister's son from Opovo, nine. Duda's Slobodan is ten, Robert eleven, this little Bisa is twelve, Buba thirteen, Milena fourteen, Boško's Nena sixteen, Milena seventeen, Paci eighteen, his two sons nineteen, that other son twenty, then Kristina, Sladjana, Tomica, Buca, Goga...twenty five. I have even great grandchildren. Sladjana has a child. Now I'm living with Milan's daughter, Daliborka. And I left her the house in my will and everything there is in the house so that she can take care of me. And she takes better care of me than my own child would.

How come she stayed with you and neither of your sons and daughters did?

– Andja escaped, that's Daliborka's mother, and her father returned home. They wanted to put her into orphanage, but I said in court, "I won't let her go to an orphanage, I'd rather kill her." So, I took her to live with me. I had a baby carriage, but it broke, so I asked the priest to give me another one. I took her with me for twenty-one years. Now she is twenty-one. She doesn't have a boy friend, she doesn't go out to the street, she is not a whore. She works, she trades. She buys pullovers, goods and thus provides for food. She looks after me, she brings home everything we need. She puts everything on the table and won't eat without me. She really takes care of me. She has a garden, where she sowed everything. She has something else to sow and she will have enough

food. She isn't hungry, she isn't naked or barefoot. I wouldn't allow her to be without necessary clothes, shoes or food. I always say to her, "Buy something to eat, do not starve yourself!" And she does as I tell her. She never pushed me away, never talked back to me. God forbid! On the contrary, she says, "My dear granny, mother, dearest mummy, your Dada loves you." What can I say? I gave her a nickname from the TV serial Casandra, I call her Nightingale. When I am angry with her or she disobeys me, I say to her, "Nightingale, just come in!" She laughs and comes in saying, "What did you want, mother?" She takes me to WC, takes off my clothes, and bathes me. When I made a mess in my panties, she threw them away. But she didn't throw my pajamas away, she washed and dried them up. I'm clean, I really am. She bathes me and washes me every other day. My own daughter wouldn't do it for me, all those things she does. I'm grateful to her, God bless her. May God give her a good husband who will not maltreat her. I wish her every happiness and all the best.

Will you tell something about March 8th? Did you use to celebrate it?

– Yes, we did. When I traded, I could sell most of goods on March 8th . I would go around and sell things. I would give presents to my daughters. I gave them what I could. They also gave presents to me. Duda visited me last night and gave me 100 dinars.

Did you celebrate your birthday before you got married?

– I've always celebrated my birthday, ever since I got married. I celebrate it even now. I got all sorts of presents: dresses, blouses, skirts, goods, scarves.

Can you sing me a song, granny?

No, I can't I. I can't, I swear. I really don't know any.

What about a legend, something you were told when you were a little girl?

– I don't know what a legend is, I don't know what a song is, I had no time. This is something I'll sing to you:

In Zrenjanin, there is a yellow house.
All sorts of things happen in that house,
Because it's a prison.
There Ljuba spent her time,
For six months she was there
But then she got out.
Now it's spring,
And Ljuba can again sing.

It is a song I sang when I was in prison.

Do you know how you got your name?

– My name? I was baptized. My name is Radu Ljubica, I have my mother's surname, not my father's. My father's name was Dragutin Jovanovic and my mother's Anka Radu.

Isn't it a Romanian name?

– That's because they weren't married. At that time Gypsies didn't get married, they just lived together. It was something different then, a different kind of life, now life is fucked up. It doesn't matter if you are married or not. If your life in marriage is no good, you have got to leave.

May God help you to achieve what you want to. I hope I will live to see you as a doctor. You'll give me an injection then.

Radinka 78 years old, (1923)

Aunt Radinka, could you tell me something about your life?

– I was born in 1923 in the village Budjanovci. My father's name was Mican and my mother's Saveta. I had eleven brothers, but I am the only one who stayed alive. I especially grieve over one of my sisters who died at childbirth. A baby just two hours old was left behind. That daughter of hers is healthy now, thank God and she has two children and she has a happy marriage. That comforts me and again I can say thank you God, even if that tragedy had to happen. Secondly what sometimes bothers me is the way I spent my life. First that war in 1942. Our father was taken to concentration camp and my mother stayed with us and I married very young. I married when I was seventeen and moved to this village nearby Budjanovci, I married a young man I fell in love with. He was grandpa Marko's son, his name was Vasa. And then I got pregnant. And he was killed the very same year we got married. He was taken away with hundred and twenty other internees to Sremska Mitrovica. Some of them, however, were released, but thirty two stayed. My husband was among them. After his death I gave birth to a daughter. Her name is Ružica. She also has a happy marriage. She now has, thank God, grandchildren.

How did you get married?

– When we got married during the war, you can imagine what that was like. The country was already occupied. My husband managed to hide for a while German troops were on the street, one day a squad ran into him and he knew some of them so they said, "So, Vasa, you got married, let's drink some brandy." I eloped with my husband so we didn't have a wedding party. My parents didn't want to bother me they just said, "She can go if she wants to. She wanted it, so she can elope next time as well". My father wasn't taken away to Germany yet. So, we didn't have regular wedding party, as a couple should have. My father invited our neighbors, his friends. They were drinking for an hour or two. But they had to leave, because of the German occupation and you couldn't walk in the street after nine or ten in the evening. If someone was seen after ten, Germans would lock him up and beat him. We married in spring and he was killed on August 19, 1941 and it was terrible time for me.

How old were you at the time?

– Well, how old was I? I was seventeen and a half. I didn't know where to go, what to do, so I moved back to my mother and father. My mother was still young and she got a baby six months after I had mine. That baby lived only for a few months and died. What could my mother do? Then Germans came and

they said, "Come on, forta, forta!"⁴, and my mother said, "Can't you see that I have my husband's permit?" And they used to give us some kind of permit, something like an ID and if they had that they wouldn't touch you. But we had Gypsy name! We didn't speak Gypsy language, we weren't living with other Gypsies, we didn't food which was bad. We had jobs. My parents worked, just like I did. After my father was taken away, my mother and I went to work. We worked for Miki Radovic's wife, for Gavra's mother, we worked ... In return she gave us a hundred or two hundred kilos of wheat. My mother went to the fields and reaped, I trussed, so we managed to survive, mostly we earned bread. We never went stealing or begging. When my brother turned nine, he went to mind the pigs of Jankovic family, his grandson Jovica is living here now. So my brother earned fifty kilos of wheat, four kilos of lard, and we had for food. My poor mother had to protect us from enemies. As soon as we heard people running on the street, my mother would gather us, she never took the harness off the mare, a mare we had in the stall. We had a cart, my mother would immediately hitch the mare. Her name was Cura.⁵

When my mother hitched the mare and I would put the children and some corn bread in the cart, we didn't have ordinary bread, because fascists took everything away and we had to grind corn. My mother would see someone running in panic and she would ask, "What's it?" If the answer was, "It is the army," she would immediately hitch the mare, I would put the children in the cart, with quilts and pillows.

We were also covered with lice. It was terrible. You didn't have time to change clothes, if you took your clothes off you had to keep them near you. You didn't have time to wash. Germans were frequently coming to Budjanovci. They would go along the railway. I feel terrible just remembering it. The patrol would go along the railway from Nikinci to Ruma. Several patrols guarded the railway. When they would pass, someone would shout "Army!". We would then run away, but they didn't harm us. We just had to run. When you are running away like that you do not care in which direction you are running, some people would run in the field. We would gather all small children there were four or five of them: Svetlana, Dragica, Ljubiša, Vida and my Ružica. We always gave a ride to some of our neighbors as well. We had our mare, she was like a fairy. During summer all my mother had to do was shout, some people would tie their horses or cows to the cart. My mother would shout "Cura". We would drive around and reach Brsac. Sometimes as soon as we would get there, someone would shout from the bell tower, "Don't hide, the army is coming from Nikinci! I don't know where they are going to go, let's see whether they'll reach

4 "Keep going" in German.

5 "Lass" in Serbian.

the well. If they turn toward Budjanovci, it means Brsac is safe, but if they turn toward Brsac, you run to Budjanovci!"

The man would shout from the tower and my mother would sit and wait. Who could care about the children then? No one bathed, you washed only those necessary parts of the body. No underwear. We would wrap ourselves in rags, only survival mattered. The man from the tower would report, "Budjanovci is free!" So we would go back to Budjanovci. I told my mother, "You know what, let's turn off the road here and go in the field." It was summertime. "Let's stay in the wheat. It was pretty high, a meter and a half or two. "Let's stay in the wheat field until it gets dark," I said. Some of our refugees could always be found in the fields. A man said, "Budjanovci is free, the army moved to Brestac." So, we escaped danger that day. The next day, my mother didn't know what to give the children to eat. Corn bread, that's all we had, and children were small. No milk, nothing. She struggled. My father wrote in one letter he longed for baked potatoes. That's how imaginative we were, baked potatoes and corn bread was all we wanted. When our children started to speak, they didn't know to ask for ordinary bread, corn bread was all they knew. She didn't know how to say bread, only corn. Corn mush and corn bread was all we had for food. Since we didn't win any land, uncle Kuzma, who lived behind our house, said to my mother, "Saveta, you can go to the field to steal for your mare, nobody else can. You are allowed to because you have to save your children." Once my late sister Vida was crying aloud. Somebody knocked at the window, my mother sat by the window on a bench looking at the window. She didn't dare answer. She wasn't sure if they were partisans or fascists. Fascists were also coming during night, in all hours. The man called, "Saveta!" and my mother answered as if she recognized the voice. The man asked, "What's going on? Why is your child crying? Where have you been? I thought you left, but I see you are here." My mother answered, "My child is sick". So we lived in fear.

My mother didn't need, how should I say, that love stuff. She looked after us. I was the same. I was eighteen. I didn't think that I was young. I didn't even think about youth and love. I was only thinking when the war would be over. Whenever I saw someone running in the street, I would ask, "What is it? Is the army coming?" Sometimes that person would say, "Well no, I'm going to see about my pigs or I have some business to take care of." That's how we were raising our children, we lived in fear. After that my father got lucky, he made friends with some folks, who helped us out with some corn. They said to their wives to help out a woman who would come to visit them. In return, my father gave food to those men there with whom he worked. My father didn't drink and the money he earned he gave for food and shared it with those who drank. Our poor father thought of us even there. So my mother went to Sase with our sister Vida and that woman said, "Our husbands are together, they became

friends. What would you like me to give you?," she asked. She had clothes for the children and food. We needed those things because we didn't have any land. She gave us some potatoes and onions, too. She put everything she gave on my mother's cart. While she was away, I stayed with those children who were really small. When suddenly a train came from Ruma. People said it was an armored train. "What armored train? What on earth could that be? Why now?" I said to myself. I didn't know what to do, there were shots, shots could be heard from somewhere. They were taking their army to Šabac but I didn't know that. I heard shooting and I escaped under the bed. I didn't know where to go. So I hid under the bed. That was my only shelter. It was a bit funny and horrible. They didn't kill any of us, they were just shooting. They were standing by Cikoški well. It was where our peasants kept horses in an enclosed field, it was across the railway tracks. So it passed. I guess they saw off their army and left us alone. But I was frightened and suffered, what do you call it, stress, and that can be very dangerous. And then my mother arrived and we ate. She asked me, "What happened? Are you alright?," I said, "We are fine." We had enough food then and we stuffed ourselves. My mother told us that her husband wrote. My mother didn't know to write, so I wrote, you know.

Are you literate?

– I am literate. I finished three grades of elementary school. It was enough for me and my parents thought that was great, because I had to look after the little ones. So I wrote instead of my mother. I was writing a letter while she was sitting, breast-feeding her baby, "My dear Mile, please, write". She was holding the baby and forgot what she said, so she repeated "My dear Mile". I wrote "My dear Mile" again. "Did you write it down?," she asked. "Yes, I did, what do you want me to write next?" She was busy with the children, she was scolding one and took care of another, I listened to all that and it felt funny. "My dear Mile" she said again and I said, "Come on mom, say something else please, don't just repeat: My dear Mile." So she said to me, "Write whatever you want. You know what is going on in our house and how we are." So I did, I wrote that we were still healthy, that we were alive, we weren't hungry, that we had more lice than before because the partisans passed some to us, and we didn't have anything to clean ourselves with, we didn't have that ... but what is important was that we were alive and not hungry. We were still in one piece, they didn't beat us. That what I wrote, And then I can't remember which month it was, I only know it was summer, we were picking sour cherries when my aunt came over from Ovar, she went working as a day laborer, because she was poor. She thought there'd be more work here. She thought she'd stay over and sleep with us.

But all of a sudden fascists came and "forta, forta", so she had to come along as well. That "forta" was terrible. Germans were all around us, I'm afraid

even to think of it. Suddenly they led Sremcevic Baja's sons. His three sons. They found them in partisans' base. Their family was wealthy, they lived across the street. They were hiding in the base, somebody denounced them. I think Sajo did it, because he was dangerous. So they were taken away. The Germans started beating them in the church. They made them bend over some barrels and they were beating them, it went on without an end and we were standing just twenty meters away from the part of the church reserved for women. They pushed us all inside. My mother told me, "You know what Radinka, stand a bit further away, if they take us together with the rest of the Gypsies maybe they won't take you with us too." I stood a bit aside with my child, the same place my Ružica and I always used to sit. Those three were yelling, you can't imagine how it was. They were beating them as long as they wanted and then they took them away and killed them. All of a sudden they got hold of some man Jovanovic was his surname, his name was Milivoj. He was a ward in the church tower. They caught him sleeping. He must have been with his girl that night, so he was caught asleep. His mother was sitting on my mother's lap. Ustasas⁶ were also there and they crammed us so inside the church. Milivoj went through the crowd, followed by an ustasa, they trampled over people and ustasa asked him to point to a partisan's mother or a Gypsy. My mother had a son with the partisans, he was just twelve or thirteen and she feared they'd take us away with the rest of the Gypsies. Sava Cekatić was also there. Boys just twelve or thirteen years old were already being taken away to Germany. Djordje came saying, "These are Gypsies." When a German hit him in the back with his gun, he told them everything what he knew and what he didn't know. All the while his mother was sitting in my mother's lap. His mother called out "My Djordje!" and my mother replied, "You're your Djordje! How come he could see I was a Gypsy. He wasn't frightened of them instead he saw that I am Gypsy." The woman didn't say a word, what could she do. That's what befell us.

Suddenly one man started calling out names, I am so upset now when I remember, I can't recall those names any more. He separated some on one side, the others on the other side. Some would be sent to Germany, some I didn't know where ... There were also women among them. There was Mileva, Krunica Vlada's wife, Drlja's girls and others. I kept breast feeding my Ruzica to show that I had a child, so that they wouldn't think I was just a girl and take me away without my child. One man called Bauer from Ruma, he was German, let's call them Krauts, he told me, "You have a child, you can go home!" My mother had some sort of paper where it was written that my father was already on forced labor in Germany, there was my father's photo and data about where he worked and everything. She told them I was her child and she got away with

6 See the glossary at the end of the book.

me. That's how we left the churchyard. Many stayed that day, I can't even remember how many of them, God save us. Then we realized my aunt also stayed there, my poor aunt. My mother then showed again that paper and asked them to let my aunt go as well. My mother said to her, "Sister, go home, may God help you." That's how we stayed alive. Some time passed, not even a month, when they came again looking for Kuzman Maletic. He was some sort of a mayor, he had an office but it was in a family house. They were looking for him but he escaped to partisan base. There were a lot of woods piled over it and Gina and grandpa Kuzman also hid there. My brother saw them in the yard and he told us, "Look, mother, Gina and Kuzman have hidden in the hole." My poor mother worried that if the Krauts asked my brother about it he would tell, Those Krauts were local so they knew Serbian. She said, "If they ask him, Ljubiša will tell them, oh my dear, what will we do then?" Partisans were killing each other.

Did partisans kill Gypsies too?

– They were killing Gypsies as well. They chased away many Gypsies, but we escaped with children. That's how we managed to escape. You ran away because one was Gypsy, you ran away because you were young. Nobody thought about love, at least I didn't. It didn't cross my mind that I was young, that I was eighteen. And there was my child, she was about seven or eight months old, or even ten I don't know she was growing while they chased us. My father couldn't send us money. Sometimes he would manage to ask those people from Sase to give us something. It was terrible. I can't even remember everything. My father spent there three years. After three years he returned. My husband was killed. What could we do? We were poor, miserable.

Could you tell me how come you got married to your first husband?

– Well now you and I have to return right back to the beginning. A friend of mine, Nada, told me once, "Vasa loves you." And I already loved him. He was handsome in the first place, you can see that in the photo. He did not find me ugly either, so we were looking at each other. He didn't approach me to kiss me and I didn't approach him to kiss him. I would just tremble when he was near me. He could play an instrument called prim, a sort of tamburitza.⁷ We danced and had fun. We really had nice time together, but we didn't dare go inside and have a party.

Why didn't you dare do that?

– Because of the enemy. We were not supposed to gather. Partisans did not allow gatherings. It was a sort of propaganda, I don't know. Some liked to lie a bit, you know, talk. We were afraid most of two men, some Mile, gendarme from Hrtkovci and some Joca also from Hrtkovci. They came to visit a

⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

woman, Vera, whose husband was away in Germany, she had one son, and they were fooling around, excuse me for saying that, but I don't know how to say it, she was whoring. We were poor and once she asked my mother to take her to Hrtkovci and she said she would pay her with a sack of flour. My poor mother was hungry so she told her, "We can't go, Vera, it's winter. I have a good mare and sledges, but partisans will hear us." But she said, "We'll tell them we are going to buy a sack of flour." When those men came, my mother remained a bit further away, what Vera did I don't know, she got a sack of flour and all sorts of things. That very night Vera was killed. After that, my mother didn't dare talk to anybody. With partisans too. She was afraid for her life.

Vasa was your first husband, right?

– Yes, he was. When I met Vasa, I repeat, he loved me. We knew we loved each other. He knew how to play tamburitza, we danced in the street. Whole crowd would gather. Someone said "Don't play that," but he played what I told him to play. When we were in company and he would ask someone to tell me that he loved me. I didn't dare go with him, and he didn't ask me to get together and enjoy ourselves. When we married, his mother told everybody, "My Vasa has brought a virgin!" His family prepared some sort of a party, but it had to be as short as possible, people couldn't stay for long so that Germans wouldn't catch them. That's how it was. My mother said, "You shouldn't have married him, he is very poor." After that he was killed. The war interrupted us, it interrupted us in midst of our health and strength. My Ružica already began walking when the war ended.

When I gave birth to my Ružica, just my mother – in – law and one other woman from the village were there. When she arrived, Germans were on the street and they warned her, "You have lights on." My mother – in – law put pillows into the window saying, "You know what, my daughter – in – law is in labor, there are no partisans inside, I can tell you that." A partisan who was really famous, his name was Čuruga lived in the third house from ours. They were after him and those other partisans, I don't know whom. There were a lot of them. There was one called List. So comrades would gather in Čuruga's house. My mother – in – law was at the same time happy she got a granddaughter and she was crying after her son. Vasa never saw his daughter. Well later what could we do? I went to live with my mother and father, I didn't have anywhere to go. My brother Ljubiša grew into a young lad. It was time for him to get married. He found a wife in Tovarnik. It was after the raids. So we organized a party, it wasn't very big. My Ljubiša got a daughter, so we decided to throw a wedding party. It was possible then.

What are weddings customs like?

– You know what, I was a guest on a lot of weddings. I can tell you

about them. We didn't have a party. We eloped. Run away bride, I don't know. Sometimes parents approved of that, sometimes they didn't. It depends. I went to Gypsy weddings. A Gypsy called Dule married his son, he is still alive, then there was another one Gypsy Bane. It's just that some people wouldn't say that they were Gypsies. I don't know who is a Gypsy, that's how it was. Let me tell you about one wedding. It was just after the war. I was waiting for Radinko from Šišatovci. We danced and had fun. We were about to go to Vojka, when I noticed that future father – in – law carried a big sheet and four loaves of bread. That other man asked him, "Dule what do you need four loaves of bread for?," he said "Well we can bring some food for the children." There were a lot of us, my friends, black and white, all sorts, and, damn it, I didn't speak Gypsy. We went to Vojka to visit a girl but it turned out that she was the bride. The bridegroom was young and the bride was even younger.

How old were they?

– They were hardly fourteen. She was thirteen and he fourteen. There were mother and father – in – law and one saucepan which was very big. Some soup was being prepared in cast iron pot in the middle of the yard. Well what can you do, it was alright. Everyone was hungry, so we had something to eat. The father – in – law brought a sheep and some bread the day before. But it wasn't enough, there were more guests than he expected. We danced outside, the house was so small you could hardly get in. We sang a song, "Brother pay for the bride, don't be stingy", but her mother wouldn't let her go, she was too young, she said. Well a fight nearly broke out. How could we make a wedding without a bride? We couldn't go back without her. That would be a great shame. The bridegroom said how much money he would give, how much lard, flour, peppers and so on. And that's how we had wedding after all. But we had a nice time. We danced and mingled with folks. Music was good, Gypsies are good at playing music. I danced but then I got hungry. But they took the whips, those Gypsies had carts and horses and horsewhips. Then there were no limousines and those kind of things. They said to me "Pećel, pećel!"⁸ there were five or six of us who didn't speak Gypsy so we didn't know what "Pećel" was, God damn it, so one girl translated it to us, they wanted us to dance. Those Gypsies wanted to hit us with whips and make us dance even if we weren't merry. And that's how it went. Then there was lunch. There were not enough plates. I got one that leaked. What could I do but eat quickly otherwise it would leak. I was hungry. We ate as much food as there was and that was it. When we came home, to the other father – in – law's house there wasn't any food. What we had at that other place that was it. So that couple lived there I don't know how. Later they separated. Well what's important is that there was a wedding party.

8 "Hit" in Romani.

And I didn't know what to do, I didn't have anywhere to go, I didn't marry after Vasa got killed. I was young, my brother wanted to get married, so my mother told me, "You know what, Radinka, you should get married." Whom could I marry. There was nobody like me, I don't mean good looking, but I mean with some property. I wasn't in love with anybody. One day a customer came, Dinka Stepanović from Kraljevci and she told me "There is one man whose wife was taken away to the camp. Why don't you marry him?" I could hardly wait.

How old were you then?

– I was twenty two. That's how it was, I decided to marry. He had no wife, no children. His name was Nova Aleksandrović. His parents were taken away to a concentration camp. I don't know, he had an old mother, but so what. There were farm cooperatives. My mother said, "Why would you want to join that kind of farm?" "Well, I just do," I replied. I was going to live there and I would join the farm. So that's what we did. We got married and I gave birth to a daughter. I named her Julijana. I was happy, I had Ružica and then that one. "Thank God", I said. But my husband liked to play cards. He loved all things nobody liked. He earned some money while minding horses. He gambled it away. He sent me to the village to beg and feed him. "Go and beg other women to give you something!", he said. I couldn't do that. I told him, "You know what, you don't want to save the money we earned, everything I earned you gambled away. I can't live like that." "Well," he said, "If you can't, you can't." So, I went back home and left my child with my mother – in – law.

Well, listen to me talk about my troubles. ... When I left that child of mine she was just two months old! He didn't get married until I took the child. He married someone, and she brought her child. My mother – in – law told me when I came to take my child with me, "Why don't you leave her? When he took that other child, why shouldn't he feed yours as well." My poor little child lived only for two or three months and then she died. I cried a lot and I said "Thank you God". He saved me from going there where they would beat me and I don't know what else. Those bastards, I shouldn't have gone there in the first place. I knew he was that sort of Gypsy, he knew Gypsy language and all sorts of things. He didn't want to work, he just played cards and gambled away money. It was all no god.

I lived without a husband for some ten years. I went to work as a day laborer at the state estate, you can imagine what I earned. We lived in poverty. We longed for everything that was nice and for some bread, too. We ate bitter potatoes, beans, we ate meat maybe once a month, maybe not at all. I would buy half a kilo of meat and didn't know what to do with it. I lived by myself at the time. My father – in – law died, I lived by myself in a house by a cemetery.

I was young, what could I do, I had offers, young men and older came to me. I couldn't refuse them. But I didn't want to get involved in their lives. We kept it a secret. Some people knew about it, some didn't. They didn't mind if people knew but I did. If one of those guys got married, I told him not to come anymore. I was only with those unmarried ones. That was how I lived.

But I got bored with this. I wanted to get married again, unfortunately. I didn't want to be a whore, I wanted to stop whoring. I got fed up with my life. I heard there was a man with two children in Bersaće, his wife remarried. Good. That was what I needed. His wife was gone, so he was a free man. His name was Nikola. We lived together for a year, we didn't start a family. But then I found out that he was meeting his first wife Jovanka. "What does that mean, Nikola?" I asked. "Be quiet, what's does it matter if I do?," he said. I didn't really like that. We lived together for another two years. Let it be, I said to myself, let him go to her. She wouldn't refuse him and whatever he took with him he would bring back home. That's how I joked about that. Bu to hell with jokes. He had a child with her. It wasn't born until I left. I went back to Budjanovci. I had my own house there which my father – in – law left to me. He died after my husband, you know that colonization ...

He was your second husband's father?

– Yes. My daughter got married in Ruma, she was already eighteen or nineteen so she got married. She also ran into a scum. She returned to me and I told her "Ružica, if things are that way, we'll buy the house we got thanks to colonization." We bought a house from my father – in – law. The father moved away from his son, then his son returned and I said "I will stay with you." So we bought the house.

And then what would she do, where would she go she decided to marry again. When she married again it was no good, that husband of hers had another woman and she gave birth to a child out of wedlock. Oh, my God, it was all rubbish. When my daughter left he got together with that other girl and then he chased my daughter away. He told her, "I have a child with that other girl." My daughter asked him, "Why did you bring me here then?" The he said, "I wanted people to say that I was too got married." As if he was a young single man. Nonsense.

So she came here, we lived together and we went working together as day laborers at a estate. We just struggled along. That's how it was. I had a niece in Novi Kneževac, her name was Ruža. It is a place at the Romanian border, where Romanians and Hungarians live. She said to me, "You know Radinka, you should let your daughter come with me, there is opportunity for work, she may find a boyfriend there." What could I do with her? She was nervous, very nervous. I asked her, "Ružica what do you want to do?" and she said, "I want to

go.” She was already married. You know how it was, it was a shame. How could she go out if she was already married? She said, “I’ll go with aunt Ruža to Novi Kneževac. It is a bit far away. I don’t even know where it is. But never mind, I have nowhere else to go.” I told her, “You just let me know where you are and if you need any help, I’ll send it to you by post. Write to me.” At that time there were no those telephones. “Alright,” she replied. And she off went. Things went along somehow, I don’t know what happened really. She managed somehow, she was also a poor woman. She found a boyfriend at a hotel. He worked there. He was some kind of a waiter, they got hitched and later married. She went to live with him in Banatsko Arandjelovo. It is near Kneževac. She wrote a letter to me saying “Mother, I got married, come if you want.” She wrote, “Come, mother, to see me and where I live, come and see my home.” So I decided to go there. At that time a ticket cost I don’t know how much ... I earned 20-30 dinars a day. I decided to visit my child. She was already over twenty. She wrote she found a good man. I remember it was November 29th, when I went to visit my child. I hardly had anything to wear. My neighbors helped me out. Lela Milinković gave me a pair of brand new shoes. Danica Zečević gave me a jacket, I had a dress, so I was ready to go. I was visiting my in – laws for the first time and I had to represent our family.

I got as far as Novi Kneževac, my dear, but there were no buses after that because November 29th was a state holiday. What could I do? Some people told me that there would be no more buses that day. A woman helped me out, she led me to a road. She told me to stand there. There is only that one village Banatsko Arandjelovo there, somehow a man gave me a ride in a car, now they call it van. That’s how I arrived into the village, but I had to ask the driver to help me find my daughter. “I don’t know where she is. It’s some place called Siget.” He told me “Look, that woman is from over there, she could show you the way.” The woman told me, “listen I am going to my sister’s house to change shoes.” I thought it was close but it turned out it was three more kilometers we had to cover on foot. I got nervous. I kept thinking that woman would tell me any minute that it was my daughter’s house. But we had to walk three kilometers before we got to her village. It was Siget. That’s how I came to her doorstep. I began shouting, but, God, whom should I call. “Ružica!”, I was shouting. A short, fat woman ran out asking “Who are you?” I told her, “I’m Ružica’s mother, is my Ružica here?” “Yes, she is,” she replied, “I’m her mother – in – law.” A man also appeared and said he was her father – in – law. “Yes”, they said, “Ružica is there.” Then I started wondering what they were trying to tell me. I wanted to see my Ružica. All of a sudden she came out with her husband. We greeted each other, I cried with joy. You know how it is. Since I was Ružica’s mother my in-laws wanted to show me how many cows, calves and pigs they had. My daughter went inside. They led me into the yard to show me where they dried tobacco,

peppers, they ground them and sold them to the factory. "Very nice," I said. He said, "Let's go inside now." When I got inside, my Ružica asked me whether my journey was alright. I told her, "I set off yesterday at 11 in the morning, I had to wait every now and then." When suddenly Ružica's father –in-law went in a hunt to shoot a pheasant. Her mother –in – law said we would scald it and she would cook it. There were some other things to be prepared as well. I saw they were plotting to do something. I thought to myself: what kind of scheme is this? I went to the other room, it was supposed to be bedroom. When I entered it there was my Ružica sitting on her husband's lap and crying. I thought it was because we are Gypsies, you know I thought maybe they didn't know we were Gypsies and my skin is a bit darker. I thought they would send her back home with me. I asked her, "Why are you crying, Ružica?" I said it in a harsh voice, you know. "It's not it, my husband, fuck him", her mother – in – law started to shout, "he killed a pheasant and got caught so now he has to go to jail immediately." Immediately. Before I was due to return home.

So he spent three months in prison. My daughter stayed with her in-laws and thank God today she has her family and my son – in – law owns a restaurant. He worked hard, my daughter worked hard, she worked as a waitress, or, what's it called, as a hostess. They also had music there and it was good. Sometimes my son – in –law got drunk, then he would even slap my daughter even though she was a hostess. She would run away and later they would make up again. All sorts of things happen in life.

They have two daughters. They worked when they grew up and they went to school, both of them. One of them went to Kikinda, she married a craftsman there, they say he fixes limousines. My younger granddaughter married a Muslim. Well, she married a Muslim and went to live somewhere across the Sava and her mother and father went there to visit her, what could they do, they were still their parents. She isn't well, she soon gave birth to a child. Her husband was lazybones. How they got to know each other, where they met, I don't know, it's their business not mine. She gave birth to a baby boy. When that war broke out between Croats and Serbs and Turks, I don't know what they are, I call them Turks, but I mean Muslims. That grand son of mine didn't know what to do, he didn't know which side he should be on, his brother married a Serbian girl, and he married a Serbian girl. So he said, "What shall I do, shall I kill my son because a Serbian woman gave birth to him? Or should I kill my nephew because a Serbian woman gave birth to him? I can't do it." They escaped to Germany and all his family is there now. Their daughter returned to her mother and my son in-law is now retired. He has, should I tell you how much he has? His pension is 3.500 dinars. He is on the top of the scale, because he had a band and all sorts of things. He was really good at making money. I don't know what will happen to them next. Well their daughter doesn't know what to do, her

husband wouldn't let her to see her children. She was so troubled and confused and in that state she gave birth to another girl. That girl is very nice, she started going to school this year.

She is your great granddaughter?

– Yes, great granddaughter. That other boy goes to the seventh grade. His grandfather adores him. He is no longer a Turk, he is Aca, he got his grandfather's name. He is a good pupil., My granddaughter is my daughter's daughter, she works in their inn just like her mother. So they finally settled. And me, I don't know what to do and where to go. They often write and call me. But I'm old, I can't go and visit them, I can't travel. I am bored, they come to visit me but rarely. What can I do? I'm thinking of getting married now.

For the third time?

– Yes. Some matchmakers came to visit me, I was worn out, I couldn't go to work as day laborer any more. Things are different now, people throw that chemical stuff on fields and I can't work anymore. A good friend of mine told me, "There is a man from Tovarnik who is interested. Do you want to get married?" "Who me? Are you out of your mind?" I told her.

How old were you then?

– I was sixty four. I thought to myself, how can I get married in my old age? She said he was a good man. Ana said, "He is a Gypsy, you know," he was a friend of hers. She said "He is a good man, cross my heart and hope to die." "Yeah, right, you would die, come on. If he is so good why don't you marry him, God damn him. You take him, I don't need him. He knows Gypsy, I don't, I won't be sold by Gypsies." She replied, "What you talking about? I told you he is really a good man, may I die if I told you a lie." But I didn't want to get married, I didn't need any man in my life. Well, he came, he was huge God damn it. When he stretched his arms I thought: his hand is so huge if it hit me, it doesn't even have to hit me, it would be enough if it just passed near my face I would faint, that would be it. He would beat me and I'm really afraid of being beaten. I went to visit my neighbor Ruža, she is a matchmaker and I told her, "Damn it, I don't know what to do." She told me, "Come on, why don't you take him, he is such a good man." I told her, "Is that so. Well you take him and give Stanoja to me, I like Stanoja, I know him and this one I don't even know, fuck him."

Well it turned out that he had a wife and grown sons. His sons used to beat him up and what would then happen to me? His sons could come and beat him and me as well. But Ruža kept repeating, "You don't know that. He is wonderful. He works, You know that when Gypsies work and when they are light that means they are good. He is really hard working." But I kept saying, "Take him yourself!" So they went away. All of a sudden that man showed up. Stanoja

brought him along and he went out immediately and he left me with him. The man was so big, I can tell you, his head nearly hit the ceiling. My goodness, I thought. I told him, "You know what, my friend, why don't you just go home and I'll write to you. Just take the bus and go home." He told me, "Does that mean you are chasing me away. Whether you want me or not I don't know what else I could do, I just can't live with my folks any more. My sons are beating me, my daughters went to Germany. My wife is painting her fingernails red, she dyes her hair. She went mad, She doesn't want me any more. I don't love her, she doesn't love me. I moved out. I spent one winter in a shed with iron door. I didn't even dare light a fire because I was afraid I wouldn't be able to get out.

I started to laugh. "You know what, my friend, just go and try to make up with your wife," I told him. "Well if that's the way it is I'll go." Only a short time passed, I remember it was fifteenth of November and my boyfriend showed up again. I was the one who asked questions in the meantime. There was a neighbor from Tovarnik, who told me even more than he said to me. He told me his folks were drunkards, that they take away his pension from him, that it was a good pension. I was interested in his pension. That neighbor said, "Just invite him to your house. He is a nice man." Suddenly my boyfriend turned up. I didn't even write to him. He said, "You know what, here I am. I was thinking, maybe you wrote and those devils of mine maybe took the letter. I came to hear it from you, yes or no." I told him, "Listen, my friend, I already had a boyfriend, who was coming and going and who disgraced me. I don't want to feel shame any more. His name was Stanko, he was a gentleman with a bow tie. And now you. I'm fed up." He said, "Well sister it can go wither way." I remembered what that neighbor woman told me about him and I said, "Then stay friend." He asked, "Should I stay or do you want that other man with bow tie?" "You," I said and he was so happy, poor man. Maybe it sounds funny now but who cares.

That day my neighbor from across the street picked corn. I went to work for him, I owned him some money. My friend stayed at home. I thought I'd stay to sleep at the neighbor's and when he saw that I wasn't coming back he might leave.

My neighbors told me, "We heard what happened. We saw your man." I was so embarrassed I could die. They said, "He isn't a bad at all. If he is good, let him stay, if not, we'll call the police." I never needed police to protect myself. I came home and my boyfriend was in bed. He was crying! I thought he regretted coming to my place to stay. He said, "You know what, grandma," he couldn't call me Radinka and I didn't mind, I was grandma anyway, "Ruža came over, she had something to do here ..." I asked him, "Ruža has a phone, did your family call and ask you to come back?" "No," he said and he was still crying. I didn't even know why he undressed and got in bed in the first place. I told him, "If you regret coming here you can always go back, you can return to your family." "It's

not it, wife, my grandma, I don't regret anything, but I used to have a home, I left my friends there, everybody, my poverty, my school friends, my ..." And he worked in forests, he sawed wood as some kind of a woodcutter, I don't know. He kept crying, "I've left my brothers, my house and I had to go in search of happiness. Shame on them, may they never have any luck!" So I talked to him. Well then at one point I saw that it's no use and that I had to lie down beside him. When I got into bed with him, nothing happened. He kept talking about how much he suffered. "You know what", he said, "I'm not a man or a woman." "It's alright," I said, "I don't need anybody better than you, you suffered a lot and I suffered even more. And now we can live together as friends. Our youth has passed. But please be nice to me so that our neighbors wouldn't laugh at us. You can see that I have a lot of friends. Please behave as a host, as a man, and then we wouldn't need love, it has passed anyway. If it ended in your case it ended in mine even sooner. We don't need that. Just be nice and calm. Don't get drunk, don't smash things, don't swear, especially don't swear at neighbors." He said, "I never behaved like that, I'm not that kind of a man." "Alright then." I said. We lived together and then November 29th came, then Christmas came and he said, "You know what grandma, I can't just sit and do nothing like this. I don't even have a piece of wood to kill a snake." "What snake, where have you seen a snake?," I got really scared. And he said, "It's just an expression, that's what people say when they don't have work to do, they don't even have a stick to kill a snake." "Alright then, just calm down." I was so frightened because of that snake. Then he told me, "Just find me something to do." "Well how can I do that now. It's Christmas. Where were you when there was work?" he told me, "You know what. I'm a woodcutter, I don't even have an ax, I don't have anything. Please introduce me to some people and maybe they would hire me to clean ditches or pull out stumps." I wondered what sort of a man he was, because he wanted to pull out tree stumps around Christmas. He said, "I just like to work." I turned my back to him and crossed myself saying, "Thank God there are people, who like to work." So I went to Sremčević Lazar, Joza's Sava advised me to go there, "Lazar has a field 2.5 kilometers long, there is a ditch that has to be cleaned." When my grandpa heard that, told me to show him the man. I knew where his house was so we went there. We went to see Lazar and he is really well off, he works hard and he has a big house. He asked me, "Rajka, is this your old man?" I was embarrassed. "Yes, he is," I told him. "Come in for a glass of brandy," he invited us. "Laza, we came, because my old man wants to clean your ditch for free. He just wants some wood." So they agreed. He said, "Show him the way, the field is near Brestača." I knew where it was, by the bridge, on the left. So we went there. My old man said, "You know what, excuse me, but I have enough money to buy some bread, but I don't have any bacon." Laza said, "I'll give you some last year's bacon." I just love bacon, I'd leave roast meat if I could get ba-

con. Laza said. "Here you are, take some bacon." He took a sack and put into it a meter long bacon. There was about ten or fifteen kilograms, we didn't weigh it. I was looking forward to eating bacon, I didn't remember when was the last time I had some. Only when I worked for other people in the field I would get some. Frost covered the ground, there was no snow and I said, "You know what, I'm cold!" He said, "Wait a little, you'll warm up." "What is he talking about, it's Christmas time, how am I supposed to get warm", I thought. He knocked in the ground four poles, made a device for me to sit down. He would cut trees as if it was grass and he was cutting it with a scythe. He lit a fire, so I warmed up and waited for us to eat. We brought some bread and water. "Don't drink cold water. Put the water by the fire to get warm.", he told me. He kept cutting as if his ax was a scythe. I started to wonder if he worked like that always or just when I sat by watching him. He said, "We'll eat now". He fried the bacon, he used thin branches as skewers, it's something he learned while working in forests, and I had never seen that before. We ate, drank water. I was sitting, while he was cutting some briar patch. Thorns were higher than two meters. He cut everything down, he even reached really high ones. He borrowed an axe from Laza. I didn't have an ax, I didn't need it, because I use corncob for heating.

A Gypsy went by on a cart and said, "Sa céres moko?" My old man could speak Gypsy, but he didn't want to, because he knew I didn't know to speak it. "I'm working.", he replied. That man said, "Shame on you, there you are working for someone else's woman, and you left yours at home. My daughter married your son. "Fuck your mother and your son and daughter, my son and daughter!", he shouted. I thought they would end up fighting just like common Gypsies. My old man didn't want to speak Gypsy, I knew that so I told him, "Steva, leave that man alone, he killed a man, don't start any trouble." That Gypsy was called Bane. "Alright", he said, turned around and continued working. The Gypsy went away.

"You know, you worked enough, let's go home." When we came home, my old man was happy. "Now I have a job." He kept cutting the thicket until he reached thick tall trees. When he cut these he sat down and then Lazar's son Milan came and brought us sack full of firewood. Do you know what it meant a few years ago to have firewood in the middle of the winter? It was like winning a lottery. When summer arrived, people hired Sava to do some odd jobs for them. He was as good as a man can be. Once his daughter came and he asked if I would receive her. I said to him, "Of course I would." One of his daughters came, then the other one, but at night. Stanoja, our neighbor cried out, "Hey, brother, your daughter arrived." My husband went out. He didn't say anything and he was away for an hour or two, then I went to Stanoja's house to look

9 "What are you doing man?" in Romani.

for them and I saw him there with his daughter and son – in – law. I entered and greeted everybody “Good evening,” I said, “Sava, is this your daughter? I’m Sava’s old lady.” I introduced myself, nobody had to introduce me. I talked with them for a while and then I said, “Listen Sava. Is this you daughter? Is this your son – in –law?” “Yes.” He said. “Well then, why should your children stay in somebody’s else’s house? Come, let’s go to our house.” So they came and it was nice. After that they were coming regularly. They never tried to beat him up or yell at him. Or to harm me.

And so I lived with my old man. Every first in the month when his pension arrived, my old man would bring it to me. “You know, grandma, just count the money, I’ll only take the envelope,” he always said. I enjoyed that. We would kiss each other and hug. There were times when my old man got drunk. Then I kept silent. I wouldn’t talk to him unless he spoke. I wouldn’t argue because I was always afraid I would be beaten up. I would be quiet as a mouse. When Christmas came he again went to fetch some wood. All neighbors gathered and praised him. He behaved very nicely with the neighbors. On Christmas day, I returned from the church, and then we had lunch. He said, “Let’s bring in some wood!” I said, “Let’s not work today, it’s Christmas.” But he said, “Never mind, let’s work slowly.” I brought out a bottle of wine, put it on the bench and sang, “Look at my old man, he drinks as much as he can.” He told me, “Be quiet, people will think I’m crazy, that we’re crazy, or drunk.” But I just kept singing, “Look at my Sava, he is real pretty, there’s not girl he didn’t sleep with.” He told me, “Be quiet woman, don’t be silly, neighbors will hear you.” I didn’t really feel like singing but I wanted us to be merry.

That’s how we were living for four years. The following year my old man got ill. He had to go to that hospital in Iriški Venac, I don’t know how that is called exactly. He had lung cancer. It all went wrong, I knew he couldn’t be cured and I went to visit him often. He couldn’t wait to see me and he was always pleased to see me. He had a wife he left. She never came to see him and his sons never went to visit him. He came home from time to time, but then they would say he had to go back. Then I heard that my Sava died. I was so sorry, believe me. Even today I feel sorry because he was so good, I have nice memories of him. He built an iron fence which faces the street, he bought me a TV set, he changed windows, repaired everything in the house, he repaired the tiles, he made the chimney, I didn’t have a chimney before. He did all that and then he died.

When he died, Ruža Stanojeva called some people he knew, she called his sons from his first and second marriage. His son arrived and said, “Džane, džane, džane romane”.¹⁰ I didn’t understand what he meant so I was afraid he

10 “Do you speak Romani?” in Romani.

might chase me out of my house. I thought I'd have no time to cry for my old man. And so we did all that needed to be done. My old man was gone. We buried him in Budjanovci. After half a year I had a gravestone made. It's a bit wider, to make place for me, too. I got his pension after his death.

I could have spent the money I got from him or I could have given it to my Ružica. But I spent it on the gravestone, because he deserved it. I have stayed alone in the end. His first wife Vera and I shared his pension. We also shared the property, although I married him, while she didn't. It was according to the law. Afterwards I heard she also died, two or three months later. Now I get the other half, too, so I now get over 1.000 dinars a month. I really need that money. My children helped me, my Ružica. I told her not to give me money any more, I now have enough to buy clothes and shoes, I don't want to buy fancy things. Thank God, that's what I can say. I visit his grave as wives should, I do what I can and when I can. And it's another matter that I would like to get married again.

Would you marry again?

– I would if he was a good man, with good pension, but I wouldn't want him to move into my house. I would like him to be at least half as good as my Sava was.

Aunt Radinka, what do you think of old age? I can see you live alone, you have been left alone. How are you doing now?

– Let me tell you one thing: I'm healthy, in the first place. I'm interested in being with people, with neighbors or my children...I read, that's my favorite pastime.

What are you reading?

– I borrow the magazine for women "Bazar" or something else from my neighbors. It may be two or three years old, it doesn't matter. Or the newspaper "Politika". I don't read papers regularly, but I like to read novels. My greatest regret is not being able to go to school. My father was willing to send me to school, but my mother didn't allow it. I finished three grades with good marks. I didn't get excellent grades, but still I did well. I learned both Cyrillic and Latin letters. I am sorry I couldn't go to school any longer. As I said, my mother didn't allow it. She got a baby, she had to work, so I had to look after it. "It's enough for you, you finished three grades. You can read and write what else do you want? You won't be a teacher anyway." Well why couldn't I have become a teacher? That's what I wonder now. That was what people used to think, that daughters would leave house anyway when she marries and that's as if she lives in other family and house. So you had to cook, wash, clean, and look after the children. Now I feel sorry that I couldn't finish school and succeed in life. But what is hardest for me is that I stayed alone, I don't even live with my children. I go to

the street to talk to people and hear from them what is going on in the world. It is hard and I feel nervous because of that.

Does anybody ever pay you a visit?

– Very rarely. I don't quarrel with anybody. That young woman across the street comes sometimes to see me. We talk, joke a little bit. She hasn't got mother – in – law, only father – in – law. I tell her, "Send him to me, I live alone." We joke a little and time passes. I told you that I went to school and I wanted to learn things. Education was free at that time. No fancy dresses were needed. My parents wanted to protect me on the one hand, but wronged me on the other. When the war stopped I got a daughter. She already was five or six years old. My husband was killed, as I have told you. There was a vacancy. I knew some teachers well, I liked being with people and I liked dancing. We staged a performance and I took part. A teacher said to me, "Radinka, you are gifted, I'll recommend you to the radio station." I was astonished. "Yes, your voice is nice and you have talent, you can also read, and you know Latin letters," that teacher said. It was as if you had a university degree then. I was so happy I went to tell my mother and father everything about it. I wanted it. A woman that participated in staging the performance for March 8th came to me and she said the teacher called me to talk to her. But my mother objected, "What? Do you want to become a whore?" I asked her, "What are you saying, mother? There are boys and men around here as well." My father said, "Let her go". But my mother wouldn't let me go. The teacher told me she would give me shoes and a dress. That was a lifetime opportunity. I wanted to go and my father agreed to go with me to Belgrade. We went on our cart, we had a good horse... He found a place for me to stay, everything. I thought I would leave my child with my mother. But she said the child should be with me. Where should I go with my child? That's what she did, she wanted to stop me by all means. I guess I had to be a slave all my life. I was left with no choice then.

I am sorry even today I couldn't do it ... first, to complete elementary school as some of my friends did, then go and face a better life. It's over now.

Cica, 77 years old, (1924)

Tell me something about your childhood.

– My parents had four children, three sisters, and one brother. My parents weren't from Žabalj, my mother was, but my father was from Djurdjevo. My mother first married a man from Kovilj, but they had no children. My father was also married before to another woman, had two sons, but then he divorced her and married my mother. They used to live in Djurdjevo at the time and my mother is from Žabalj, if you know Boško, who lived in Gypsy lane, he was her uncle. Her father died there, I can't remember her father and she married that man from Kovilj when she was still young. She had no children, she had divorces and came back to her uncles. My father and mother got married, had three children, I was their first born, then came Ljubica and Gaja. And two sons from my father's first marriage were with us, my mother accepted them, we grew up together.

Did you have toys?

– No. We children took care of each other, we were playing in the mud, I was making my own dolls out of rags. I would take some cornhusk and roll it around ... There were some girls across the street, Serbian girls and we played with those girls. They had no special toys, it wasn't the way it is now. Nowadays children have too much. Our old house was at the end of the street and we were playing there. There was a field there ...

Did you help your parents?

– Yes. My father was a dogcatcher, he would go to the village and bring dead hens and pigs and all sorts of things. My mother would go to the village and I would work in the house. I cooked, knead pogacha¹¹ with my mother, when I was a bit older, about 13. I would put a tub by the table so that I could stand on it and knead because I was still small.

Did your mother make any difference between girls and boys?

– My mother wouldn't forbid us to do anything but she also didn't teach us anything either. Bujko was the older brother, he was helping my father he would go around village and bring those things home and Proka was younger and Gaja the youngest. Later when he grew up he knew everything. When Vida, my father died, Gaja was the one who took responsibility for everything, he became man of the house. My mother taught me how to cook, clean and wash. After me, Ljubica did these things too.

¹¹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

Did you go to school?

– Ljubica did, but I didn't. Ljubica finished five grades, I finished none, my mother didn't let me and I didn't object. My brother, Gaja, went to school for two years. He didn't learn easily. I can't read, nor write, I only know how to work, I wasn't even thinking of going to school.

Did you send your children to school?

– Yes, I did. I sent Radojka to school. I didn't make them go, but they really struggled to learn to read. Rada wasn't that good at reading, he preferred to work. He liked better to work than to struggle with reading, Radojka also wasn't too keen ...

When you were young, were young women allowed to go downtown with boys?

– Girls were allowed to, but I didn't want to do it. My parents didn't forbid me to but I didn't even ask to go downtown and make friends with Gypsies. There were few Gypsies in Djurdjevo. I lived in Djurdjevo until I was seventeen. At that time girls weren't allowed to use make up or wear mini skirts, but those who wanted could cut their hair. I didn't cut mine until the Hungarians came during war, then all women had to do it, it didn't matter if they were young or old, they just had to. That was what the Hungarians ordered.

How old were you when the war started?

– I got married when I was seventeen, it was winter, after Saint Michael's Day. It was 1941. The war just began. My father forced me to get married. Radoja, my father – in – law and my father got along well, they were good friends and so my father wanted Laza to be his son – in – law. I didn't want to do it for a long time. He was blind in one eye, really blind as a bat. Still, I had to obey my father and marry him. There was no wedding party, the war was on. We had wedding ceremony afterwards, just before Rada was born. I have two children from my marriage, Rada and Radojka. I had one more girl, but she died when she was three weeks old. I gave her poppies and put her away. I couldn't work from her, so I put her to sleep and she went to hell. It's a good thing she croaked, I wish this one croaked just as well. I had no children for four years, then I stayed pregnant with Rada and after nine months with Radojka, afterwards I had no children for three years, and then I gave birth to that devil. I didn't like that child.

How did Romani people live during the war? Did they help the partisans?

– We didn't help the partisans. There were those who went to join the partisans and those, who didn't, younger ones went and elderly stayed at home. There was a Hungarian woman who lived two houses from our house and she

told Vida, my father, "If you promised your girl's hand then marry her but don't throw a party because Hungarian army is here and they don't like such things." When my husband's people came to ask for my hand he told them, "She will get married, but there will be no party, because the Hungarian woman said the Hungarians will punish us." So you could say that I eloped.

So you got married?

– Yes. Nothing happened, I came to my husband's house in the evening, on foot. He was from Žabalj. I came to Žabalj, I stayed there and grew old there. When I arrived to my mother in law's house, she gave me bread and salt to eat. It's the custom to give that to bride and groom to eat. I don't know why this is so.

What did you and your husband do to earn a living?

– Well, I worked as a day laborer, we had no land, so that's what I had to do. He also traded with horses a little bit at fairs, market places. He would go to work in the field for a short while but only when he didn't trade. One could make a living out of that. At that time, Gypsies were mostly tradesmen. I also kept silkworms. I would go and pick mulberry leaves. I did that just for one year. It used to be called 'galete'. You made those big things of reed, something like shelves, and then on it you would put reed, and the bugs eat that for a month or so, you have to feed them. You put leaves over night and when it dawns, you have to take away old newspapers which were under them and put new ones and so on. One could earn nice some of money doing that, but I didn't want to do it for another year. It was hard for me to climb the trees and pick leaves, I could pick only as much as I could reach. I had those rakes with me, you know those people use to thresh straw and with them I could reach a branch, pick the leaves and then reach for another one... My husband went to pick leaves with me. He didn't help me in the house, but I didn't ask him to anyway. Men should help their wives, but there are those who do it and those who don't. And woman has to do everything, to clean, to cook and wash and raise the children. Fathers should teach their sons to do the same job he does. If a father is a tradesman, his son will go trading with him, if he works, he will go working with him in the field, or he will hoe corn, hoe the garden. Daughters are with their mothers, sons with their fathers, so they learn how to work, when they grow up.

And what happened after the war? Do you remember the time when Russians came to Žabalj?

– I don't know for how long they stayed in the country but they weren't in Djurdjevo and Žabalj that long. They were going all around Serbia and had to be put up at people's houses. I can't tell you what they were looking for because they didn't stay at our house. I was in Djurdjevo then. Also they didn't stay at

the houses of Gypsies. There weren't as many Gypsies in Djurdjevo then as there are now and especially not where we were, there was just our house.

Did you and your husband inherit the house from his parents?

– Yes, we stayed to live in that house. I looked after my mother and father in – law when they got old. Later on, when Rada grew up and became independent, he tore that house down and he made another brick one. It had hall, kitchen and two rooms. Our old house was an adobe, made of clay bricks and it was covered reed. It had only one room and a kitchen. It was an old house, the father of my mother – in – law built it. He left it to her and when she got ill and died, she left it to Laza. My mother – in – law's name was Duna.

How old was your son when he got married?

– I don't know, it was before he went to the army. He married young, Kurejac convinced him to do it. He is the son of Laza's sister, I raised him, him and another girl because that daughter of Duna got married and left those two children at her mother's place. When my father and mother –in – laws returned from the marketplace, they found their grandchildren alone in their house while their mother got married and went to hell. When Laza married me, I brought them up. Afterwards that Sava, that kid I raised, married Mica's aunt. My son married my daughter –in – law's aunt. She was from Aradac. She was young, but somewhat older than my son, I don't know. We made a small party, we served brandy and so. She was not wearing a wedding dress. She was a virgin, I guess, but I don't care for that. It doesn't matter if she was or she wasn't, if she was good to him she was even better to me. Afterwards her family came to see how she was doing. They have three children. I didn't throw a wedding party for my daughter, either. When she married for the first time in Kovilj, he was a womanizer of a sort so I was hoping she wouldn't be hung up on him. She was young, oh, well, I don't know. And Mile from Aradac wanted to take her even before that but I wouldn't allow it because our families were related. He is brother of my sister – in – law. One morning he, Laza and his father dressed up and came to us ... She has been living with him ever since. She doesn't have children. Her husband went to work in Germany and he had two daughters there, they raised one and he got a divorce and he didn't even know that he had another child with that other woman. Joca was born there at his mother's place and when he grew up he found out that he had a father. So he came to meet him and he stayed with him and got married afterwards. So he has three children, only he took away two and he left that one girl to Mileta and Radojka so that they would bring her up.

When you were young, did you go with your husband to celebrate, for example, May 1st?

– We went nowhere to celebrate any holidays as people do now. We worked at home, we had our cattle. I had pigs, our own horses... After I gave birth to Rada, and my mother – in – law was still alive, she looked after both of the children. She couldn't work much, she was ill. She spent four years in bed, she had asthma. My father – in – law and I were looking after her, but he spent most of the time at home, he didn't work, so he helped her with the chamber pot and those things... I cooked in the evening, when I got home if I returned early enough, and if not, I cooked early in the morning so that they would have something to eat. We slaughtered our pigs, we had plenty of meat, everything. I didn't have to struggle as I do.

Does that mean that you were not poor?

– Well, I don't know, we were neither very poor, nor very rich. My mother – in – law, as far as I know, she was going to the marketplace to sell things with the Bulgarians, like potatoes, parsley and onion, lettuce, cucumber and melon. She got ill afterwards and couldn't go anymore. My father – in – law also traded. All Gypsies traded at those times, not like these days all they do is play music ...

And did you go to church?

– I went to church and I believe in God. I am an Orthodox. When I was young and as long as I could, I went to church regularly, but I don't go any longer. I celebrated our Patron Saint's Day, Archangel Michael. Then Christmas. But I don't know why Christmas is celebrated. I can't tell you that. It's been celebrated since the beginning of time, for God left it so. Christmas lasts for three days. The first one is the evening, Christmas Eve. When I was younger, we would go out in the evening as korindjashes.¹² You get all sorts of things, walnuts and other things ... As children we would sing then, "Priest sits in nettle minding our cattle, We'll give books to God and God will give us good health ..." I can't remember those little songs any more. I was already married but we still went around the village as korindjashes on Christmas Eve. In our neighborhood, where we lived, there were no other Gypsies just our house, so we, young married women would go along with the girls ... We didn't have any music with us, we just went like that, not everyone had music at that time.

What did you prepare for Christmas?

– I cooked a lean meal, noodles with poppy seeds, also I would stew prunes, fry fish and make fish chowder. In the evening we would light a candle, when we took the straw in, about six, seven o'clock. The host takes in some straw and blesses everybody, "Merry Christmas, may you have even better Christmas next year, may all of you be healthy." And I would reply, "God bless

¹² See the glossary at the end of the book.

you and may you be healthy together with our children.” Then I would throw some wheat on him. He would spread some straw on the table, the rest under the table. If there is no host, the children are supposed to do it, if they are big enough, the sons. Walnuts are thrown in the corners of the room in the evening in the shape of a cross and then we sit and have dinner. Before that we pray to God, fist the host, then I do it and then children if there are any. After dinner we would go around the village as korindjashes. When you return home that night you’ve got everything, you get money and walnuts, cakes, meat, black pudding. On Christmas Eve I would always roast a turkey for the next day and prepare chesnitza.¹³ Earlier during the day I would make kolach¹⁴ so that I could put the candle in it in the evening. This I did for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The host would slaughter the male turkey. I wouldn’t cut off its head, only the legs, so that I could cut it nicely, then I would roast it, usually in the stove. When it was ready, I would put a walnut and a coin into its beak. On the second day of Christmas I would make chesnitza. I would knead dough and then stretch it to make layers and then on each layer I would put walnuts and raisins and I would put one coin in the middle. Sometimes I would put five-dinar coin or something like that. My husband never went to church. I would make ordinary kolach, I would put some salt and sugar in the dough, then I would knead it and when it was done I would separate it and make three rolls and braid them in one plait. I would put four walnuts on top in the shape of cross and I would leave a hole in the middle so that I can put a candle in it. The votive candle is lit on Christmas Eve and it burns all the time. After lunch I cut chesnitza. First I leave a piece for Christmas, then for God, then if someone died in the family I leave it for them, the rest I put on a plate and whoever wants can eat. We stay at home on Christmas Day, and on the second day of Christmas we usually visit friends and we carry a plate with us because it is a custom. We don’t go to visit our best man because he lives far away in the village. Serbs baptized our children because we didn’t have any neighbors who were Gypsies. On that plate you put pieces of chesnitza, kolach, and roast meat. You eat roast meat on the second day of Christmas. That’s what my mother – in – law used to do and so that custom stayed. If there is a guest staying with you, then you can start eating the roast already in the evening. I used to buy something new for Christmas, mainly dishes or something I needed. That also was my mother – in – law’s custom and I heard it about it from other people as well.

The third day of Christmas is called Stevandani.¹⁵ I would wake up around five, when Laza went to feed the horses, I would clean up the room, take the straw to the field, where nobody walks and leave it there. You should make

13 See the glossary at the end of the book.

14 See the glossary at the end of the book.

15 See the glossary at the end of the book.

a wreath from the straw that was on the table and hang it up on a fruit tree. People say that you will have more fruit then. I never left that straw in the stable. On Christmas Eve we would clean the stable and we took apples there and walnuts and left them under the beam where the pigs weren't able to reach it. Laza did those things. He blessed the pigsty. Those things would stay there until Christmas day then we would clean the stable again and give walnuts and apples to the children. That was the custom. We cleaned with an ordinary broom, our broom that we used before. I didn't buy a new one, neither did my mother – in – law or my mother. I would leave the head of the roast turkey on the beam and the coins from chesnitza I would put on the icon and it would stay there, I would never use it. It would stay there for years. Bones from the roast meat should be buried, you mustn't throw them instead you collect them and on the third day of Christmas you should bury them. The rest of the meat you can eat. People say that it is a shame to give those bones to dogs, that's what I heard from the old people.

What happened on Easter? Why is it celebrated?

– I don't know. It's something from the old ages, it was left to us from some other people. Easter is celebrated for two days. Eggs are dyed in the evening before Easter. I always dyed eggs on Good Friday. You fast on that day. I always cooked fish chowder. Laza loved it and so did I. On Easter I would go to church, crossed myself and prayed to God. After I got home, I cooked lunch and there would be leftovers for supper as well. We used to sow corn, so we had corn to make popcorns. We would make popcorns in the evening. I would leave eggs and candies outside for the children, telling them that Easter Bunny brought it all. The children were happy like all the children. Other people in the village did the same, so I did it too. I didn't do that for my grandchildren, their mother did. You take an egg, rub it against their cheek and say, "Let it be round as an egg, rosy as an egg."

Who is your patron saint?

– Archangel Michael, its day falls in the autumn. I used to celebrate Djurdjevdan when I a young girl. Once a girl gets married, she inherits her husband's patron saint's day and celebrates it till the end of her life. The children inherit it as well. I didn't make koljivo¹⁶, nor did I bring wine to church to be blessed. Sometimes the priest comes to bless water a few days before Archangel Michael's Day, you light a candle then and if you want or if you can afford it you buy a liter of wine and put it on the table. The priest blesses the house on your patron saint's day, if he wants he drinks a glass of wine, if not, he just leaves. You give him some money, as much as you want or have. I would invite guests

¹⁶ See the glossary at the end of the book.

for lunch, we would read Our Father, those of us who knew how to read and we would pray to God. My brother or sister Ljubica usually read, when they came. We didn't go to church.

You have lost your son and your husband. Is it true that when someone dies, his soul dwells in the house for six weeks?

– It depends. I heard my husband but I couldn't see him, he would just knock on our window from time to time. But I neither heard nor saw my son. Others both saw and heard him, but I didn't. I don't know why, I wonder if he bears some grudge or if it is just hard for him, I don't know that. He died because he had a car accident. His spine broke and spleen fell off, so he had been ill, he stayed in hospital in Melenci. It didn't help him at all. He was ill for ten years and then he died.

Why is the deceased dressed in a new suit?

– It doesn't have to be exactly new. He had a spare suit and we put it on him. We bought nothing, but shoes. He didn't have any nice shoes. He simply had what he had been wearing and that's all. A meal is cooked from what people bring and people also bring cigarettes or candies as a greeting to their dead. For example if I have a father who is dead, just like my son is dead now, and then he dies then I would buy a box of cigarettes and say, "Well, say hello to my son I am sending these cigarettes with you as a greeting." People say that the deceased will take it to those other dead people. But you should never send clothes. You put in the casket things he used to wear, if you want to, if you don't want to then you don't have to put anything inside, you can just leave it or burn it, most people burn it. My son had nothing important to be put beside him. The relatives go to the funeral and someone stays at home. If there is nobody who can stay, the house stays empty. Daga¹⁷ is prepared by the person who stays in the house. Round bread is usually made for the funeral feast, nothing special, but what one finds in the house. Fish soup is usually cooked, and after six weeks fish soup with no fat is cooked and fish is fried on oil. It is someone else, who cooks. It is a woman from the neighborhood, who will cook, not you. A woman from the neighborhood cooked the funeral feast for my Rada, and after six weeks we cooked, I think. After the funeral you wash your hands at the home of the deceased and not on the cemetery. A basin is filled with water and everyone washes hands and dries hands with the towel that is on the chair and after that everybody sits and eats. People eat at the so-called funeral dinner. For example I died today and in the evening there will be funeral supper and then tomorrow is the funeral. For that supper you can cook whatever you want, you knead pogacha, it is placed by the deceased's legs and whoever wants, can eat...

¹⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

Someone people prepare something else besides pogacha. You can also slice sausages and put that on plate or salami, usually you offer two kinds of salami so people can eat what they want to. When someone dies, you put a candle in his hands so that he can see better, so that he wouldn't be in darkness. He slept on a feather pillow, but when you see that he is about to die you should take away that pillow because people say that it is harder for him to part with his soul if his head is on feather pillow. The next day everyone goes to the funeral, some women stay to prepare daga and the relatives, along with the others go to bury the dead person. Those who brought something for daga do not go all the way to the grave. They stand next to the well, and those, who want to escort him, those people go the grave, then you throw a few lumps of soil into the grave and you say, "May he rest in peace." All presents and greetings are put into a bag. If there are too many things, they are taken out of the coffin and put in the grave next to it. Those people, who didn't go all the way to the grave serve pogacha, they break it in pieces and as people return from the grave they wash hands and take a bite of pogacha and drink some brandy, for the dead person's soul. Some take wine, some take brandy. When they come home, the table is laid for daga. It is very important that the food for the dead is put on the table first, after that people sit around and have dinner. There should be odd number of people at the table. The place for the dead person is left empty, his plate is overturned and also his cup. Also you should first put a plate of fish chowder, piece of fish and some water on the shelf and that's for him. His relatives go to the graveyard again the day after. They take there pogacha and something to drink. First you take his piece of pogacha and you leave it o his grave and also you pour water over his grave in the shape of cross and then you sit and eat some pogacha facing his feet. You should go to the graveyard after a week, then after six weeks, half a year and a year and give respect to the dead. You don't go exactly six weeks after his funeral but a week in advance, also after a year you go a month in advance, at least some people do. It's a custom with all people.

Do you believe that after death man still lives on that other world?

– I don't know. Last winter there was a conjurer from Čurug, who said that dead people know everything that is going on in their house. I told Sophia, "I don't believe it." But she said, "Grandma, don't do it, don't refuse to believe, because there are people who talked to Rada, although he is dead." I just can't believe it, but maybe there is something after all. When my mother died, I heard her come home and cry at the window, and when my father died, I never heard him. My husband came to my dreams for so many, many times, but my son never, never came. Why doesn't he want to come to my dreams I don't know. I would like to see him. There are times when I believe in dreams. I dreamed about Laza coming home and that he liked to trade, he came in so many of my

dreams I even forgot how many.

Do you believe in witches?

– I heard about witches, but I don't know. They never came to bother me, they never came to my dreams I never saw them. But I heard from other people that they came and annoyed people. There are those who to strangle you, they grab people at their throats. ... They come during night and God knows how they get into the house. I also heard that they strangle only adults, they leave children alone. I heard about it in Žabalj but also when I was still in my parents' village, I heard it from elderly women, they would say, "Witches came and tried to strangle me tonight!" Why they were coming and if that's true, I don't know. I don't know how one can protect oneself from them. Thank God, they never bothered us, neither in my parents' house nor in my in – laws' house.

Do Romani women have a hard life nowadays?

– She has to work a lot, be quiet and suffer. It is very hard. My husband didn't beat me, nor did he cheat on me and I didn't cheat on him. We lived an honest life, we struggled all the time to make a better living.

What made influenced your life most?

– Nothing special. Mostly that I worked and I liked to work and if my back didn't hurt and if I weren't ill I would work even now. It's in my blood. I did other people's laundry, I worked in the fields and I whitewashed other people's houses in the village ... When I got ill, it's been many years now since that happened, I stopped working. My spine ached and I got injections for the spine, but it didn't help. I just kept bending more and more and now I'm bent all to the ground. I haven't been to a spa. I had four operations: doctors took out my womb, then they cut off my breast, four operations but thank God I'm all right now. I went to hospital when I was forty. Then I also got that spine disease and I got some disease inside of me. My womb, ovaries all that had to go out, my spine bent and after that I just couldn't work anymore.

What was the happiest moment in your life?

– I don't have any. I was happy, when I gave birth to my first child, I guess that was it. ... I was happy it was a son. I was also happy, when my first grandchild, Cica, my granddaughter, was born. Bata, Mile and others followed...

What was the worst moment in your life?

– This is my worst moment. I don't have pension, I don't have any welfare aid. I live with Bata, my grandson, with his wife and her son. I go to village and beg, let me tell you that as well. They support me, but as long as the weather is nice, I go and beg. I still can do it, but I don't know for how long and what will I do afterwards when I won't be able to do it anymore. Where will I live and what will I eat, I don't know. I don't know what to do.

Did you ask for welfare?

– I did and I had some but then we had that accident in Aradac and they took me away. We moved to Aradac, Bata sold the house to move there, the house my son had built. But he and his family didn't even live in Aradac for long, then they moved to Žabalj, then to Jaroš. I didn't even know this Jaroš existed and now I'm living in Jaroš.

What did you want to achieve in life, when you were young?

– I liked to work and have nice clothes and I wanted to stay with my mother as long as I could. I didn't dream of marrying someone rich. I didn't want to get married so early, but my father forced me. My mother and me never thought that I would marry so young, I was just seventeen. I did all sorts of jobs in my mother's house, I wasn't dreaming about having a nicer house, or living a better life than I was living in my mum's house.

What would be your advice to you granddaughters, or to young in general?

– I would tell them to take care and find a good house in which they will marry. If she is a good girl she should get married, she should find for herself good and honest family, but she should also be honest, she shouldn't wail afterwards and say, "Oh my God I had a better life in my mom's house." If her life is not good she should keep quiet and suffer. But if she can't take all that suffering then it is better for her to get separated before she has children, and then later she can find herself another man with whom she will have a better life and if you have children you have to know how to raise them it's no good to have them and then leave them. There are girls who just have children and then leave them and marry somebody else. She should go to school and be good at learning or if she has some craft she has to know how to use it. She should also have some nice memory of the time when she was a young woman, she should have that memory for the time when she is older. She should be her own mistress, she should know how to read and so.

Gina, 75 years old (1925)

Tell me something about your family.

– My parents are real Romani people from Žabalj. They had nine children. Five sons and four daughters. I was sixth, first there was Aca, Zora, me, Dana, Neda, Luka, Draga. None of them is alive, just Luka.

When you were little what did your parents do to raise you?

– They fed us corn mush, cornbread, times were hard, at that time Hungarians came, it was difficult, you know how it was – nine children and them two. My father looked after village pigs, he was swineherd, then we helped when we grew up. I took care of them mostly, then sister Marija took over. Dana minded pigs a bit, but Marija and me did it mostly. The sons didn't do it because they married young, and as children only Mile and Aca minded pigs. Dada didn't because he had no luck with his eye and we protected him most and he was sickly. He was twenty-five when he died of cancer.

When you were little did you have toys?

– Well, we didn't since we were poor. We would go outside, take string and jump over it, take each other's hands, turn round and so on. We played "All 'round the mulberry bush" or "Cates in a cradle" and we took our hands and turned round. We made rag balls: we took rags, made hard-core and then with strings we made ball and played with it. We also made rag dolls. We made head, arms, legs, you can also do it with corncob and also with wood. We never played with dolls anyway, we had to work. There were a lot of people in the house, after that my brothers married, there were eleven of us, then Hungarian time came. It was very difficult, it was wartime, it was hard, we had nothing to eat. Mom worked, she went to other people to plaster walls of houses with mud, to whitewash walls, she didn't take us with her. We just minded pigs with father: me and Marija, while Dana was at home. When the war came, we lived hard, very hard, we couldn't mind the pigs and the hogs were in the municipal building and we had to enter the building each morning to drive them out and in the evening to herd them in.

Did you wear yellow ribbons so that people knew you were a Gipsy and were you beaten and was you head shaved?

– We didn't wear yellow ribbons, but our heads were shaved and we were beaten by Hungarians. Some Pizoš called Milan the Gipsy, Jova's father, president of the Gypsies, he was on their side.

And then later, when freedom came, he was taken to Bečej, and nothing

was ever known about him later, they said he went to work illegally, he was killed in Bečej, by our partisans probably. Cause he was on their side. He was beating Laza, twice, thrice he smacked my husband so. And he came to throw karabo¹⁸ in the house. It smelled and we weren't able to sleep in the house, it smelled so bad I can't explain it to you. He threw it he said because of lice, and he brought sulfur to pour it on our heads. There were four of us girls, I can tell you that as well. We all had long hair, and they didn't find a louse in it. We didn't have our haircut, they cut other people's hair, and our hair wasn't cut because they didn't find lice while they were cutting. They cut hair of older women, of some Leksa, they cut her hair, then my mother – in – law's, she had hair so long she could sit on it and they just came and cut her braids, and left some hair here, and then there was that Lepa, they cut her braids also and left some hair above, then they cut hair of some grandma Rozika.

It was much worse for us because they were beating us, maltreating us, they sent Laza in a prison in Germany because he was good, he was there for year and a half: he went in 1943 and came in 1945 from Germany, and when he came back he started to work.

Some Roms were taken to concentration camps, they were killed, thrown under ice. My family wasn't killed, not my father nor mother nor brothers nor sisters, they didn't kill anybody from my family. Well, they killed gendarme some Acika, then Stojan from Romani lane and Gordana, Dušanka, those were Miša's – Beka's. Well, they killed those, took them to the Tisa and killed them. Well, young Stojan, who lived with that Dušanka, he didn't want to climb the truck and one man took a gun behind the door on the gate in municipal office and killed him. They did horrible things.

Did your mother make a difference in raising female children?

– Of course, she took care of us as if we were the pupil of her eye. She was careful so that we wouldn't be tricked by someone. There were scoundrels among men, they were wild, so she took care of us, and why would she have to care about a boy? She allowed him to do much more, but man is a man, and woman is a woman. We were looked after by my mother so that we wouldn't be tricked by somebody. I could go to the window, but not to the center to the cinema, I didn't know what cinema was at all. So it was a bit merry in houses when we young gathered and there were no dates. We didn't go to cinemas, nor dances, nothing.

There were no clothes like today either. Mostly you didn't wear things short, but longer skirts and dresses cause that was fashion then, to wear longer things, cause you were ashamed of your father, parents, to wear short. There were four of us daughters and we couldn't wear short in the house because of

18 Powder used as insecticide.

our parents. We rarely tied kerchiefs because we had nice hair and we went mostly bareheaded, with nice clips in hair.

How old were you when you married?

– Sixteen.

Did you go to school?

– I only went for two grades. Cause we didn't have possibilities, we were very poor, our father couldn't send us to school. My brothers and sisters didn't finish more than two grades, none of us finished fifth or sixth grade or eighth grade, no one did. I know to read and write a bit, only I can't see. I can sign my name.

How did you meet your husband?

– Ah, how did we meet! Let me tell you that I was sixteen years old when I met my husband. It was a custom that we marry young. We had to marry so young cause we were poor. We couldn't have the time to be young women, to dress like other young women. However, even if we got married earlier it wouldn't matter, I wouldn't mind, just to have mine husband, then it wouldn't matter what kind of clothes I had, what kind of shoes. It's different to be a young woman, young woman needs nice shoes, nice dresses, right, these skirts, blouses and so. And we didn't have those, we were very poor. There were eleven of us in the house. My husband Laza was also from here, from Žabalj and so we met. Once I went to the store and so he found me and asked me to go with him and I said, "I'll not go with anyone or leave home until I marry" and he said, "Will you marry me?" I said, "I can't say it now, I want to think it over!" There was that Sava Bukuriš, he was a matchmaker. I went to the well, there to the faucet, on the corner where people who carried water gathered, and I left my bucket and eloped with Laza. I liked Laza! I had nine children with him, when I married. We didn't make a wedding, he was poor. You know it was our house there where your uncle Milan's house is now, there behind, now it is a big house. There was just out little house. There lived: me, Laza, my brother – in – law Sava, his wife Anda and my mother – in – law Đula, and my father – in – law wasn't with us, he was separated, he married another woman. I got along nicely with my mother – in – law and the others in the house. We were together for thirty-one years. I served her, she died in my arms, I loved her very much. If the daughter in law is good – then you know everything is good. And when the daughter – in – law fights, then everything will be over.

What did you do?

– Eh, what did we do? We coated the walls of houses with mud, we worked in the fields, I worked as a hired help, who ever called we went there and worked, I went to different houses, I whitewashed and did laundry ... what can

I tell you? I was very poor, I had a lot of children, I had to do everything to raise them. Once I had an abortion, it was my tenth child. When I went to have an abortion, Laza took me to Novi Sad. When it was all over the doctor went out and said, "Well, Laza, now you can know." He asked me, "Which one is your husband?"; and I said "Laza", and he went after me to Laza. "Well, Laza, now you can know what your wife has thrown out! She threw out two sons!", he said. And now I have twins Mile and Milanka, and then I would have had two sons. And now I have children: Seka, Ljubica, Stevica, Mile, Sava, Aca ... I gave birth in Novi Sad in the hospital only to Mile and Milanka. In hospital in Novi Sad I gave birth and I had Aca here in the old ambulance. I gave birth to Aca and Sava in home, and to Seka.

How was it, did anyone help you, did your husband help you?

– Husband has nothing to do with it, there was a doctor, Hungarian, the country was under Hungarian rule when I gave birth to that older daughter of mine. I married in 1943. I gave birth to the first child in that year, on 20th of April.

Did you send your children to school?

– I did, as far as they wanted to go. Aca went for five years, my Mile went for four I think, Lazar five. Aca and Mile went to school. Sava didn't go, Stevica didn't go. They didn't go, I don't know why, they were poor, they were left without parents. I worked alone until my Mile came, when my Mile started to work, he went around village working. Sava did the same, Stevica also worked so they couldn't go to school. My husband got killed in a car accident in 1971, Slavko Gajić killed him! I was left a single mother. Afterwards I married in 1973 a man from Kać. I didn't live in Kać, he lived with me here. I didn't have children with him, or with any man, just with my Laza. But with him I lived for just a year. Cause he drank a lot and he had his wife, children, and he turned to his wife, his children. He lied to me that he didn't live with that wife, that he couldn't be there, that he had a fight with a Bosnian so he was having his revenge. So that his sister was also here and she said he was good, hardworking, good worker ... And when I found out, I immediately got separated. After that I married Vitomir, after him, a year and a half passed. With Vitomir I lived for three and a half years and then he started saying something about my Aca, that he didn't have the right to have things, asking why I gave Aca money to buy notebooks. He had his children, two sons, and they were with us. I never made difference between his children and mine. He didn't like me to give things to my children and I didn't mind that he gave to his. Well, if you give to your kids, I am going to give to mine too, and Aca was going to school, he needed notebooks and pencils, and his son saw that I gave Aca six dinars for a notebook and he told that to his father and he started shouting at me and I said, "If you have objections,

I want my things.” and I went to my house. I lived in Generala Milutinovića Street, here in Žabalj. After that I never married, I was sick when I saw that I had no luck, that my children had no luck. Why should I raise other child and other children, I returned to raise my children and to be among my children. I lived in ... that old house, how did you call that house, it was my late husband’s house, with my mother and father – in – law. I didn’t bring husbands to them, God forbid that I would bring them to my mother – in – law. My mother – in – law died and you know she didn’t even know that I married after her son.

After my husband died, I stayed in our house, we had one room, that was mine and Laza’s house, we made it. Even today I live in that house. But let me also tell you, I am not always there, I have place at my daughter’s and my other son’s, only my brother and wife have children. There are eight of them and me, we can’t be together all of us, how can we lie down? I go to my daughter for a while, I go to my son for a while. That house I made with my husband I gave to one son. My son repaired this house, and it was one little room, so little that just one bed could fit in there and cooker and table and there were eleven children and us two. What do you think, what kind of life that was? Then afterwards, when my Mile came of age, he made it, he fixed it all round, I gave him everything, that place, everything.

Tell me whether you remember war, when Russians came to Žabalj?

– I remember. I think it was round 1948. Well how was it: they came to shoot us, who knows would we be alive. Then supposedly it was a war with Hungarians. First the partisans came, then when the partisans went, then came Russians to clean. We all went to Bečej, we all cleaned roads, we went to fields to cut corn, what was left of it, we cleaned fields so that nobody would hide in the fields, well that’s what we cleaned. Russians were there for a time. In my house there was the kitchen for more than two months. They slept in houses, in my house there were two in the room and a captain just across me. They weren’t bad, we had those who were good, and there were those who weren’t good. Russian wanted to be loved, when he saw a girl, that was dangerous. I was making preserves then and at that time I had pigs and ducks and I had a scarf over my head and one came and said, “You are going be my girl.” I said, “I can’t be your girl, I have a husband” and my mother – in – law yelled, “That is my daughter – in – law, that is my daughter – in – law!” They were dangerous. There were girls who hid and there were girls who didn’t hide. Me and my sister took picture with one officer, and when Laza came I really paid a price for that. My husband was in prison in Germany. Well then they left, then my Laza came, it was liberation, the partisans parted. When freedom came, it was very nice, fiddlers played, it was big celebration. Jevrenka was there, Jagoda. Jevrenka was a partisan, she was a guest, they were there in front of municipal building, it

was her whole regiment, one was from Čurug, then commandant, nice dawn came for all of us.

Could Roms travel during the war, could they do anything?

– During war I think they couldn't, but when it was almost peace then you could go to Bratislava, they could go to Italy. I was a poor woman, I didn't have a possibility to go and trade ...

Did you keep silkworms?

– I did, in Svilara, in Žabalj. We got bugs and we picked leaves and fed them for four times, until they got up. We fed them with leaves, then when they started to wrap themselves up, you put many leaves and you put also brooms in there and then they climb and become very beautiful. We made money ... well, I can't tell you how much a kilo was, but we mostly worked. I went working in the fields in farm co-operatives and also on private farms, well there wasn't anything I didn't do, anywhere in village and elsewhere.

Tell me, do you believe in God?

– I believe, I do believe. I am an Orthodox Christian.

Why is Christmas celebrated?

– I think that Christmas is celebrated because Jesus Christ was born, his mother's name is Mary, and his father's ... I don't know that. Christmas lasts for three days. First day before Christmas is called Badjindan.¹⁹ On Badjindan animals are slaughtered, house is being cleaned so that you cannot work on the first day of Christmas. On the first day you knead noodles, on Badjindan you cook noodles, you cook plumes, fish chowder if you can afford it, and those who cannot afford it, don't prepare it, they do not have anything to cook. You go as korindjash²⁰ and you say: "Two golden pigeons flew, and fell on the holy church's altar. We came to you to give us omens, tonight Jesus Christ was born for us and walks on Earth and heaven for us." I know some more: "An apple was growing by the gray sea, under it sat Virgin Mary, she cried and called Saint John, rise, rise Saint John, we came to you to give us omens!" You go from door to door as korindjash. In the evening you bring straw before dinner, the host takes it in and says: "Christ is born!" And I am throwing corn and wheat on him. He tells me: "Christ is born!" And I bless him, he throws walnuts in the four corners of the room in the shape of cross and says, "In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Ghost, amen!" On four sides the room is crossed and then poloznik²¹ is given dinner. Poloznik is the person who comes first in the morning. Then he is given dinner, before we have dinner because

¹⁹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

²⁰ See the glossary at the end of the book.

²¹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

he is poloznik. Poloznik means the one who comes first, that is our poloznik, if that person is a man, and usually a man comes. We light a candle and read "Our Father", votive candle is burning till morning under the icon, I mean we light it in the evening and it burns throughout the night, then the same votive candle burns all day and then afterwards we light a candle when we are about to have lunch, we pray to God. We put straw on the table, kolach, children go as korindjashes and I am left alone to prepare lunch for tomorrow. During night I prepare soup, but I do not let it boil immediately, I just put it aside on the cooker. Then I prepare stuffed cabbage and the filling for it is brought to boil and left for the morning, then we just stuff cabbage with it. We make kolach, big kolach, like bread, salty and then it is rounded and I put four walnuts on sides like a cross and in the middle I make a rose. On that night we roast meat, usually turkey, not female turkey, because it is not good, because it is female it is not good, male turkey represents the host. In the male turkey we put cut bread, apple is put in that filling, the turkey is sewed, you put a walnut in its mouth. You do not cut its head, you have to bend it, you prepare a wood, and lean it thus and stick it either in the wing or in the side. You do not cut the head because the host would not be alive, because it is the host that is being roasted. And when I bake chesnitza²², in it I put walnuts, raisins, you spread honey over it and one dinar is put in it so that only I know where it is and nobody else knows. So whose ever luck it is to find it, finds it and I know where it is because I make it. And this year it was my luck: I found a dinar in my piece at my daughter – in – law's. The day after Christmas the host does not go anywhere throughout the day, he stays in the house, because you do not go anywhere on the first day, we are all in the house. When it is lunchtime, we have lunch, we read Our Father, we light a candle, we sit, pray to God and then we sit and have lunch, I read Our Father, we all together read. As I am cutting chesnitza, first piece goes to God, then we give it to poloznik, then to the dead, who died in turn. The piece for God we put on kolach, for the traveler it is also put on kolach, the piece for poloznik is put aside, then you give pieces to children according to their age. The dinar must not leave the house, it has to stay and even today we have that dinar. We do not eat roast meat on the first day of Christmas but on the second we do. On the first day we eat only soup and something else I prepared, and the roast meat remains and you decorate it with money and big kolach is garnished with money and the roast meat has to be decorated. That means that we are giving present to Christmas and we are repeating it, whatever we buy if we buy a plate or a jug whatever you can buy, this is Christmas being granted a present. On these days money is not taken out of the house. There are people who do not give anything out of the house on these Christmas days, they say you shouldn't do it, I do not

22 See the glossary at the end of the book.

know why, but I wasn't giving things. On the second day of Christmas I can go out and bring things on plate to my daughter, for example to my brother too. Always, each year, we take kolach to our godmother, I make special kolach for the godmother with milk and eggs so that it is sweet, I take a slice of that special Christmas kolach, I take drumstick of the roast meat. And then later she brings me cakes as well. My godmother is not a Romani woman, she is Serbian, she baptized my children. I have chosen Serbian woman because we didn't have anybody else at the last moment's notice, so then we said Živka would baptize them and her son would baptize Milanka and Mile. He wanted the boy to be named Steva, but we didn't want that name Steva. My brother Mile came and told Laza, "If he is not named Mile I will not speak with you, I want my sister to give my name" so we gave names Mile and Milanka to the twins. But Stevica has his own godmother, I have four godfathers. I had a godmother as well, that one renounced Stevica, she said, "I entered Communist party. I will no longer do it, I renounced it." Alright, the godfather didn't do that, their surname is Tešin, their elder daughter is called Seka Jelica and they baptized Jelica. When I went to Ljubica she said, "Godmother I apologize, I entered the Communist party, they do not allow going to the church", so she canceled being a godmother.

On the third day of Christmas you can do some work, you can go out, usually on the third day we clean our room. The third day is called Stevindan. You clean with a broom, it doesn't have to be a new one. You do not throw the straw out, instead you make a bundle and tie it with a string usually and either take it to the attic or you tie it to the beam at the attic. You do not throw that straw because it is Christmas. The bones of the roast meat are collected and you do not give them to dogs or cats you shouldn't do it because otherwise people in the house will fight.

The dinar we find in chesnitza we leave, my daughter – in – law left it aside. I was hostess, I mean my house. I gave it to Laza and when Laza goes to a fair he takes it and adds more money to it and buys candies for children or cotton candy or something else. We also had pigs and it should also be given when buying pigs.

Tell me what happened on Easter?

– For Easter, well what do we do on Easter: we prepare cakes, we dye – on Good Friday we dye eggs. After that you eat popcorn and pogacha²³ – we don't eat meat, we are fasting and we go to church. In church you pray to God, light candles for the dead and those still alive. On the next day we put eggs under children's pillows as if Easter Bunny brought them. My mother didn't do this but I dye eggs for my children and then my daughter – in – law gives eggs to children and says, "There, bunny brought this" and she puts eggs under pillows

²³ See the glossary at the end of the book.

as if bunny brought them. I have no idea why eggs are put under pillows, also candies for children, chocolate if we have any, if we don't, then just eggs and then children are happy. Eggs are dyed because Easter is important holiday, that is once a year just like Christmas.

Who crucified Jesus?

– Who crucified him? Well, Jews, well I don't know why, I can't explain this to you, because maybe I wasn't even born at that time so I don't know, those who know to read and write might know this and say it and I do not know why he was crucified. ... I know it was said that Jews crucified him.

Who is your patron saint?

– My patron saint's day is Djurdjevdan²⁴, it's on sixth of May, I inherited this patron saint from my husband. On Djurdjevdan we knead, cook, greet guests, guests come, I prepare koljivo²⁵, kolach and wine to be blessed. All this is prepared to be taken to church, either my daughter – in – law or I can take it, sometimes the hosts takes it and then he hears prayer, the service and prays to God, kolach is blessed, then koljivo and then he comes home. Then the guests come and so we have lunch, we make marry, sing and dance because we celebrate we sing and greet guests, it is very nice. The guests bring cakes, some bring beer, some brandy, those who can buy chocolate box, they buy a bit of everything and bring it. For example whom do we call: our family, my brother comes, while my other brothers were alive they came, my daughters – in – law and alike. This is Djurdjevdan on the icon, he killed the dragon.

Tell me whether you know, since you did not have a wedding when you were married so you do not know how it is, did you make a wedding for your daughters?

– I did not, but of course I have seen that custom. There are brides who are bought, it is obligatory in Banat, and there are some among us Romani people, I mean girls are bought. A father comes to the bride's father and they talk about which is the lowest price for girl to be given and they say what has to be brought: how many loaves of bread, how much of brandy, how many bottles of beer, a pig and so on, plus money and then when they come for the girl they bring all this in advance and then come for the girl. When a girl marries she has to be a virgin, and if she is not a virgin, then it can happen that a boy won't want to go with her. It is important that he wants the girl, a woman can't go with him just because he is a young man, he wants her to be a girl, if she lied it is possible that he will return her and then there might be a fight or a row immediately the day after when everybody can see on the sheet that she wasn't a virgin, she can

²⁴ See the glossary at the end of the book.

²⁵ See the glossary at the end of the book.

immediately get marching orders. I don't remember that it happened before, but I remember myself when I married, I was a child, a young woman, then my mother – in – law took the sheet out and showed it around and said, "See what my son had brought, a real girl", she bragged with the sheet. I was, how can I say it, ashamed. So when they bring a girl, the day after they show the sheet and light a fire and if she was a girl it shows on the sheet.

Tell me can you give the wedding dress to other people?

– You can.

You can't work some spell or something like that?

– Well, you know, it happened that spells are cast but rarely on the wedding dress, it is a rare case that spells are cast. And magic is performed I think by pulling a thread, if you want to make some magic. And you can't do it alone, you have to know who works magic and take that thread to them, but there was no case of it being among us, I don't know. I believe in magic and I think you can harm somebody with it. The things my daughter went through, her sister – in – law made it, my daughter was ill for more than two years, she barely stayed alive. She knew it was a curse because we took her to a conjurer woman, doctors can't help in that case, doctors don't help, only conjurer. So then I took her to Sase, there was a woman conjurer called Jelica and I politely told her the name and she said, "You are Milanka's mother." I said, "I am." There was late Nada Karašev, Ruža's mother and Manoja's, she said, "You are Milanka's mother from Žabalj." "I am." Like this my scarf went up, my hair stood at an end, I thought whole room felt creeps when she said my name and my daughter's name, I said, "Yes." She said, "Listen, not a meter away if more from your Milanka's house there is a woman, her hall is facing that house, that woman is dark, slim, tall, that woman and no one else cast a spell on your Milanka." "How?", I asked. She said, "Who died in the family?" I thought and in my family nobody died, but in her husband's family somebody died, the aunt. She said, "That's it, that's what I wanted to hear." She said that Milanka's underwear, underwear of his aunt, that woman, that is someone related by blood, she put it in the casket so that as the underwear rots so Milanka would rot. "But what should I do now?", I asked. She said, "Buy two bathing salts and three weeping willows and take the gown she wore in the house and bring it to me." Her husband went, changed vehicles and went for Dubrovac, and I and my Milanka went to Žabalj. As night fell he came from Dubrovac with those two bathing salts, three weeping willows and the dress she wore in the house. When we returned, the conjurer woman said, "Listen now I will give her some water, each place where she lies should be sprinkled with that water and this water should be sprinkled over her too. I will give her a little cross so she should put it around her neck and she should take it off only when she bathes and she should put it back immediately, she should

wear it day and night.” All right. We believed in everything she said so we did everything she told us. But, damn it, my Milanka got worse and worse and they called us to tell us that, whole family went to Dubrovac and when we went there she was reduced to nothing. We were talking to her and she just sat there, quiet, with her head down. Then her husband took her to Bela crkva, there was a man who was handicapped, my Mile was there too and he was brought in and that man said that we should go to the cemetery and take three roses to the grave of that aunt of her husband where my daughter’s clothes were buried. Three roses should be taken there, two should be left and the third one should be brought back to Milanka. We did that, but it didn’t help and then her husband prepared everything he had ready to build a house, a huge house, not an ordinary one. So he sold all that and he took her to Serbia I think, somewhere behind Požarevac and there was a conjurer and he broke the curse cast on my Milanka. And here is Milanka today, he helped her otherwise if there wasn’t for that man, my Milanka would have died. That is what her sister – in – law did. She did it because she hated her, she hated her and that’s it.

Do you believe that the soul of the dead person can be in the house for up to six weeks?

– I believe that. The soul is alive and the body is dead. Only the soul comes for six weeks, it goes around the house, how should I say, just a shadow since I saw it. Now when my sister – in – law died, I closed the door, they were in Srbobran and my Mile and everybody else was there, the children were sleeping. I closed the door, Mother of God when I got up, the door was wide open, I said, “Good Lord”, I crossed myself and prayed to God, just as now the door is wide open. When I unlocked it by me passed something like a shadow twice, I stood like this and I saw her soul. For when the priest read he said the body is dead and the soul is alive therefore I believe that the souls are alive. And when my brother’s daughter died, let me tell you this, they were all inside and I went out to relieve myself, pardon my expression, and then I wanted to go inside. She tackled me so I called Mile or somebody, I can’t tell whom, Aca and Cveta were there and they carried me inside. She really gripped me and tackled me and I yelled and they ran out and carried me in. Since then my left side hurts from the hip because she tackled me. That is why I believe that the souls are alive.

And do you believe that souls live in the other world?

– Well it is possible that they do, it is possible, now it depends what they are, children’s souls live in heaven and those who went to hell maybe suffer there. Just like the soul suffered on this world so it suffers there.

Why do we light candles for the dead?

– You have to light candles so that it is bright, so that it is not dark and

the candle burns for up to six weeks in the house. And when a man dies, then a candle is put into his hands, if you are there and you see that he is going to die you immediately come and light a candle and put a candle in his hands and you remove a pillow from under his head so that he would die more easily, because if the feathers are heavy in the pillow it is difficult to die because it is warm, and so you remove the pillow and you place him evenly without the pillow so that he can part with his soul. You open the door so that the soul can get out. They you dress him, before that you wash him, I mean if he is not washed, you wash his feet. You throw that water out, I mean with that water you cannot work spells, you throw that water on clear spot, you throw it towards the sun. After that, you put some water with lime underneath him so that he wouldn't become ugly, he can turn blue, purple, or nose bleeds can appear. You close his eyes and mouth. If his eyes were open, you close them and coins are placed on his eyes and you close them. Of course, you dress him in new clothes, of course you do not dress him in old clothes, I mean if she had nice clothes and I do not know what else prepared, you dress her in that. In the casket you also put his clothes, I mean what somebody has, you must not put pictures, you cannot put a lighter – it burns in the other world, you put clothes and shoes, underwear, but only his. You must be careful not to put something of your own, your mother's or sister's to rot with the body, just what he wore and don't put something which you wore for him to wear, that is not good. Then I rot, I get ill and there is no medicine, as she rots so would I. You put money in the hands, handkerchief always, in the hands you put a handkerchief and then money. And fruit, coffee, candies, those are greetings, for example this person, he came, brought wreath or apples or oranges, you put that in the casket with him or her. And then before he is buried, you put all this in a bag and that person who carries a cake, brandy he also takes greetings to greet those other dead people and as he is put down in the grave, then you throw those greetings at his feet. Everybody goes to the funeral, but the cook must stay at home, she prepares all the food for *daca*²⁶, she greets people and sets the table. In the house odd number of people remains and then others follow the casket and then a basin with water and towel is prepared and when you go to the graveyard you must take *pogacha* with you and brandy and before you go, you must eat supper at the dead person's feet, you eat boiled potatoes and *pogacha*. This is eaten by the members of his household, that means that he eats, so that he doesn't go hungry to the other world, it is for his soul, and we gather at his feet and sit and have dinner and before that you put for him or her food under the eaves, we leave for her food so that she can eat, we leave potatoes and *pogacha* but people say that you should not leave it for six weeks, it is not good, just give that supper

26 See the glossary at the end of the book.

and also when you come from the graveyard that evening also give supper and then stop, do not leave more food. In the grave you throw money so that he can pay for his house, he is paying for his place there. It is our custom to throw five or ten dinars for him to pay his house. You throw soil – not the family so that it is not heavy for him, not the family. And when a tear of his mother or wife falls on him, he is wet and you do not dream of him, that should be avoided. And after we bury him, we wash hands at the graveyard and then we come home to *daca* and the table is set. The cook puts overturned plate on the table before we come, when we come, she sets the table. For *daca* you cook chowder. There must be three dishes, for example just one little saucepan for the third dish, if there is fish or if there is stew there must be another dish, there must be three dishes. So when the cook cooks she knows that there must be three dishes thus she makes in the saucepan the third dish even if there is just a bit of it and gives it to everybody, but first to him under the eaves, first to him, then you sit down, wash your hands and sit to eat. And before that, someone stays at home to sleep there, if anyone is afraid, and if anyone comes to spend one night then it is either one night or three nights. And that person for example if he doesn't want to spend there any more nights he has to be there for one night or three nights. On the next day we go to the grave, family comes and everyone carries what he or she brought: they carry meat, cake, that is prepared by the family, they prepare more and more food, it can be fatty meat or fish, and from his home only lean *pogacha* and brandy are taken. All this is for him and then when you eat at the graveyard, you pay your respect at the graveyard, you will not do it in the house, then the same is done at the graveyard and then of course you come home to lunch or supper, whatever it is, it doesn't matter, then you come home. You have to pay your respect at the graveyard and then you do not have to come home. And then afterwards you go to the graveyard again in a week, then after six weeks, then after half a year, then after a year, and all this you do in advance, because if you do it evenly the dead person cannot get what you give him, that is why you always have to go in advance. If you are going after a week's time you have to go a week in advance, if you are going after six weeks you have to go a month in advance – now it is five weeks you have to go to honor six weeks after that person died you go a month in advance. It is the same a year afterwards, you go after eleven months, so eleven months make a year.

Are there any witches in Žabalj?

– There aren't any, as far as I know. And before, when I was small, there were. There was a blacksmith here who shoed his wife, that neighbor woman had on her hands horseshoes shoed with hammer. He said, "Come on Milica, for how long will you sleep?" She was quiet. "Come on, get up, we should have breakfast," he said, she was quiet. When he went to see her, on both of her

hands were horseshoes, a blacksmith shod her, she was a witch and she turned into a duck. Every night she was at his place under the window and at the well near the school, on the main street ... That faucet on the well was one of those that turn, exactly at midnight, there was a horse at the well and it spun as if it had a wheel. And he caught the duck in which she turned and he thought that it was a duck. And then when she turned into a horse he thought that was a horse and shod it, but she wasn't a horse or a duck, she was a woman and people witnessed that neighbor woman was a witch. And her man took her to hospital to get injections to be destroyed. She was a witch, I was told so.

What does a witch do, how does she bother people?

– Well, how does she bother people: she simply wears a man out. She constantly follows you and when she comes to your heartstring, she bites it, a person can die like that and she wears out children mostly, she wears out a child and then that child ... let me tell you this as well. My sister was a cook in Krušedol and she had a fling with Vlada's brother. Her husband was in the army and she had a fling with him and gave birth to a child and that husband of hers was in the army and she brought the child home. And across the road was a woman, she was a witch and she wore that child out and the child died and the neighbor woman said, "Marija you know what you should do: put the child's cap into your bosom, the one who wore the child out will come and ask you what you have in your bosom." And my sister did so: she put the cap, little child's cap in bosom and that very woman who wore the child out came and asked her, "Marija, what do you have in your bosom?" So my sister got the proof that she was a witch and people wanted to kill her. I can't imagine that these things still happen. And a man can be a wizard too, why not. And the witch has to have a tail, only it doesn't show, when she puts on her underwear, God forgive me, she tightens it, so it doesn't show. That is how one can tell because she has a tail.

Can she harm her children?

– Well, the one she loves she can cast a spell on, and she can't cast a spell on someone she hates. If there was a witch who loved a child, she destroyed him.

Tell me granny, what were the key points in your life, what influenced your life most?

– Well, what influenced my life? It influenced that I had children, that I was left alone, that he married three times and I both lived with him and was married to him and he left me. For two or three months he didn't even call and I went to work with children. While he was alive I did not cheat on him because I had to get married sooner or later. I did not want to do it because I had chil-

dren, I fed my children, put clothes on them, I went and worked for whatever I could get to feed them, I worked for their clothes. And secondly did I marry behind his back? I didn't, I never put a spell on him because I thought it was a sin. I told him that one shouldn't do it, I left him, but I had no where further to go: three houses further was my mother's house and there I went to my mother's place, she was miserable ... Where could I go, I had to go to my children, to my house, how ... Who would look after my children, bathe them, cook for them so I returned home. I was very ashamed to get a divorce – then women had to be quiet, to suffer, as he wanted we had to do it, we weren't allowed to protest. If you protested, you were knocked around, my husband could beat me and there was no one to come to help. Listen, once my brother burst in, he flew in and he said, "Laza I will kill you" and he said, "You will kill me, I will kill you, I will wait and kill you." And I approached them and said, "There will be no murders, there will be no fighting, I have to be with him. I do not have to be with you brothers, I have children. I cannot live without my children, I want to live with him." I had my children, I had my house, I had it and I had to suffer. So when he was beating me I had to go to my mother's house and then back. If luck would have it that he was alive now and let him cheat on me! I wasn't jealous, I never was, let him cheat on me, he is a man, he can do it, and when a woman does that, it is a big deal, and when a man does that – it is not a big deal. Every man is the same, let me tell you honestly, they can cheat, I didn't want to.

What was the happiest moment in your life?

– When I gave birth to my first child, my husband wasn't with me, he was with me for six weeks and then I was left without him. He was taken away, he went to Germany, I was feeding my child, I was feeding my mother – in – law, my sister – in – law and her husband, they were all in the house, and I worked – I always suffered. And when the child was born, I was looking forward to that child so much: first child, first joy. I was also happy to see my first grandchild, that was my Milanka, when my first son got married there was my first daughter – in – law and then I was happy too, actually when he brought that first one, I wasn't too happy.

What did you want to do when you were a girl?

– I wanted to earn a house for myself, to have nice linen and nice life, but I couldn't do that. Almost nothing came true because there was a lot of company and whatever we earned had to be given for food, we had to eat. I didn't have a nice house nor nice things, I was very poor! I worked and what I earned I gave to feed the children, he was on the other side and we couldn't save anything.

Was it difficult for Romani woman at that time, did she have to put up with a lot of things?

– Well she had to put up with fighting and beating, with father – in – law and mother – in – law. I didn't have a father – in – law however, and my mother – in – law was better than my mother: whatever was first, it was mine. She brought me everything, she would hide something in her bosom and bring it to me so that her daughter wouldn't know. She loved me a lot and I loved her too. Woman's duty was to wash, cook, to work around the house and also in the village I washed, whitewashed and plastered houses with mud. My husband was taking it easy, he drank and I worked – he was not helping me. If he had been helping me he wouldn't have gotten married, he wouldn't have left me three times.

Tell me, how is your health now?

– Well, my health is quite good still, I just do not see very well. I had some operations – on my right eye, three years ago. Now I can see only with my right eye. I don't have the money to go to all these check ups, I receive welfare but I don't know when it was last time it came, I didn't get any money for nine months. I am also getting some humanitarian help. That is not enough. I receive twelve kilos of flour, beans, and a kilo of sugar, one liter of oil and this is what I get. I am living in my son's house, the one who doesn't have a leg, Mile, his wife's name is Dana. He lost his leg three years ago, he was ill, there are eight of them in the house, I am ninth. Life is very difficult, you know how it is, six children, all of them go to school, they are studying very hard. They themselves want to go to school, they are very good pupils, all of them. You see, this little Sanela is the best pupil still. And my grandchildren from my other sons do not go to school. Stevica's children are young men. Željko is married, one of these days he will have his own children. None of my grandchildren graduated, just Mile's mother made them go to school, but they didn't want to listen. Željko went for a while, Mile went for first four grades and then gave up, Željko did the same and the others didn't go. And I have more than sixty grandchildren and I am great grandmother as well.

How does that make you feel, is it nice?

– It's nice, I love it, it's all the same to me now, and these Sava's children – they are all mine. I minded mostly Mile's children, Milanka more than anyone else, she is my first grandchild, I love her best.

Where were you during air strikes?

– In Mile's house, we went to the basement for about a week and then we stopped. Mile said that we shouldn't go to the basement because the ceiling could fall down, then we heard that one family got suffocated in their basement so we stopped going there. When we heard bombs, we ran outside and stood under the window. I remembered then that previous war, but listen, that one

was more dangerous: then they were beating people in their houses, they came and made men, women and children climb a truck and they took them to the Tisa and there they threw them into the river and killed them, they did all kinds of things and even in the municipal office they killed people. And now there were air strikes and you could see it, you could hear it, somehow you could ride through it and I wasn't afraid for myself, but for the children, I felt sorry for them, I lived my life and saw everything.

Tell me, was life better during Tito's government then it is now?

– I think life was better then because we had everything possible: to eat and to go trading and all. I think you can't do it now, I don't know because then I didn't trade or go away, I never went further than Žabalj. I think life was better then, there wasn't inflation.

Now as an older woman what would you recommend to the young people, **to what they should pay attention, what they should and shouldn't do, what is best for them?**

– The best thing for them is to go and work, to go to school. The school is important for them so that they could find a job, to go and work as clerk of some kind, if they could find work, that is why it is best for them to go to school. I would recommend to them that if they do not go to school, they should go and work and somebody else can mind their child. And I wouldn't recommend to young girls to marry young because it is not good for them to marry young, for example my first granddaughter Milanka is twenty two years old and she got married now and before women got married when they were fifteen or sixteen years old, I married when I was sixteen years old and when I was seventeen I already had my oldest daughter. I would recommend to them to be honest, they do not have to marry as virgins because now it is not so important now.

Kristina, 73 years old (1926)

Tell me something about your childhood.

– We lived in poverty. I was born on May 14, 1926 in Vojka. My mother went to other people's houses to clean, she worked as other people's servant only to earn food for us. My father had bad temper, he was really horrible. He traded with horses. I had a sister who was ten years younger and a brother who lived for just eight days. My parents had a difficult life. My mother committed suicide after I got married, she could not take it any longer, my father was very nervous. He abused my mother.

Did you go to school?

– I finished three grades and then I stopped going to school. I grew up at my uncles' and aunts' houses, my mother had to go to other people's houses, I suffered a lot, I can't remember one nice thing from my childhood.

The war broke out when you were still very young?

– When the war broke out, we were very poor and then my family was taken to a concentration camp ... Our family sided with partisans,²⁷ my father was a partisan, so our family was maltreated. I was fifteen then. Ustasas²⁸ moved into the five houses that belonged to our family. During that time we lived in Beška, I was born in that village. When we returned, everything we had was taken away and stolen, they didn't leave anything behind.

The war lasted long. They came to take me away in 1943. Fascists had already captured my mother in Beška and they locked her up in the town hall, my younger sister, who was five then, was with her. My father already joined the partisans. My mother worked for a chemist who was German, so he protected her and then later she and my sister were released from jail. When I heard that my mother was captured, I wanted to see her, but others didn't let me do it. I was hiding in a house of a clockmaker, he didn't let me go see my mother. Then we went to Čortanovci, I was hiding in a grove, I crossed the railway track because my comrades were there. When we all got together in the evening, we climbed the Fruška Gora hills, we crossed all hills on foot, me and my eldest uncle, he died later, we went to Sremski Karlovci, together with my older uncle and the younger one. Afterwards, we moved to Montenegro. That's how I avoided being captured, I ran away, I joined the partisans. I arrived to the Fruška Gora, to Jabuka, I have a picture we took then.

During the war we didn't dare walk anywhere, we stayed in houses. My

²⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

²⁸ See the glossary at the end of the book.

uncle was hiding at the attic. One Kraut was supposed to hide him. But when the time was ripe he ratted on him and they took him down. He was ill, he was forced to join the domobrans²⁹ then he managed to join the partisans and in the end, just after liberation, he got killed in a train accident.

Once the Germans captured me and I had to gather straw from the mud, I was all alone then. But one of our friends managed to get me out and afterwards the partisans placed me in their underground base and so that was my shelter in Čortanovci.

Were you fighting in the war?

– Yes, but I didn't stay long with partisans because I got ill and they sent me back to Srem. I returned with comrades to Stari Banovci, we were in large battle there, fascists were there and they were shooting at us ... We had to say "Give oats to the horses", that was our password and we had to say that to our comrades so that they would recognize us.

I had an uncle, he was two years younger than me. While we were running away, he said, "Come here!", but I replied, "No, we have a sign, someone is supposed to be waiting for us to help us get out ... near the Danube, near Stari Banovci." We jumped over a fence, but my uncle had wide trousers and he got hooked and couldn't unhook himself. Some dogs started to bark, we didn't know what to do, we heard some people shouting, "Comrades, come here, comrades!" but they weren't our comrades really, they were ustasas. We hardly managed to escape. Then we went to a house and lay on bed, me and my uncle, the youngest one, our comrades who were with us, about ten young men, left. We left all our things with a woman and we told her to say if anyone came to ask about us that we were husband and wife who fled from Zemun to escape air-strikes. We managed to escape somehow to Stari Banovci, where we had relatives. We stayed there for a while, we were hiding in houses till 1945.

When the war was over, we returned to our empty houses, nothing was left, everything was stolen, leveled with ground and the ustasas ran away. When we arrived, we didn't even have a place to lie or sit down. They even took our linen ... everything!

How come a Romani young woman enlisted as a fighter?

– My father joined the partisans in 1943, so that is how I got connected with them...

What happened when you married? Did they buy you?

– They did not buy me. Romani people came to see us, my first husband was Romani, he was also a partisan and we was sort of temporary thing, how would I explain that, we knew each other during the war. He came with his

²⁹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

parents and in the beginning everything went well, but after a while it all went downhill. He had some other woman, so we had to get separated, we didn't live together for long, since he was in the army, he served as an officer in Surčin, I think he was a lieutenant.

Did you work?

– I worked in the town hall, I cleaned offices. I got a pension, beside my regular pension I am getting some additional money because I was in war. Besides, I used to read cards and tell fortune to young girls and so I earned some money. I never lied, I had some kind of power to guess what would happen. Even now I can look into cards and tell fortune. I would spread the cards and tell what happened or what would happen to that woman or girl, so they all believed me and I earned money.

What was your life like after the divorce?

– I was in hospital because I had my appendix taken out. After that my life dragged on, I lived very hard ... I was young, but I didn't go anywhere. I had no friends.

Did you remarry?

– We made an arrangement when I came, he already had a house in Surčin, it was small, miserable house. We got married (I wasn't married to my first husband), he was married before, but he didn't have any children, I also didn't have any children, so we were match for each other. I had father – in – law and a mother – in – law, we got along well. I wasn't a complicated person, there were no problems. My father – in – law died soon afterwards, he was in a concentration camp in Germany, my mother – in – law had to raise two children alone, she lived to be eight five. After my father – in – law returned from Germany, they lived in poverty. I had five children with my husband: a boy, who died when he was six, he got diphtheria. We took him to hospital in Belgrade but doctors gave him more serum than they should, so he died in my arms. It was so hard for me. Then I gave birth to the rest of the children, three daughters and, finally, a son. It was the happiest day of my life when I gave birth to my son.

How did you raise your children?

– Well they were born with couple of years apart and I worked as a char-woman in the town hall so I had short maternity leave, around fifteen or twenty days. My children didn't go to kindergarten because my mother – in – law took care of them but they went to school. One girl and one boy finished trade school, they work as sales assistants, one girl finished only primary school. I had three daughters. I raised them to be honest and chaste and they married as honest girls. I really kept an eye on them, I even hit the youngest one with a stick because she liked to wander so I had to go and fetch her, I took care of her

and she married as an honest and chaste girl, just like my other girls.

You didn't have to keep an eye on your son?

– No, it wasn't necessary. Their father wasn't really interested in the way I brought them up. He could see that I was strict with them and he never meddled. He minded his own business.

What was your life like?

– Our life was very hard. He was a musician, and he maltreated me. He played in inns every night, he was with the female singers and he ignored me... In the beginning we were very poor, but now we have our house and our son has his own. My husband has never respected me, he doesn't respect me even now. I can't cope with him and my life with him is miserable, I almost don't have a life at all now in my old age. And when I was young it wasn't any different. He always insisted on his importance and belittled me, humiliated me. He was with his band and he always did whatever he wanted to. He would invite whole bunch of people to our house, also those women, his women singers, and all sorts of people.

For example, now in my old age I had an accident. I had go to the doctor's to get a shot, when a car hit me. I had brain concussion, I can't walk or do anything ... It's been three years now that I'm ill and all the time I had to stay in bed. I can hardly walk and I can't hear properly and now he is like strong, he is healthy, he abuses me. He tried to hit me several times and he did. He beat me up several times. Now I keep quiet, I don't talk with him any more, I just wait for the day of my death to come. Maybe then I'll manage to get rid of all this trouble...!

Did you ever get separated?

– Well, now that I am old, and ever since that accident I had, he maltreated me, so I went to see my daughter in Germany twice, but then there was this war ... My grandson and son went to the front, so I came back to look after my grandchildren. I had left him, but I returned...

How many grandchildren have you got?

– I have eight grandchildren. Each of my children has two children. I get along well with my grandchildren, they go to school. One of my daughters lives abroad, my grandchildren also go to school there. They help me. I like it when they come to see me, they come to see how I am, especially my Milena. I love all my grandchildren I don't want to make any exceptions.

Did you have wedding parties when your daughters and your son got married?

– Romani people came to ask for my daughters' hand, we made a wedding party as it should according to the customs. I didn't sell them, I didn't want

to blackmail anybody for my children. I didn't go to ask for the hand of my son's wife, his girlfriend eloped with him and my son – in – law brought that other man (but I don't have him anymore, he died). When my son brought his girlfriend, she is a Serbian girl, we threw a party but not real wedding party because she eloped. They worked together in department stores in Belgrade, they decided to marry, they both went to school to get education. I am glad he married Serbian girl, because we are one nation, so to speak.

Which dishes did your children like most?

– Romani fritters that's what you called them and pancakes. You mix dough and you fry it on a bit of lard, then you turn pancake over, when it is ready, you put some jam on them or anything else ... We always made pancakes for the holidays when a lot of us gathered, but not for Christmas and Easter that's different. For Easter you dye eggs and the children were always so happy because of that. They always got presents. And we were always happy when Christmas came, we tied towels, we waited for it to come ... it was great joy. Sometimes went to fairs in honor of Romani patron saints, but not too often ... I only always went to visit my family on Saint Nikola's day³⁰ and St. Petka's day³¹, Saint Nikola is patron saint of my family. Nowadays the greatest holiday for me is when my children and grandchildren come to see me. When they come to visit me I feel happy, but when they aren't around I feel miserable, my life is hard, I am closed within these four walls, all alone, although I have a big family. Loneliness is hard to bear, especially now that I am ill, it's very hard to bear it.

Did you have a vacation while you worked?

– Yes, I did. I never went anywhere for my holidays, I only went to spas when our pensioners' association sent me. Otherwise I didn't go ... Now I have pension, plus additional money I get for fighting in the war. A nurse comes regularly for an hour or two every day to help me, to clean my room and do what needs to be done. I am still able to go to the bathroom although it is difficult for me to walk, I can't get wash myself, so the nurse helps me.

Is your husband alive?

– Yes, he is, he is here, but I don't speak with him, although we live in the same house. He wanted things to be like that, he started that, so I decided I won't give in. He brought another woman. He destroyed her as well, he accused her of stealing from me – although she didn't, so she left and now he has to look after himself. Our daughter – in – law helps him sometimes, and he cooks by himself.

Do you believe in God?

³⁰ See the glossary at the end of the book.

³¹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

– Yes, I do. I am Orthodox Christian, while I could walk, I went to church regularly.

While you were employed did you celebrate March 8th?

– I celebrated it until my son died, because he died exactly on March 8th he had diphtheria. We took him to hospital in Belgrade, they gave him too much serum, that's why I lost him ... My husband never paid any attention to that holiday, he was always terrible. As a Romani woman I never had time for myself, I didn't use makeup, I never dressed up while I was young. Then I was operated on because of my appendix, I didn't care for anything and my life was miserable. We never had any peace, it was just like it is now, and that is not fair. I never went out, to cinema, or to the theatre, I never had time for that. I had friends and acquaintances but I didn't spend too much time with them. Now that I am old, I have a friend from Dalmatia, I share my worries with her, she visits me regularly. She is also ill.

When did life seem to be better, during Tito's government or now?

– During Tito's time. We all had good lives. We could take bank loans, my son built a new house at that time, and we were all satisfied. We could buy new furniture and it was nice. But what's the use of it now, he had to die, so it is difficult for us now. We could travel, we could smuggle goods from abroad. I used to go to Romania, I had a hard time with customs officers, they were checking us all the time. But I was lucky when I went to Italy, nobody checked me. In Romania people liked to steal, I didn't know that so I got cheated. I didn't go to Romania too often. I traveled to Italy regularly, sometimes I would go twice a week, because I had a good time. I would bring men's and women's clothes, and from Romania I was bringing glassware. I would sell those goods in villages, to my neighbors, to young women, young men, I would offer goods to those I knew, but I never went to sell at marketplaces. People ordered some goods, neighbors as well and I cooperated well with them.

Whenever we went to get goods for smuggling, we would put on the clothes we would later sell, so that we would have small packages so customs officers would not suspect anything and also I didn't want to pay duties. We would put on jeans, suits, wrap clothes around our waists ...I never got caught but some other people got caught. Customs officers would order us to get out of the bus and they would take our money, but then we learned to hide money. We hid money in our bras ... and some other places, too...

What influenced your life most?

– Marriage of my three daughters and my son's marriage too and that now I live all alone. It was hard for me when my first daughter got married. She was my darling, she was fragile, but she married into a good house, where they

treat her well, but I didn't feel that. My other daughter went abroad, to Vienna, far away. I worried so much, all sorts of things crossed my mind, whether she would manage, what would happen to her ... In the end everything turned out fine, only I didn't know it would be like this, I suffered a lot and it worn me out. She had to go to hospital because she had some operation on her throat. She has a daughter and a son. My youngest daughter married a scoundrel, he was really terrible, she suffered a lot, she got ill and everything. He was chasing women, she suffered with him and I suffered with her. She has two children and she is divorced now. She left him and she also left her baby who was eight days old, her name is Natasha. I took a cab and brought her to my house. When I went to fetch the baby her father-in-law said, "Everything's gonna be fine, you'll see." Now everything is fine, she returned to her husband, but it all turned around. She wants to go abroad to earn some money and she would leave her children behind, they go to school, they would be with her mother – in – law. She wants to earn some money. Her husband can't go abroad, but she has got a chance, but I can't go with her, and that's why I worry. I worry a lot, I am old, ill and I can't go anywhere. When my son got married, he moved away with his young woman, he has his life, his marriage, his wife gave birth to twins: a boy and a girl. They live separately, so I am left all alone. I have no life with my husband, he insults me, calls me names, he abuses me.

What was the happiest period in your life?

– When my son was born. After three daughters I gave birth to a son and then I was overwhelmed with joy. When I got to hospital to give birth, they told me, "You have a son!" I was so happy and somehow I was relieved, because I lost my first son. I wanted a son and I stayed pregnant until I had a son. My husband wanted me to give birth to a son, at first it was difficult for me because I grieved over my first son. But I struggled to have another son and thank God, we have him, may he be safe and sound. He is fine, thank God, I just wish this war would end, I wish we had some peace.

How did you managed during this last war?

– It was awful. My grandson went to the army, my daughter lost her husband, he died, he was young. She has her little girl and her life is very hard. I visited my daughter in Germany. I went to Prater but only for a short while. Everything was interesting, that big wheel and everything else, but I wasn't interested in that, I just looked at things. Here airplanes flew over us and you could hear shooting. Thank God, they didn't shoot here, in our village in Surčin, but they flew over us during the air strikes. They dropped bombs on Batajnica, the airfield, we heard it all the way here. During daytime it was easier for us but nights were horrible.

I also had crises when I got injured in that accident. A man hit me with

his car, and just a month later he died, he got burned he had an accident with petrol. I didn't wish for his death. When he hit me, the ambulance arrived and took me to hospital. My family from Austria came to see me. They thought I would die, I had big wounds on my legs. I was in Sveti Sava hospital in Belgrade, my husband insisted on it. I was lying there for eight days. I had a stroke, that's why I am lying in bed. Now I can't walk. I suffer a lot and I am getting worse every day. I had a stroke after the accident, I saw everything double and there was something wrong with my head. I have headaches even today. I guess my time will come soon and then I would be gone. I would get rid of that enemy with whom I live. I would lose consciousness from time to time so a doctor who lives across the street came to see me and also my son and daughter – in – law took care of me. One other woman helped me too ... I do not faint anymore, I just forget things, because I suffer from headaches.

That war broke out, the enemies came and they do not want us anything good and it is very hard. All sorts of things are happening in Belgrade.

You did not get along with your husband almost from the beginning, but you still have five children with him?

– I also had one miscarriage. My sexual life was disgusting. My husband used to force me to sleep with him, but I would reject him, he maltreated me always, he swears at me and my family, those alive and those who died. He would beat me and that was a big insult for me. He keeps beating me even today, although I am old. He threatened me he would kill me, he keeps threatening even now, he would like to see me dead so that he can live his life freely. I can't go anywhere now. I am old, I'm seventy-three, I decided to go to an old people's home. I'll see about it in September, I can't take this life with him any longer, I can only die. He wants to kill me because I am standing in his way. He wants me to give him money, but I can't give him any and I don't want to help him because he insults me and I don't want to talk to him any more. All these years... now I won't anything to do with him anymore, I don't talk to him, he keeps hurting me, he threatens he will kill me. He can't wait to inherit my pension; I receive that additional pension, while his pension is small. He wants to kill me, to get rid of me so that he can find another woman and God knows what else. He is jealous even when I have something to eat.

Have you had crises in you life?

– The greatest crisis I had was when I lost my son, when I watched him die in my arms. I didn't anywhere to go, it was hard, I was lost, me and that husband of mine and then we brought him home and we buried him here.

What does a burial look like in Romani community?

– Those people who come to express condolences bring a bottle of drink, a

pack of coffee or something else and it is for the soul of the deceased. The family is dressed in black, those who are closest relatives of the deceased wear long black scarves. People bring wreaths, flowers, the deceased spends the night in the house, after that he is carried to the graveyard to rest in peace. The things which belonged to the deceased are put in the coffin and food is brought to the graveyard to be handed out to those who come to the funeral and it is for the soul of the deceased. After the funeral you go to the graveyard again after a week, after six months, and after a year and then this is where that custom ends. In church a mass for the dead is held, it depends on what the family wants. Food is taken to the graveyard and also food is prepared in the house of the deceased, after the funeral people go to the house of the deceased where that food is served, for example a stew or chowder.

Do you believe in witches?

– No, I don't. Old people used to talk about them, they said that they were coming out at midnight, then it was true ...

What would you change in your life?

– It made big mistake when I didn't divorce my husband and now I would have had someone who would respect me, I would also respect him. Now I live with someone who doesn't talk to me, maltreats me all the time and puts a lot of pressure on me. I failed in my life because I didn't want to remarry and that was because of my children. My youngest daughter asked me once why I didn't leave my husband. How could I leave my children behind? I endured a lot of suffering, hunger and all sorts of things. Even if I had divorced him and taken my children with me, that other husband wouldn't have accepted my children. I had my job, I was careful not to lose it, people respected me and honored me and everybody knows that I was always honest. But what's the use when my husband never respected me. He was rude, he was a musician so he did whatever he wanted, and that is why my life is a failure.

If I could bring my youth back now, I would know how to find the right husband, I would change a hundred of them just to find the right one and then I would have a right kind of life. A good man is the one who respects me, who doesn't molest me, who doesn't swear at my family or me, who doesn't insist on his importance and belittles me. I can't forgive myself for not being clever enough when I should have been. A man doesn't need to be handsome, his goodness is what counts. It seems to me I have bad luck, I was born under some unlucky star. I can't walk and my life is so difficult, I am sorry I must live that way. Nobody cares whether I have eaten something or not. The woman that takes care of me just goes to the store to buy what I tell her to ...nothing else.

I survived both wars, I joined the partisans, and then afterwards it was chaos always, I was always fighting for survival.

What would you recommend to your daughters?

– I would tell them to take care of themselves and to be careful with their lives, to take care of their youth and to live a good life. They shouldn't have troubles that I have had. If they can't get along with their husbands, I would recommend them to get divorce, if they have grown up children then I don't know what I would tell them, how they should solve their problems. If I knew that some of my daughters lived the same life as me, if her husband abused her, I would tell her that I endured everything but that I regret I did. I simply don't know what they should do. I would say to her to stay with her husband, but if she can't ... I wouldn't like it if she had to leave her children, I would worry about her children, but if she still couldn't live with him, it would be better to leave him, change her life, whatever happens ... I would feel guilty if her second husband misused her as well, because she would feel that I forced her to do that ... If she could take her children and live alone, that would be best.

What would you recommend to your grandsons?

– Well, I would tell they should respect their wives, they shouldn't maltreat them but live peacefully in marriage, they should have their families and agree with each other, so that they wouldn't have the life I lived.

What would you recommend to your granddaughters?

– They should wait until they find the right man, if only they could find the right one and see what he is really like. They should see how he behaves with them, they should test him to see who he is, how he copes with his own family, whose son he is, where he comes from and what he does. A girl should make decision only after that.

Is there anything you would like to tell me?

– My life was a torture and I was always afraid. During the Second World War I was hiding and I was afraid. The fascists killed my grandfather when partisans put explosive under a train and Germans killed him for revenge. He was old, those younger men were hanged, but they killed him. They wanted to hang me too, but they couldn't catch me. My grandfather was left to lie on the railway track for three or four days in August, in that heat until a German, who ran a mill, helped us to get his body, he was good to us. So we buried him. We didn't dare go fetch him until that Kraut gave us his approval.

In the end, would you tell us a Romani poem or sing a song?

– I can't sing, but I will say this, "Đelem, đelem lungome dromez macadile barvale Rromeja", it means "I started on a long journey and I met a rich man".

Vida 74 years old, (1927)

What was your childhood like?

– We were poor, my father and my mother were very poor. My mother went to the village to work and bring us a slice of bread so that we could survive. I was seven, and I still remember it as if it were only yesterday. It was wintertime and in front of our house there was ice on which children used to skate. I remember my childhood at the time when I stole a pair of boots from my grandfather, which I used for skating with other children until nine or ten o'clock in the night. Then I would put them back secretly, to avoid being seen by my grandfather, and I would go to bed. In the morning my mother would wake me up and tell me to go to the village. I would protest and ask her, "What will I do there, I'm still a small girl." "I don't care, can't you see that we have nothing to eat!" she told me. So I went to the village to a Slovak house. I was barefoot, I had nothing to put on my feet and my legs were as cold as ice as it was snowing and there was ice everywhere. The woman took out a pair of shoes and I started crying. I took the shoes and put them on. Then she asked me, "Will you go and bring me some water and I'll give you some potatoes and flour in return." Well, of course I would! When I brought pails of water and was given flour and potatoes I begged for some bacon, as we had nothing to eat back at home, and the woman took pity on me and gave me some bacon too. On my return from the village I saw my mother going back, too. At home, my mother asked to see what I had brought, and I said, "I brought some flour and potatoes." She asked why I went barefoot to the village. "Well, what else could I do? I had to go to the village and here I have some flour and potatoes." "It's all right, I will put those potatoes in the oven and make lunch for you...would you like me to bake the potatoes with or without the skin?" I said, "With skin!" When the potatoes were done, the room was so chilly; the rooms were small as well as houses. My mother took out a pan in which she used to bake bread, and she put some embers from the stove in it and drew it closer to me, and my legs. I sobbed: "Now you take out embers to take the chill off my legs. Look! The kind lady gave me shoes, which warmed my feet. I brought her some water, I brought her two pails of water and she gave me some flour and potatoes so that you can make lunch for us. Thank you so much mummy, for making us this meal. Can you put some more embers from the stove so that my legs can get warmer?"

I was born in 1927, and I spent my childhood skating on the ice with other children. We would chase each other; we would tumble over the ice, we played with our eyes closed. And when the game was over, I would sneak into the

house, as my father would not let me come in late. I would open the door carefully and hide behind the stove and then go to bed. When it dawned, mummy would come to me and ask me when I had come home and then she would order me to go back to the village and to bring some flour and potatoes and to ask for a piece of bacon too, so that she could make a meal. Since I had four younger sisters, and I was the eldest sister, I had to go to the village and bring us something to eat. Now I have one sister, as the three of them died. So I went to the village to work. Mostly Slovak women asked me to work for them, and in that village where I worked the population was mixed – half were Serbs, and half were Slovaks. They would ask me to polish the floor in their halls. When the job was done, I would spread my apron and they would put some flour and potatoes in it. I asked them to give me a skirt as I was almost naked and had nothing to wear. They would tell me to wait for a little while, that they had to find a skirt and warm, woolen socks for me. When they gave me the socks I wasted no time, and put them on immediately to get warmer. I felt so relieved then. That is how I spent my childhood.

In summertime when my mother returned from village, she would take cast iron tripod and pot³² outside. By then I grew up, and I would knead bread for us, and she would cook. I picked up wood, some corn sticks and reeds to put up fire and make the meal as fast as possible as I was starving. Mother used to come back from village around eleven o'clock in the morning, and we, children, were so hungry, as we had not eaten anything. We would wait impatiently for her to come and give us a slice of bread. We would ask her for a piece of bacon too, but she would not let us have it, as she could not make a meal without it. We were happy with that slice of bread and went out and played with other children. That is how my childhood looked like. I didn't go to school, as we, Romani people, did not go to school back then.

After that some Roms came to ask for your hand?

– Yes, when I was thirteen, Roms from Zrenjanin came to ask for my hand. They brought a bottle of brandy with them. “Good day, brother!” they said to my father, “May you be healthy and may God be with you! Come on now, let's have a drink and discuss things.” one man said. “What things?” my father asked. “Well, I came here to find a bride for my son.” “Oh, my daughter is still too young to be married, I won't let her marry yet.”, my father said. “So what? My son is very young too, let them grow up together in bed.” His son was fifteen too. After they talked a bit about this and that, they agreed that my father should

32 Cast iron tripod which has its lid is rather shallow. The cast iron pot is also used for cooking and has its lid. Both are used for baking bread or roasting meat. They are covered with ambers during cooking rather than put over open fire or corn husks are used for making fire under tripod since that kind of fire is not very strong so it enables slow roasting..

sell me and he got a sheep, two hens and five loaves of bread each weighing ten pounds. They made a modest marriage celebration. They bought me a wreath, wedding dress and my father-in-law hired a coach from Zrenjanin, and so they came to our house and took me with them.

My in-laws lived in a wooden shack in the forest, secluded from the other villagers. I lived in the same poverty; I had nothing to eat there. I had to go to the village again to beg. So, what could I do, where could I go? I didn't have a soap to wash my skirt. What was I to do, where was I to go? It occurred to me to go to the Begej river and to take all my clothes off and get washed, and wash my clothes in the river. It was summer and in no time I had all my clothes dried up so I put them on again. I went from house to house in the village, I said, "Good morning ma'am, do you need any help in the house? Do you have anything that needs to be done?" But women looked upon me and told me I could be of no help to them as I was still a little girl. I begged them to give me a slice of bread, as I was starving. They did. I would be given a slice of bread here, another slice there, and when I returned home my mother-in-law was satisfied. She thanked her husband for he had brought her hardworking daughter-in-law.

I left my husband soon, returned to my mother's and spent some time there. I left him because I did not love him. My father gave my hand to him, and I could not stand up to him. It was a custom to obey one's father and marry a person he chose. I had to show respect for my father, mother, the whole family, and I could not look my father in the eyes and tell him whom you want to marry, but you had to go to an elderly Rom.

You were not afraid of leaving your husband?

– Well, I was determined I would leave him even if he tried to kill me. I ran away home and my father had to return the money he got for me. He sold the horses and returned the debt. Then I remarried. I took Toša. I went to town, I was a girl by then, and I started to work. I spent some time at home too, but that was until I met and married Toša. At the time I married him, he was very poor, he had no one to turn to. The two of us built a little house and lived there for a while. I went to the village and look into cards and told future, I made magic, and took flour and oil here, ham and bacon there in return. That's how it was, and I swear to God it is true. I did some magic, and sometimes I really knew what would happen and sometimes I lied too.

Do you believe that Romani people know how to make magic?

– Of course they do, I do it myself! I believe that Lord gave Romani people the gift of making magic, and if it were not true I would have no bread to eat. I've been making magic to this very day, although I do it very seldom now, as I cannot walk, I am old and I cannot go to the village. When I make magic I use cards and explain what is what, this is your husband...he is cheating you with

another woman, I can give you this or that, but how much can you pay for it? They usually say, "I'll give you whatever you want just see to it that he doesn't go with that other woman, make him stay with me." So I make for that woman nails from dough and put them on a stick to bake, or I made human figures out of dough and gave them to her, as a token, protection from evil eye, and she gave me whatever I wanted in return. I myself don't believe much in that protection from the evil eye, but what could I do, I am a Romani woman, I had to lie and make ends meet somehow.

What else did you do while you were married?

– I did almost everything; whatever I could put my hands on. I made some magic and I was stealing. I stole sweaters. I would go to the market and stole whatever I saw, mostly pleated skirts. At that time we had everything ... and I would bring them home and sell them and I had a lot of money. I could eat and drink whatever I wished for. I used to eat two to three ice creams. I didn't care...

Did your husband work?

– Poor thing, he worked on machines, and I knew how to trade and make magic so wherever I went to trade I made some magic too. I would go from door to door and I ask women if they would buy some of my goods and usually I would have a cup of coffee with them and I would look into their coffee cups to foretell their future. They would give me with whatever I wanted, I would even ... cut their hair, you know down there so that they could not accuse me. If any of them would want to accuse me of putting a spell on her, or for lying or taking money from her, I would ask her whose hair was that and showed them their pubes. I would ask her, "Don't you have any shame, look what I did, I cut your hair. Shame on you!" That is what I did to women who asked me to work magic for them.

I worked as a cleaning lady in other houses. My husband and I made adobe bricks. We made a big house for ourselves, we bought pigs, two hundred hens and a roosters; I became a lady: I would put make-up on, dye my hair and take my merchandise to the market. My husband bought a motorcycle. He went to the market to sell poultry and other goods to ladies, and I went with him. I would put a scarf around my head, with my hair dyed and with make-up on my face ... I am telling no lies. I got along with my husband well. We lived independently, we moved from my mother-in-law's house almost immediately. I was barren for nine years, and then I got my Dominka and we moved to Krčedin. Dominka was our only child. I lived with my husband for 54 years, and now it is seven years since he died, and I am widow to this day. I have not married and have no intention to. I have my daughter and, thank God, I am with her.

How come that you got a daughter after nine years?

– Well, I was barren. I gave birth to Dominka in Novi Sad hospital. Now my daughter is as fit as a fiddle, and she is forty by now. I did not take medicines to help me to cure my barrenness; it was God's will. Before Dominka, I was pregnant but that child died in the very beginning and after nine years I gave birth to Dominka. My husband and I lived in harmony; he did not harass me because I could not bear children. He was from Kovilj, and his parents and brothers lived in Krčedin so that we lived in Kovilj at first, and after ten years we moved to Krčedin.

What did you do during war?

– It was terrible! Our Romani people were taken to concentration camps, but I did not go there. We all wore yellow ribbons and had to walk on the street but not near houses. The sun was scorching. We all had shaved heads, Germans shaved our hair. We were not allowed to go anywhere in the village to beg for a slice of bread. German gendarmes lined up us Romani people to shoot us and we were all so scared, we peed in our pants. Each and every of us wore a yellow ribbon on their arm with the inscription: Gypsy. Roms were sent to concentration camps, and we, women, stayed at home, all marked with those yellow ribbons. Our men were killed in the market, hanged. My uncle was shot down and hanged in the small market in Zrenjanin. During war I lived with my first husband in Zrenjanin. We were whipped with a huge whip, we were forced to clean their rooms and they would order us to work in the snow. Get down, stand up “nieder – auf, nieder – auf”³³ and the one who could not get up would be hit in the head with a log so that their head would crack and start bleeding. Romani people in Banat had it much worse. My grandmother was married in Mošorin; she told us that Romani people were killed and thrown under ice. And when summer came our Roms had to take them out of the river and bury them like that. Women had to go too, but we were lucky here in Pazova because our mayor would not let us be killed. He was a Slovak and would not let Germans kill us Gypsies. The whole flow of the Tisa reeked of dead Romani bodies. Dead Roms from Žabalj, Mošorin were floating along the Tisa.

Do you remember some of Romani songs, which were sung during war?

– Yes, I remember them; it's just that I do not sing them anymore since my husband's death. I can tell the song for you, if you want: “I was walking down the road and caught cold, come mommy and lit up fire, as I caught cold... I cannot lit up fire for you, I am very ill...” I cannot remember the next line, I forgot it, I am old now.

Do you know a fairy-tale?

³³ “Nieder – auf”, down and up in German.

– I do not. I had no one to tell me tales, and my mother herself had no time for that, she had to go to the village to work and bring us some food. I had to stoke the fire in the stove, not because I wanted to, but because I was afraid of her.

And when the war was over, how did you live?

– We lived happily. The Germans were running away, they spilt sugar down the road and we, children, went to pile it up, I put it into my skirt... It was spring and they were escaping during night. We were liberated by the Russians. It was after the war that I married Toša.

And how did your childbirth look like?

– I had delivered my first child in the house; I was still married to my first husband. I chopped wood and put logs into the stove, stirred up fire and prepared lunch, and then suddenly I had terrible pain. I was alone; my husband went to the forest to cut wood. It was October. A neighbor who lived opposite our house stopped by to ask how I was doing, and I replied that I was making lunch. He asked if I felt all right and I had to tell him that I was not, so he concluded that I was bound to deliver a baby. That is exactly what happened. By the following morning I gave birth to a baby girl, but she died soon. I delivered Dominka smoothly in the hospital. After all, that was a hospital.

How did you bring up Dominka?

– Well, I think I brought her up to be a decent girl. My husband and I made adobe bricks, we washed her diapers, put her in shade while we worked, we cherished our little girl. We did not have toys, but I would catch a butterfly and put it in a plastic bag so that she could play with it, while I was making mud and pouring it into the adobe mould. Houses were built with it, and we would sell it so that we could buy food. Poverty was everywhere. My husband was not employed, we owned nothing, one could not find work anywhere, and we were not employed.

Did Dominka go to school?

– She finished the first five grades and did not want to go to school anymore. She eloped with Dragan from Krnjaševci. They didn't come to ask for hand because she eloped with him. Before that I prepared seven pigs each weighing seventy pounds to be roasted but it was of no avail since there was no wedding. After that my husband and I did not go to see her for two weeks. Than we agreed to go to her and make amends, but I never took to liking my son-in-law. I didn't because I learned that he had sent Dominka letters furtively while he was serving the Army and she was in school. She got married when she was fifteen, and the following year she got a daughter Sladjana, there she is on that photograph.

Would you have liked to have more children?

– I am so sorry that my first daughter had died, maybe I would be better now, If I had two daughters. I would spend some time with one and then go to the other. I have never wanted to have a son. I was so happy when I got Dominka. Here look at her (pointing at a photograph) riding a bicycle. I have always doted on her, and I was so happy to have a girl. I even have a photograph where her teacher holds her on his lap. She had long hair. When she was a girl I kept an eye on her. She would go out, but she had to be back home by nine. I would only let her go to the cinema. I was very strict with her, while her father was quite lenient, but I was not. I adhered to the Banat rules of behavior. I have never let her anywhere, since everybody respected us, they knew how honest we are.

Have you ever had time for yourself?

– Of course I had. I wore wide skirts so I would sit with other Romani women on the canal, we would make some coffee and sip it. We would tease each other about who loved which Rom – I said I loved the one with dark hair. I had many girlfriends. My best friend was Katica. When my mother brought a slice of bread from the village, I would share it with Katica. I will never forget her, as well as Kosana. It was such a strong friendship that I cannot find words to describe it. We would not even eat without the other. Whatever our mothers brought us from the village we would share among us.

What did you do during holidays?

– Well, we celebrated them. We would dance, Roms sang to us, we would go from one house to another and perform Romani dances ... young people would gather, we never worked on weekends. My husband and I would go to the cinema. We watched “I even met happy Gypsies” and many other films. However, that was my favorite film and the scene when Olivera sang “Karing dza karing bandjara?” It means “Where should I go, where should I turn?”, when Bora³⁴ slit his wrists! The lyrics of the song go like this: “Roms, I’ll tell you straight, over the death of my husband my heart will break.” Do you remember, Bora had his wrists all slit, small children smoke cigars and fell into mud and ducks ran around.

When I was younger I watched Westerns. While my husband was alive we went wherever we wanted, since we had no children for nine years. We would lock our little house, our cottage and go out. We went often to places with live music, where one could sing and dance. We went to inns too, to markets and we visited our friends on their patron saint’s day. We would trade on the fairs and there were a lot of Romani people there. You had tents spread every-

³⁴ Main male character in the film.

where and under one tent there was music, people danced and sang until dawn, various dishes were served. We did not have any children so my husband and I would sit on our coach and watch the world with wonder. We have never traveled abroad like other Romani people to earn money. We toiled to earn what we have, which was everything for us, here, we worked hard. We didn't travel anywhere abroad. I did not leave my husband nor did he leave me. We made two houses thanks to our hard work and suffering. I was wealthy, I owned pigs, horses, I even had my own bathroom ... oh, I cannot talk about it. My heart aches when I remember my 80-litre boiler, the hall all covered with tiles. And the veranda, the door and kitchen window all made of glass...

My husband passed away seven years ago and I was forced to sell the house as I was old and weak, I could not maintain it anymore. I had no one to buy bread for me, to clean the snow for me. I sold the house and handed the money to my daughter and now I live with her. Until I moved here I was so lonely. I would shut the door and windows and cry my heart out. I took a bag and went to the women I knew. One would give me some bacon and bread, the other gave me flour and potatoes. I was so weak I could not carry it back home. So I told them not to put too much food into my bag, as I could not carry it. They agreed and told me that I would take the rest next time.

Have you celebrated any holidays, like the Women's Day?

– Well, I have. We have made different dishes for ourselves to eat. We made lots of cakes. I would get out in the street and chat with other women. My husband would buy me an apron, or a scarf but he never failed to buy me something on that day. I remember the dry red wine, I can't remember its name, I always liked to take a sip. I also liked to taste some sweet brandy and my husband would buy it for me. Later on, when I started to trade I made most money on Women's Day.

Well, when Tito was alive, we could afford any luxury. We could take credits, buy machines. Even poor people lived well and they ate bread. My husband worked in the Community office and he took six million dinars of credit and bought a refrigerator. We had everything, we took up credits to build our house, so we did not live in a small house made of adobe bricks and mud, but instead we built spacious houses with bathrooms... My husband passed away ten years after that, but he made me a large house and later on, another one. The whole house was covered with tiles, oh it hurts me so much to bring back the memory of the beautiful life we had. Now I live at my daughter's and I have to be quiet. I do not have the freedom I had when I lived in my own house. When I sold the house in Krčedin I bought another one in Sase. Now I have people who rent it so they pay me around 50 DM per month. It is good that I have some money of my own. I use that money to buy poultry and everything else I need for food so

that I'm not hungry. I think I do not have long to live, perhaps four to five years at most. I receive a monthly pension of 220 dinars in two pay checks and I am satisfied with it. I inherited the right to get the pension from my late husband, since he worked in the Community office.

Do you go to church?

– I am of Serbian religion, although I am Romani and I go to church at Christmas, Good Friday. While I lived in Krčedin, I would spend the whole night attending the service in church. Now I cannot go to church anymore. I am old, my legs hurt and I cannot walk. My patron saint's day is Saint Nikola's day³⁵ and then I make cakes, roast a pig, make chicken soup. Saint Nikola was a handyman.

How do you take care of yourself and your health?

– I do care about my health. I try to keep myself clean, to have clean bed sheets because I'm afraid I might die and then people will see the things I slept in, or when they start undressing me they will see if I were clean or not. But I'm ill and that is why I came to live with my daughter, I need her to look after me. I can get dressed and have a bath with no one's help. I like being clean. When I was younger I would cook, cleaned the house ... I did all the chores in the house, who else could do it? I loved to make soups and broths. To tell you frankly, I adore soup, and I love to eat it now as I am old, and my Dominka makes it for me. Even now I cook and make cakes...especially poppy seed strudel. This is how you should make it: warm up the milk, but not all of it just one cup of milk and it should be lukewarm. Then put some yeast and sugar in it and when that dissolves take some margarine and a pinch of salt, some sugar and an egg and put all that into the dough. After that you just knead the dough. When it is ready, melt some margarine and spread it over the dough. Leave the dough to rest. After a while when it rises stretch it evenly. Before you spread it spread some fat on it so that the dough does not get sticky. Leave the dough you have just spread to rest. Then sprinkle over the dough with cheese, raisins, or if you like some poppy seed. Then you can roll it and put it into oven. When it is done, it is puffy and all soft, as soft as velvet.

Today is Good Friday. What have you been doing today?

– Today we fast. You make popcorn, fish broth, you fry fish in oil, and generally have rest. People drink juices, make cakes. You must not dye eggs on this day as it is Friday and we have to fast. That is what we make for Easter and then we dye eggs, roast pigs, chicken, make soup...we make all sorts of dishes. Eggs are dyed for Easter. Virgin Mary is happiest then, she holds her child and offers an egg to him. Christmas is dirty but it is rich, it is fat. It was

³⁵ See the glossary at the end of the book.

on that day that Jesus Christ was born in straw. We believe that Jesus Christ and Virgin Mary stroll around in the night to see who prepared what for the holiday, and that is the whole truth believe me. Virgin Mary has her little girl, she is pretty, and she has eggs and cookies and cakes, everything. Since we don't fast for Christmas we roast pigs, we have walnuts, honey, lots of things for supper, because then Christ was born in hay. I practice the same religion as the Serbs, but I am Romani and I go to church on Christmas, Good Friday. While I lived in Krčedin I used to spend whole night in the church. Now I cannot go to church, I am old and my legs hurt me, I cannot walk. My patron saint's day is Saint Nikola's day and then I make cakes, I roast pigs, make chicken soup. Saint Nikola was a handyman, may he be healthy and we next to him ... we make all kinds of dishes and drinks.

What was the worst thing that has happened to you?

– Well, the fact that my daughter married Dragan from Krnjaševci. She exchanged letters with him, I forbade her to do that, but her father didn't. One night she got ready to go to the cinema, and I asked her, "Dominka whose necklace are you wearing?" She answered, "A Romani woman lent it to me for a little while" "That is not true, tell me whose necklace is it?", I demanded. "I told you. A Romani lent it to me", she said. That night she ran away. When she got married I did not go to see her for two weeks, and on Saint Nikola's day I invited them to come so that we could make up. Soon after that, she got pregnant and she delivered a girl. Her mother-in-law was a mean woman. She collected all her things after the childbirth and threw them in the river. I asked Dominka, "Why did you let her do it?" and she replied, "Well mum what can I do, she is such a terrible woman. I just can't handle them, I don't know what to do." Then I told her, "You know what sweetie, I won't come to visit you any more, I can't stand that regime of theirs, I can only tell you to take your daughter and come and live with us. Your mother will fight for you. I will buy milk for you every month." She agreed and moved to our house, but her daughter passed away after 8 months. Then she married another man and I called her every day, since she was my only child. When we built this large house, I wanted to invite my son – in – law to live with us, but that did not happen. That is where my husband died in 1994. I lived alone for a while. I went to the village, I worked, made some magic and took whatever people gave me: flour, bacon, fat, all kinds of things... While my husband was alive, I would steal and so I filled this house of mine, and we even built another house. Thank God I am still able to do things, I can still do some chores in the house and cook.

You have lived alone in the house when your husband died?

– Yes, I lived alone for six and a half years. I went to the village, I was not afraid to live all by myself in this house. But I could hardly stand the loneliness.

I prepared meals once a day and put them in the fridge so I could use them the following day. After that I sold the house because I became weak, I could no longer keep things clean in such a large house. I sold it and came to live with my daughter here in Pazova. I am happy here; my son-in-law is a good man. However, I cannot work anymore. I am so sorry I had to sell my house, but there is nothing I can do about it now. If only I could make my husband live again, if only I could make him up from clay. I would be the happiest woman in the world, but that cannot happen. What could I do, I had to sell our house. I cannot work in the house anymore and a large house is very demanding because it is very big. That is why I decided to move to my daughter's. I have also bought a house in Sase. I gave some money to my son-in-law and my daughter and now I live with them. I happy with them, but to be honest, I miss my own house. I earned it all through hard work with my husband, suffering throughout my life. We have never gone abroad, my husband and I, we earned it all with our ten fingers here and that's why it was so hard for me to leave my house.

What influenced your life the most?

– My being poor, not living in a house of my own when I got married. We had nowhere to live. When my husband got a job in the Community office he started to receive pay cheques and that enabled him to take up credit and build the house. When we made it and could afford a normal life my husband died. I will grieve and mourn him as long as I live.

What was the happiest time of your life?

– I consider those nine years while I had no children as the most fortunate years of my life. I went to fairs with my husband. I had beautiful hair, I loved going to dances and fairs. My husband took me everywhere, and I was happy. When Dominka entered our lives, after nine years, no one was happier than me. I loved to dress her in the most beautiful dresses, because she was a girl. I have always wanted to have a girl, and even now I have no words to describe my happiness for having a daughter. When she was small I would always dress her smartly, I would braid her hair and tie her plaits with ribbons. Before I got Dominka I always wore make-up, my hair was dyed, I wore pretty skirts. Even when we had Dominka my husband bought me cosmetics and he did not object when I wanted to look pretty. For a while I wore short skirts, I loved those from Banat and then I would put a scarf and make a big bun. I looked nice. I loved putting make-up, dying hair and wandering around. I wore wide skirts, aprons, pretty blouses with Romani designs and scarves.

What was the saddest period in your life?

– The saddest period of my life was when my husband died and when I started living alone. You know how it is when you are fragile and ill... I was

most unhappy person when my husband died. I loved him so much, we never argued, or had any fights. We were never jealous of each other.

Have all your wishes come true?

– Well, I have always wished to have a handsome husband and a lovely house, to have children, and thank God I had it all. God gave me a loving husband and He granted me this house, which my husband and I made with our ten fingers. Good Lord gave me a daughter, and I am satisfied. But my heart weeps when I think of my dear husband who died and left me alone.

The only thing that did not come true for me was that my husband left me too early. I was a woman who had her own ways, and I loved my husband, what can I do now? Thank God I can at least help a little in the house, I live happily with my daughter. My husband and I got along well; I would go to the village and bring us some food. Whatever I made was so sweet both to my husband and me. Later on, my daughter grew up and she ate from cast iron pot, and even today I use it for cooking and baking bread in the stove. I do not have any grandchildren. I had one but she died early.

How would you advise your daughter?

– I would advise her to live with her husband, to be smart and to mind her own family, because life is very hard nowadays. I would tell her to share everything with her husband - from hard work to the last slice of bread. My daughter and my son-in-law go to the village and work for wages, they trade with scrap iron, and with money they earned they buy poultry, pigs and that is how we have for a living, for bread, coffee, thank God we are not hungry.

Where were you during the air strikes?

– My daughter moved me from Krčedin and brought me here to Pazova. I watched them throw rockets on villages. I took it all very seriously, while my daughter laughed at me. I slept for five days in my daily clothes. I wanted to go to my own house and have a good night's sleep in my own bed. But as soon as I went home the bridge in Novi Sad was bombed and destroyed and what could I do, I went out in the street, sat on a bench and wrapped myself in a blanket, so that if they wanted to kill me I was there waiting for them. I was petrified, but most of all I was worried about my daughter. But the previous war was much more terrible – we were all lined up to be shot down. During the air strikes I did not hide in the basement, I did not care since I was seventy.

Is there anything else that I forgot to ask you?

– Well, when I left my first husband with whom I lived in Bečkerek, or Zrenjanin as it is called now, I came home and I faced poverty everywhere. The winter was very harsh; the ground would crack it was so cold. It was then that a Romani called Ruža came to me. She invited me to accompany her in stealing

wood in the vineyard. I warned her that we could be killed for doing that and she said that she feared nothing. We made a hook since we could not climb a carob tree and we used it to break the branches we could reach. We went where we knew we could find lots of low branches. Below our feet was only water and ice. When we grew tired we stopped to have a rest and then we tied the branches and pulled them back home. At home, we could not find our axe. All of us living in that area had but one axe and we all shared it. I went to our neighbors to inquire about the axe. I searched for it everywhere ... and I found it eventually. I chopped the branches we had stolen and brought as firewood. Then I put them in the stove and they were all so dry. At that moment my father came home from the village bringing with him a big duck and he told me to bring a pail of water and that he would pluck off its feathers before mother came, and that she would boil and fry it. I went out to bring the water and in the meantime my mother came home. We crammed lots of wood in the stove and my mother put the duck in the oven. When the duck was done, she made a full pot of stew and she made bread. If only I could have a bite of it now! Perhaps I would be healthier now, because back then we were all much healthier. While our mother prepared the meal I would sing: "Oh, Romani where do you come from, where are your little houses, your kings...oh, Romani what shall we do with this stew, even if a Rom came to propose to me, my dear father would take a dinar or two from him." Those were the words of my song and my mother said, "Vida don't get married, whom will I send to the village, who will bring firewood for me? Don't get married your mom is begging you."

I also want to tell you that life in Banat is pretty much the same today as it was before. Our girls do not walk around at night, they do not wander around, and their parents do not let them do such things. They do not have boyfriends, but young men come to ask for their hand and if they want to, they get married. Parents ask their daughter if she wishes to get married, and if she agrees then parents start negotiating how much money they will get for her and when they will have a wedding party. The custom of selling one's daughter is still present. And you know too that our girls are hard working, they keep their houses spick-and-span, they know how to do trade, their husbands have nothing to worry about, they know how to cook, wash, they were taught everything by their mothers. I spent most of my life in Srem and there is a big difference. Our Romani people in Banat do not let their daughters go even to the cinema, whereas in Srem they have steady boyfriends for two or three years and no one knows if they are still virgins. If a girl is a virgin, they take a bed sheet and put it on the gate; if she is not they send her off to her parents. They simply send her off; they do not need another woman in the household. If she was a virgin they celebrate, they eat, drink and smash things to their heart's content. Romani people in Banat are very serious about this, they send the girl away if she is not

a virgin. That is what my nephew did when he got married. His wife was not a virgin and he expelled her and brought home a virgin. He is now married to her and they have a grown-up daughter. When he evicted the first girl from his house he told her, "Take all your things and get out of my house. I do not need you, you are a woman, I will marry a girl." For Romani people it is very important for a girl to be a virgin. If a girl is not chaste that is a great shame and Romani people usually discuss that between themselves, "What did your son marry a woman, why didn't he take a virgin?" "Well we didn't know." "Well, if you didn't know, now you do, so send her back to her parents." When I got married I was a virgin. When my husband and I woke up the following morning, my mother-in-law came to our bedroom to check if everything was all right and then she took the sheets and showed the whole world that I was a virgin. They all made merry, ate a lot, drank a lot... If I hadn't been a virgin they would told me to return to my mother.

I would also like to say something about my husband's Army days in Skopje. I went there to visit him, as we were childless, and I would rent an apartment and spend even two weeks there. I enjoyed watching Muslims and Macedonians dance so much, I loved their weddings and dances. They have the same customs as we do here in Banat and they care about a girl's chastity. I am not quite sure about Srem, but I got married there since I could not get married in Banat. If I had married a person from Banat he would rebuke and nag me all my life. That is why I chose to marry Toša and I stayed with him. I loved the lifestyle people have in Srem. My husband, for example, took me everywhere with him whereas in Banat husbands leave their wives at home. A woman is to be at home, she is to cook, wash and watch over the children.

I can tell you this, it is nice for a girl to have freedom, but the best thing is when she is chaste and when she enters the marriage as a virgin. That is what I was when I married for the first time. My first husband loved me and respected me, but it was all in vain since I didn't love him, I loved my second husband. I lived happily with my second husband, we had our mutual language and he never reproached me although I was married once before him, and I didn't reproach him because he was married before too. If I had married a person from Banat, no matter that he, too, had been married before, he would scold me and told me I was a whore, because if I were honest I would have stayed with my first husband. I also want you to know this: Rom in Banat shows great respect for his wife, if she is a virgin. My husband was from Srem and he respected me, but I am not quite sure about customs in Srem although I stayed here. I had lots of girlfriends in Srem, not in Banat since Roms there would not allow their wives to go anywhere because they were jealous. They could go only with their husbands somewhere, have a cup of coffee and get back home with their husbands. Roms could go anywhere without their wives, to inns ... a woman was

not allowed to meddle in his business.

Men are the bosses in the household because things are written on the soles of his feet and everything is written on woman's forehead. If he is not a virgin it doesn't show on him while on woman everything shows. You can never know what he did, with whom, but with women you can tell easily. Also, man has a final word. I had to put on whatever my husband told me to. In Banat we did not wear short skirts, because even today whoever wears a short skirt we say that the girl is not a virgin. I have never worn short skirts, only long ones embroidered with Romani designs. When I once asked my husband which skirt I should wear, he told me the one which had pleats on it, and those nice sandals with those stockings and put a scarf on and come with him. In Banat a woman who wore short skirt was taken to be a whore. I listened to my second husband, but I didn't want to mind the first one, simply because I did not love him. That is why I left him, may he break his neck.

At the end do you have something to tell us?

– I wish I was younger, or at least that I am sixty again. I wish I had my own house. I am so sorry that I cannot bring those years back. I am old and weak and I cannot do anything in the house. It is obvious that I am losing strength and my health is failing me. I have to accept my fate! If only I could get my strength back and if only my husband were by my side! That is what I wish most. God will take me and I will meet him in afterlife and be happy again.

Right now my only concern is to be clean, to have clean sheets because I am afraid I'll die suddenly and then when people come I want them to see me clean and not my dirty linen or my dirty clothes. I'm not well, in fact I am ill, I can die any day. That is the reason why I agreed to come and live with my daughter, because I can no longer take care of myself. I can get dressed and have a bath all by myself. I like being clean.

Verica, 72 years old (1929)

What year were you born?

– I was born in 1929, on February 19th. There were six of us: three girls, Draginja, Milanka, and I, and three brothers – Miodrag, the oldest one, Laza is another one, and the third one is Tima. We used to call Miodrag Pisarika. My mom's name was Katica, and my father was Nikola. My mom was seventy-eight years old when she died, and I don't know what year she was born in, I am not that educated. My dad was sixty-two, and my mom was seventy-seven. I am now seventy-two. I wish I were dead. What else do you need?

The name of my mom's mom was Draga, and her father was Murša, my mom's father. My mom was Dimitrov, and that was both her maiden and married family name. Eh, damn, God forgive me, how would I know why she had the same family name. I was a kid when I was with them. And when I got married, then I was my husband's, right? And then I did not need anyone, then I had my children, I had my family, and so it was, that's all.

What were the names of your father's parents?

– My father's mother's name was the same, Draga. And I have no way of knowing his father's name, I don't know it at all. They died young, I was not even born then, how could I know? I was not interested, either, to know what was someone's name. I don't know what I had for lunch yesterday, I am so dizzy. Of all my brothers and sisters I loved my brother most, the one that lived with your grandmother, Pisarika. He meant so much to me. And now I love my brother Tima most, and my brother Laza died. I always had fights with him. He liked to drink and he always called me names, and so it was. That's all.

He was fifty five, he didn't have a wife, and he was drunk on Christmas day. He went to sleep and dropped his cigarette, and set his quilt on fire. He didn't put out the fire, but he threw the burning quilt on the stove, and it smoldered and smoldered there and he suffocated in the smoke. He was in the room for three days and three nights, no one knew about it. It happened many years ago. I don't know if I am right or wrong, but it was maybe fourteen years ago. Pisarika was killed in Hungary when he was taken away to force labor. They killed him in the war. Not in this war, in another war, the first war. Since then he has been gone, that's all.

And how do you get along with this brother, Tima?

– I don't know where he is or what is happening with him. He has no one else but me, out of his sisters. And I have only him. That's all. He is not healthy, he is sick. That's how it is, they are eating him alive, bastards. These days they

know that he gets drunk, and they are scared as hell when he is drunk. They all run away in fear. My sisters Draginja and Milanka died. Milanka was a young girl, she was sixteen years old. Draginja was the first daughter, then this sister of mine Milanka, and then I. The oldest one was Miodrag, then Laza, then Tima. Miodrag is older than Draginja, then Milanka. Milanka comes after them, the first one was this brother of mine, then Laza, Draginja, then Laza, then Milanka, then I. Tima was the youngest one.

What do you remember from the times when you were a little girl?

– What do I remember? I remember all the things that were not good. Everything that was bad. I have suffered ever since I was born. I never knew anything good, and that's how it is today as well. My father was really good, he drank, he destroyed us all. This sister of mine who had sick lungs, she got it because he would chase her around, naked, barefoot. She got sick when she was fifteen or sixteen years old, and then she was gone. With the other one it was the same, he tortured her, he made her suffer, once he threw a cast iron pot full of lard and fish on her. It scorched her skin. Then she went far away, we never knew where she was or what happened to her. It turned out she went to Srem and she was killed by Germans there, the fascists, they killed her, her husband, and three children. And that was all because of my good father who beat her. Nothing good came of my father. I don't remember anything good. He slashed my mother with a file, he made twelve cuts. That's how I got bad heart. I am still not feeling well. He wasn't a father, he was, how can one say it, a dog. It was worse than when a dog bites you. When I go to the cemetery I never visit his grave. He doesn't deserve it.

Did you attend school?

– I didn't. None of my sisters did. Only my brother, Miodrag, taught himself to read and write. He didn't go to school for even one day. That's why my dad called him *Pisarika*³⁶, because he learned to read and write on his own. He was so literate that no one compared to him. I have four daughters, and none of them went to school. Still, all of them know how to read and write. They learned it on their own. I was not even aware that they were learning this. After they got married, they learned it on their own. Well, they are not, so to say, very literate, they know how to write their family name, their first name, and to read a bit, I however don't know a thing, I don't know how to say anything. I can't do it, I just passed by the school. I can't do it. They didn't allow me to go, either. I told you what kind of life my mother had.

What about your sons?

³⁶ “Pisarika” could be translated as the one who writes, the nickname comes from the verb “pisati” which in Serbian means to write.

– The oldest one never went to school, the youngest one went to school for four years, the one next to him went to school for four grades, and this grandson of mine who started making fuss, that's till I break his teeth, he went to school for eight years and has one year of high school. He was supposed to be a mechanic, a metalworker, but his mother didn't want to look after him, to help him, to pay for his bus ticket, so now he is a nobody. He is not employed or anything. I brought him up since he was five days old. Now he does not even go to his mother's. She gave birth to these two children, and I like them, I respect them as if they were my own children. I brought up my grandchildren better than my own children. Remember where you yourself grew up, here, at my door and on my threshold. Don't make me swear. I am sick and tired of you, all of you. I can't tell you about the things I cannot remember. Didn't you hear me, I don't even know when I was born.

Did the children from your neighborhood play with you?

– No, I didn't play with anyone. Neither with Gypsies, nor with Serbs. Never.

What did your parents do, did they work?

– Of course they did. My father was a housebuilder. My mother was a martyr, she worked in other people's houses, she whitewashed their houses, did the laundry, ironed. All that to bring us up, that was what she did. She, too, was not literate. The old man was not literate either, my father. That's what they did. We didn't have any land, we didn't have anything. We were poor from the beginning till the end. I didn't socialize with anyone. I had no friends, because we are all family here. To be honest with you, I had no time to be with friends, as my father was always beating my mother, he was slowly killing her and I was her servant, and her guardian.

Now tell me, when did you get married.

– I got married out of great necessity. I told you that I lived with your grandmother Bojana and my brother Miodrag, he lived with your grandmother. They arranged my marriage when I was thirteen years old. That's it, I was in their way. They married me to some fool. I wasn't there for even a week before I returned home. I went there as a virgin, and I came back as one. I didn't give him my shell.

How did you live there with him?

– We used to beat each other and we tried to kill each other, I didn't even know what he wanted. He was twenty, I was thirteen, I didn't have breasts yet, I didn't have anything. I was still a child. They gave me away by force, and that was it. I had gone to the attic to hang myself. My brother found me, and Bojana said, "Give her away now, those people spent money to come here and ask for

her hand, let her go, for however long she stays there it would be good!" I had gone to the attic, I put something under my feet, and put a rope around my neck to hang myself. I didn't know what love was, what a husband was, how could I have known? So my brother listened to his Bojka, and they came for me and took me away. I was there for one week only, I cried and wailed. And then I figured out what he wanted, no way, you won't get that! It was him and me, we knocked each other around! I would hit him real hard and then run away. I didn't know the way, it was dangerous as it was wartime. At that time there were Hungarian gendarmes: if anyone was found in someone else's house, they were killed on the spot. I ran away from him, I ran as if I were mad, on foot. And he beat me so hard that I was all black and blue. His dad was seventy years old. I slept behind his dad's back, and he would come and try to drag me out. Well, you won't, and I would punch him with my fist! He hit me, I hit him, he hit me, I hit him. "Is that what you want, you motherfucker, is that it ... is that why they gave me to you, so young and green? Why didn't Bojana take you?", I said. Bojana should have married him. Yes, she said that, I guess I was a burden to her, so this woman arranged my marriage, when I was young and green. I didn't know about it, I was taking care of her children. I was rocking a cradle on Assumption Day when my husband's family came. I was singing out loud, rocking the little boy, I had him on my lap and I was singing a song about three birds on a branch, I was singing. They came to ask for my hand in marriage. My brother came inside, and he told me – I was singing aloud – to shut up. "Why?", I asked. "They came to ask for your hand," he told me. "Whose hand?" "Yours." "Wait a minute, I'll show them." Then I got up and I took an axe. "Get out, I don't want to see you here, I'll break your necks. Take Bojana's hand – this sister-in-law of mine here, this old woman of yours!" I chased them all out. They hung around for five days until they took me away by force. I was there for a week, he beat me up pretty well, and when I left I was a girl, I didn't have any curves, while this other woman was a cow. And I had nothing. So I came home, and I suffered again.

You see, I had a father and a mother and still I lived with my brother. I suffered so much. I can't even remember all the things that happened. I can't remember anything well. Even today nothing good happens to me, and now I am almost crazy, I am so neurotic that I ask myself, when this frenzy comes to me, what I spent my youth on. I was tall and pretty, no one ever guessed that I was a Gypsy. I could have married a Serb. They asked me to marry them and I would say, "What? You, a Serb, would take a Gypsy woman? Go marry your mother. And what would I do with you?" I would say, "You want to fool around with me and then leave me? No, I don't need you." That's what I was like. I was something then, and now I am all eaten to the bones. I have, I think, around thirty grandchildren. And they all have two children at a time, all by twos. Twins! And

she is young, my daughter, when she had two little boys at a time, and the man is no bigger than a rat but he made two children at a time. Makes two children at a time. I must have something like ten to fifteen great-grandchildren. They are all mine, and I didn't give birth until late, until I was nineteen, I didn't have any children at all. Then I got married later.

Whom did you marry afterwards?

– After I ran away from this devil of a man, and he did not as much as lay his hand on me, I got married in Djurdjevo. Yes, as a virgin. They didn't believe me that I was a virgin. They thought that I was a woman already. When they saw this, they were dumbfounded. That man was dumbfounded, and my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law too. I told them, "They married me by force, I am a virgin. If you don't believe me, here, I don't even need to lie down with your son, you can take me to the doctor right now to check!" I didn't know what a man was. I didn't have any children, and I didn't go out with anyone until I was nineteen. Not at all.

How old were you when you got married the next time?

– How old? I was thirteen years old, and the second time I was fourteen. What could I do? My father was torturing me, I had no place to go to, at your grandmother's, at Bojana's, it was the same, I had no place to stay, I had no place to go. I didn't know what to do. My sister-in-law gave me to them, and they were part of our family too. She married me in Djurdjevo. I had no luck there either, this guy was a rascal, a good-for-nothing. He took me straight into the house. I was there for perhaps three weeks when my mom came for a visit for the first time, and she brought kolach³⁷. He sent me away with my mom, together with the kolach, all together. He kicked me out. Well, that's what he wanted, he had another slut. That's it. But I beat him up when I wanted to. His father would stand up and say, "Hit him, my daughter-in-law, hit him hard on his naked flesh!" His father liked me a lot, I sang, I was a singer. He would sit on my lap so that I could sing him a lullaby, his father and his mother, they liked me a lot. But it made no difference, as he was a womanizer. Now he is dead. He married another woman and she died. And I'm still alive, alive and kicking. So you see how it was, my dear! You found the biggest big mouth. The one who can say it all.

Oh my God, the things I did at the market! I found my son, when I was waiting for the bus, when I was at your place. My son passed by. Remember when I told you that that was my son. After I left I sat by this board here and waited for the bus to come. All of a sudden my son came along. "Hey," I said, "Stop!" He stopped. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "I came with the

³⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

wind," I said. "How come? I am a living creature," I said. "Mom, how can you wander around like that, you roam around, you have a weak heart, God forbid, you may fall down somewhere, no one would know where you are," he told me. "Even if I fell down someone would find me and let you know. I am on my way," I said, "I'm off." He and Tima are not on speaking terms. I went to my brother's to see how he is doing, and this is how Radinka greeted me: she looked me in the eye and told me that Tima can't even enter that house. Motherfucker, she can't say that to me! I won't say anything to her. Now they are afraid, now they all ran away from the house. He is dangerous when he drinks!! He drinks like a fish! And the sick one, the one who has electricity in his house, he wants to get married too. What does he need a wife for, if the wife is the same. And that woman! She caught a French guy, that same slut who left two children here. She left them hungry and thirsty, full of lice and dirty, with little Tima. While she was there she gossiped about little Tima, said that Tima is good-for-nothing, that he is sick. Why did you come again, then? She caught a Frenchman, Milkica knows this too. She got herself a job, like, to clean, for 800 dinars. Instead, she drinks coffee! She met a Frenchman. She took 500 DM from him. Now she is with Milkica and Radinka. This Frenchman will be the death of her. This is why little Tima took her in. This is the kind of thing that happens around here! What is this, I am completely mad. If only I could remember all the things from my life, to tell you. I am wondering myself, and I pray to God our Lord. All my sisters died, all my one-time friends, ask God about this, as I grew old. What can I say, I am the only one left. And I suffer most.

All those who were my friends died. We were all related. Cousins and nephews. We were never free from family. We were all family. That man Branko, the one who died, who was with this woman Zora who is still alive: he had two girls and I have two sons. We were not related at all. My brother lived with this man's sister, with that grandmother of yours, with that Bojana who is now dead, how could we be relatives? We were just in-laws. At that time I worked with fish, the old man caught fish and I worked with it. He would come there, at late Giga's, you don't know him. Do you know late Maca? That was Giga's wife. He had daughters, Lord knows how many, they liked me a lot! They treated me just fine! They liked me because I danced, because I gossiped, because I cursed, it was amazing. They didn't know where to seat me, they liked me so much. This man, Giga, was my cousin, his mom and my dad were sister and brother. Maca, his wife, was better than my own sister-in-law, she would treat me with herbs when I was sick. I cared very much for that woman, they liked me so much. I liked this woman, but then all of a sudden I felt like doing something, "Hey," I said, "Branko!" He replied in a funny way, "What do you want?" I said, "Why don't you and I become in-laws?" He said, "What did you say?" "You heard me," I said. "I wish you'd kill yourself," he told me. "Why should I kill myself?"

“Because we are relatives,” he said, he had spoke with difficulty, he stuttered. “God, how can we be relatives, when your sister lives with my brother? We are just in-laws. You have two daughters and I have two sons.” Then he told me, “Drop dead!” And then he took out a knife and he tried to stab me with his knife, because I said we should be in-laws. “We are family. So we can’t be family, when my brother lived with your sister. You and I are in-laws. And you and I could also get married,” I said. Nothing happened then. I went there for the second time, I didn’t say anything, and he chased me with a knife all around this woman Maca. He opened up his big pocketknife and tried to stab me. The other time I went there he asked me, “Why are you so quiet? I wish you were mute.” That was the way he spoke. I said, “Why should I be mute, you should! Get out! Don’t talk to me at all, you son of a bitch!” He said, “Listen to me sister. I’m sorry.” “What is it now?” “If we always look at who is related to whom, we would never get married. I agree that we should get married.” May the devil take him to hell! May the devil take him, he was awful, and God cried over the fate of his wife. It was Bojana, your grandmother, who went there on her own and brought this woman. Do you know that her brothers came here to kill her! He was nasty. He walked like this, with a stick, and he had a hunch on his back. I don’t know whom his children took after, they are all very, very smart and nice children. You know whom they take after? Their mother. She was a very pretty woman, and she suffered a lot, Bojana even sent her to clean furnaces from the inside, she was very bad.

Did you have a job?

– I didn’t have any job while I was still at my mother’s. I was a child, what would I do? Afterwards, when I got married, then I worked. You see what I do, I make wicker baskets. I am really skilled. When I had children I used to do laundry for other women. I whitewashed walls, I did any sort of work, ironing, so that they would pay me and I could feed my children. That’s what I did. I made wicker baskets, the old man caught fish, I’d sell it, and that’s how it was.

What was the name of the husband with whom you had children?

– Krsta. That was my beautiful husband.

Is that the one from Djurdjevo?

– No, this one was from Serbia. God, I got married three times. My children are all from one marriage, all six of them. Milanka, Ljubinka, Slavica and Kaća are my daughters, and Miodrag and Pera are sons. Then I gave birth to the youngest one, Ružica, and she died. I got rid of five, so that makes twelve. If I were a sow, I’d be good for breeding. Good. I don’t know what years my children were born, I can’t remember if my life depended on it. I’m old and I forget a lot.

When I'm all alone I could fall down, I could have that heart attack here, I could die. I could lie here for three days and nights, no one would open this door. So someone comes to visit sometimes, and when there is no one around that means that then no one needs me. I brought them all up. I even brought up the children they would bring to me. Especially those that were brought to me should be my merit. Just like Ružica. I had ulcers twice and I had a heart attack twice. Since I was born I have suffered and I pray to God, day and night, that He will take me! But He won't! You see, a thirty-six year old woman died, they buried her yesterday. I am seventy, I've been through everything, through great suffering... and I am alive. Only so that I can suffer more, nothing else. That's it.

Do you remember when the Germans were here during the war?

– Of course! They killed, they killed some Gypsies and some Serbs. The whole of Novi Sad was bombed, it all went to hell, it was chaos!

Here in Kovilj the Gypsies were not killed. There was a Hungarian man, and he was some kind of a fat cat. He went from one house to another to see how Gypsies lived. That's because there are Gypsies and nomad Gypsies, Hungarian Gypsies, Kraut Gypsies, and German Gypsies. They thought that this was all the same. We are true Orthodox Serbs, we just have a different language. They went from house to house to see how the Gypsies behaved. In Gardinovci, Mošorin, Žabalj and Djurdjevo all Gypsies were killed. When they went from house to house they saw that the Gypsies had cows, horses, ploughs, land, and when they entered those houses they could not figure out which one was better or more beautiful. Then this man, the Hungarian, his name was Tišleteš, said that no one should even touch those Gypsies, "You have to kill me first!" Then they called us into a cellar and checked us for lice, for nits, I don't know what, they checked us all and checked the houses too. But this man said, "I take responsibility for these Gypsies, for Kovilj, they should not be harmed." They gave us food to eat, they helped us. They cooked food in huge pots and gave us a kilogram of bread per person, a meal per person, no matter how many people there were they gave them food, they gave us that much, and we had no fear. They took our men away to work as forced laborers, and if they came back that was good, if not – then nothing. That was all.

They did not take away anyone from my family. There was a big prison camp in Zastavica, that's in Serbia. All Gypsies there were killed. In the place where my sister lived, in Vukovar, in Bašadin, Vukovar, they tied stones to the necks of Gypsies, lined them up on the shores of the Danube, and then they shot them. The Gypsies fell into the water, together with the stones. It's good that I stayed alive, I don't know how it turned out that I am still alive today. I don't know, I pray to God every evening that He will take me with Him, but He

won't. He leaves me here to suffer.

Do your children come to see you?

– I have no use of my children. What children? You can forget about them. Nothing! All of them have their own children, all of them have their own worries, but I am here for them today as well. Yet, somehow I try to be cold to them. Who cares about them? Who gives a fuck, I say. Why don't they ask me, "Mother, did you eat anything today? Are you healthy or not? Did you drop dead mother, or not?" No one asks me anything. They never come to my door. They only come sometimes, or when I have something to give them, then they come. They are all around me, all of my little children are here. Only one of them is in Valjevo, my daughter, the one who loves me most and whom I love most, the one who never insulted me. The others all insulted me. And they are all here under my nose. I tell them, here is a little woman ... what was I trying to say? I go down the street and I shout, "Fuck the one who put you near me, why didn't you go somewhere further away?" "Wow", I say, "look at my neighbor! Neighbor, will you invite me for a cup of coffee?" There is no way you could come in, you can't open the door when her daughter is around. No one can do it! Across the street, at the other neighbor's, that woman does amazing things. She invites the whole neighborhood for coffee, but when I pass by her house she treats me like a dog! She has a daughter who is one year old, Pisarika also brought her up, for this whore. He was at one daughter's, then at another's, then at the third one's. My fourth daughter is in Valjevo, and I can die here. Even if I said, "Oh, I will die of starvation, I will drop dead, I will leave this world hungry," no one would bring me any food. No one! When they want to, when they feel like it, they give me fifty dinars, thirty dinars. What can I buy for fifty dinars, when everything is so expensive? I drink coffee, and that's it for the money. Coffee for twenty-five dinars, cigarettes for fifteen, and a box of matches. And what should I eat, stones, or what? May they all live long and be healthy, may God give them health and happiness. I never knew that a mother, I could cry now, that a mother could make her own children feel disgusted. I get up in the morning and I wail. If I were bad, like some women are, if I left them, if I was married many times, alright, but instead I was suffering, and I was beaten and I was battered, and he beat my mother too, the one who died, the old man. I put up with all sorts of things, and I have nothing in this world, I lived with him for forty-eight years and I have nothing now. And what have I lived for? It was all for them, for the love of my children. No one thanks me now. No one! I'm ill, I am sick to death. When I walk, I fall on my face. I go around, I make wicker baskets and then I go out to sell them. If I cannot get as much as I want for them I have to take what the women offer. I cannot get food like that. Do you call this a living? It's a dog's life. I am sick and tired of them. I do

my own laundry, I do my own cooking. This is too much for me, let alone to go around for more suffering. They bring me a box of cigarettes. That's nothing. So I sit here and wail. Now I don't know what my brother Tima is doing. Radinka tells my son Petar that Tima scolded her daughters. You see, she is killing my son and my brother. May the Lord and Jesus be her judges, for her and her daughters and her grandchildren. Whenever I go there, she does this to me [she shows how her daughter-in-law pushes her out of the house]. One of these days I will get her in the house, so that she won't have to leave it either. I can't take it any more! They do as they please, and I keep my mouth shut. I told them today, "You know what? Didn't I just enter your house and you shouted at me immediately? Didn't you tell me then that my daughter is hanging around with Janoš? And that she is pregnant too?" That's the one who was here a little earlier. She doesn't care about her family, as if she had none of her own. "No, no and no," she said. Then she took a candle and swore on the candle. That is why God is bad to her, to her and her daughter and son and grandson. There is God above and God sees everything. And God will give to everyone what they deserve. I have no one right now, I only have Him, I only have God and my brother. He broke his leg, he went to his grandson to get some medicine. He fell and completely broke his leg. Then she said, "He will get nothing from the house, and he will walk with a stick at the age of seventy." Why would she say that to me, why is she torturing me like this? I couldn't say anything, I just lit a cigarette. I didn't even say goodbye, I just left. Even if I had said just one word, it wouldn't have been so easy, it would have been one hell of a mess. Everything would be upside down. I would run, I would hit her, I would beat her, all sorts of things. But I held my tongue, I left, there was no bus. I got up and then I saw my son Pera coming. I said, "Pera, my son, take me to downtown, I want to see where Tima is." He was not there in that bar, drinking, but he drinks and his leg is hurting him. He could fall somewhere, God forbid. I've had enough, I've had enough of everything. I don't know why my aching heart still keeps beating. I don't know! It amazes me that my daughter Ljubinka lives here behind the house. Then there is another daughter, and the son in the courtyard ... my daughter is across the street and my grandson is at the corner. They are all around me. But the way they treat me – even if I had left them, if I'd been bad, they'd treat me better than this. I suffer. But this one is good to me, I must admit. I don't know what I'm saying, I am very nervous, I don't know where my brother is. I can't handle that. I didn't have anything to eat for the whole day today. When you walked in I was just starting to eat, but when I saw you I got up. It doesn't matter, I didn't mean it. This granddaughter of mine who likes to gossip, she is so lazy! She will make a mountain out of a molehill. If they saw me drowning, they would not drag me out, they would push me deeper instead. But I've done nothing wrong. I gave my couch to my son. He gave me this bad one, and he took my couch for

himself. She needs it when she comes to study.

Then I spent three months in a hospital. I weighed fifty-five kilograms. I came there weighing fifty-five, and I left weighing ninety-five. They loved me so much there, they did, they cried over me. I ran away from the hospital three times. They would come after me, and the nurses would take me one under one arm, the other under the other arm, because I was saying bad things. They asked me to read their fortunes from coffee drags, they did amazing things with me. There was one crazy woman from Čurug, she would take her clothes off and dance. The hospital manager would come, a doctor, "Dušanka, what are you doing?" "Man, you can see what I am doing, I am dancing and lifting my skirt, I can feel that I am pregnant, I need to see a cologist." She did not say gynecologist, she said cologist. She danced naked! Amazing things! I can't tell you how much they liked me. All of the women there, whatever they ate, they would leave a piece for me. I'm telling you, I weighed ninety-five kilos: they could not put a skirt on me, they had to tie it on me with a cord, I gained so much weight. I spent so much time there. The manager was not there, he was on vacation. And this woman, some Croatian, she told me, "The one who admitted you here should discharge you." So I stayed there for three months and fifteen days. They brought whatever I needed from my home for me. If anyone did not want to eat at the table I would take their food. They did amazing things with me. I would sing to them and they would dance. There were plenty of love affairs. They would go to meet their lovers, and they would take all of their clothes off, and throw them at me. "Go to hell, what are you throwing at me, you whores, you sluts, old women.," I told them. Then they would go to the bushes, with men young enough to be their sons.

Marija 70 years old, (1930)

Tell me something about your childhood?

– I was born in 1930, on August 3rd. I lived well in my father's house. I had both my father and my mother and I was well provided for until I got married. My family had good reputation, we owned an inn and we lived wealthily in Pazova. I had just one sister.

My parents brought me up nicely, they sent me to school and I finished eight grades of elementary school, and, as people would say, I lived happily as well as my father, my mother and my sister. I used to play with children, there were so many of us, and we all played together. That was life, it was so different than now. We would play in the street, we would chase each other, we played in dirt and made little balls out of mud, now you do not see that anymore. Nowadays people hate each other, and before we used to love each other. We would all crowd together, we used to live like one big family. Ten of us lived in one house and we were happy. Today you cannot live with your own daughter under the same roof.

I went to school until I finished the eighth grade: I finished first six grades in school, and two I finished in the firm where I worked so I have finished elementary school.

Other Romani children went to school with me: late Jeja, Medena, Zlajka, Giga all the children who used to live here, they all went to school with me. No one bothered us, we all attended the same school, both Romani and non-Romani children, and there was no taunting.

When I started the fourth grade the war broke out. I went to school for two years more and then I stopped, and my father would no longer let me continue because of war. It wasn't safe for us Romani people to go to school any more.

Do you remember war?

– Of course I remember war, my father joined the partisans. It began in nineteen forty-one. I remember Germans rallying all Romani people from Vojka, Golubinci, Banovci and they took them away, but they did not touch our Romani people from Pazova since the main man in Pazova was a Slovak called Ljuban, he was an ustasa³⁸ but he would not allow others to take away our Romani people. When my father saw that they had killed the partisans³⁹, and they, Germans, hid in Zagorka's house, so when the partisans passed by, they

³⁸ See the glossary at the end of the book.

³⁹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

started to shoot and they killed that Slovak too. One man, a partisan, fell down in Triva's canal, and then ustasas arrived and rummaged all Romani houses in order to find that partisan and take him to the Town Hall. It was then that my father decided he would join the partisans. While he was with them, he was wounded, and he had to return home. He was lying in bed for a short while and then he passed away.

During war we stayed at home, nobody maltreated us, my mother and I were alone since my sister got married. No Romani man was harassed here. My father ran away and joined the partisans as well as my uncle Triva and Đoka but they all made up their minds when they saw what awful things Germans were doing. I must admit that we had no problems whatsoever. I can remember, as if it were only yesterday, and I believe I'll never forget it, when all young Romani men were summoned to Vojka, they were taken away and hanged on a lamp-post in Pazova: all mother-naked. I saw it all, and I'll never be able to forget it! They did it only to boys and men, and we, children, went to see it, and whenever I remember that, it breaks my heart.

Your father, did he tell you something about war?

– Of course! They suffered a lot, they were running away and hiding. My father was wounded and they dragged him to and fro so that he wouldn't fall into German hands. Vanja was the one who was hiding my father most of the time, she was the first partisan hereabout, she was a nurse, she used to live next door and she was hiding, nursing and taking care of my father. She would hide him in the cornfield or she would cover him with a load of corn to prevent Germans from finding him. When I recall what happened to my father, and in the end he did not even get medical help, that's how things were! He died shortly after war and he would tell us stories about Romani people and Jews being sent to death camps and there being thrown and burnt into large stoves (my father-in-law, too, ended up as fuel in Jasenovac stoves). He would also tell us that if anyone was caught by ustasas, no one, not even Lord himself, could help him – they would pluck out his eyes, cut his arms! We Romani people of Pazova were lucky since the population of Pazova is a mixed one, so that there were Slovaks, Croats, Serbs living there, but it was Slovaks who have helped and saved us from falling victims.

And what happened after the war?

– My mother and I lived alone. Before war we owned a small shop, an inn where my folks worked, that was ours. My father was a wealthy man, however when the war broke out and when he joined the partisans, everything was lost.

After that you got married?

– Yes, my husband's family came to ask for my hand, my father was still alive and he gave my hand to Boža. When they came to propose to me I was only a girl; I was fifteen, I had never dated anyone before, and my father told me, "You know what, my child? I am going to give your hand in marriage to him, I am going to die soon, and then what will you do with your mama all alone?" That is how I got married to that man. I only lived with him for eight years and I had two children with him. He was a rascal, womanizer, a scoundrel ... you name it! I got sick and I went to the hospital and he married another woman, while I was in the hospital! I went there for an abortion, and while I was lying in the hospital, he remarried. When I got out of the hospital, I took my children and left him.

What was your marriage like in the beginning?

– Well, what can I say! My husband was a musician, he played in inns, and came home at dawn, I was just a girl, I didn't know anything and I did what my mother-in-law told me to do: I kept silent and lived with him in both good and bad times. But devil take him, after that my husband went crazy – he brought other women, singers, home! He made my life so miserable! He kept beating me all the time ... Only God knows what I went through living with him! I might have stayed with him after I got out from the hospital, but he married another woman. That's why I took my two children and brought them to my mama and swore I would never live with him again. He used to beat me, and made us all miserable because of all his mistresses, he would beat me and my children, he drank, whored ... I swear, he did horrible things. My mother-in-law lived with us, she was his stepmother, and my father-in-law was in a death camp. My mother-in-law was good to me. He also had an old grandmother, God bless her, may she rest in peace! She was good to me, better than my own mother-in-law, to tell you the truth.

It was terrible the way my husband maltreated me. When I came to my mama's house with my children, he came to see where I came to live, and my uncle, who is dead now, snatched a pitchfork and started running towards him to kill him. I screamed, "Don't do that uncle, you'll end up in prison because of a fool!" and I told my husband, "Come on now, get out of here, I don't want to live with you anymore!" And that is how it was. He lived in Sase with Živka and he even has a child with her, he has another child in Krčedin, and he later took our Dragica too. He would beat me and come home swearing, he would say, "Mother fucker, who do you think you are, you are nobody, I have better women than you." What could I do, I was young, inexperienced, I would curl up and keep silent, and he would grab me and hit me and hit and hit ... I would cry, "Why don't you stop, I am not a dog so that you can hit me like that all the time!"

Could you tell us something about your sexual life with him?

– Well, my child, it was awful! Everything was crazy! He would come home drunk, when I had to lie in bed with him he would chase me around and beat me to force me to sleep with him, there were moments when I wanted to take a knife and rip him open. I lived a dog's life, to be honest. Later, I got pregnant. My first child was a girl, Jeja. I had a very difficult delivery, but with Đorđe it was easier. I went to work and when I got back, a mid-wife came to help me deliver a baby.

I raised my children alone, I was the breadwinner. I worked for daily wages and supported my children. I worked long hours and had to take them with me, I dragged them everywhere with me like kittens. I suffered with them like Jesus, but I didn't want to leave my children with anyone. I worked for daily wages in Surduk every day. I took Đorđe with me, I would lay him on a pillow at one end of the field and I hurried to finish my work in the field so that I could reach Đorđe and breast-feed him. If only you knew how much I suffered, while my husband wandered around, sang in inns, squandered money on women – his mistresses. He never brought a dinar back home! I had to go and work, to provide food for children and him, and that mother and grandmother of his ... I supported them all. That's how it was. To tell the truth, my mother-in-law came to work with me too. And my older child, Jeja, stayed with her granny, and I took the younger child, whom I was still nursing, with me to the field. Oh, Lord, my soul was so tortured!

Later on, children started going to school.

– They both finished elementary school.

There was no huge difference between upbringing of boys and girls. I loved Đorđe as much as Jeja, but when she was about to marry, she wasn't allowed to go anywhere. I never let her go out alone! And Đorđe went out alone; he was a boy so I did not vex that much about him. I worried about Jeja, since she was a girl, somebody could attack her, and she did not have a father, I lived with the children alone, I had to fend for us all. She had to be a virgin until marriage, and that is how it was: she married this Radovan and lived with him and had three children with him, and all in all he was a good husband to her. She was seventeen when she got married, and my son was seventeen too, when he married.

You married again?

– When I got separated and returned home with my children, I married Luka after five or six years. Until then, I lived alone with my children. I spent eighteen years with Luka and I was officially married to him, and I my marriage with the first husband was not registered since Romani marriages were not previously registered. My life with Luka was similar to the one with my first husband. He, too, drank, went wild, had mistresses, you know how it is. This

Dragica ruined my life! I couldn't help it. He harassed both me and our daughter Ružica and she developed nervous illness, she is ill even today since he would come home drunk, he would turn over the table, smash things around, and she would watch it curled up in the corner of the room, trembling from fear. That's why she got ill.

Why did you live with him so long?

– Well, in the beginning he was very good to me, to my child. I didn't want to marry him, he was always running after me like crazy. I was very young when I divorced my first husband. Wherever I went he would breathe down my neck. I tried to turn him down so I mentioned my two children. He had no children, but he was married to Mira and they had a child and it died, so he left her. When he married me he had no children. After we got married we had a daughter and in the beginning we lived happily, we built up this little house. But then he started to hang out with those rascals and after that everything went downhill. I remember once, it was Saint Nikola's⁴⁰ day, when my husband came home as drunk as a skunk, I was dragging him inside to put him to bed, but he resisted it, he wanted to beat me and to go to his parents. You couldn't stop him! When he reached Nikola's house, Nikola took up pitchfork and headed towards him since he learned that he slept with his wife and at that moment I screamed, "Oh, my God he is going to kill him!" As soon as they heard me, late Đoka and Boba ran to him and protected him, and Nikola's wife came out and picked up Luka's hat that fell down when her husband, Nikola, punched him. When I saw her I couldn't help saying, "What do you think you're doing? Don't you see that your husband wants to kill mine because of you, and you dare pick up my husband's hat?" I had suffered so much with my husbands. I had no luck with them, and now I don't need them as long as I am alive. No husband respected me, as if I were an ugly or filthy woman.

Were you and your second husband employed?

– We worked for sanitary service. I am retired now, and I have a very small pension, and I worked for thirty-five years in Belgrade. I toiled, grieved and that's why I wasn't good. Whores always came first, and me, a housewife and a worker, I wasn't a woman enough. His mistresses attacked me; I couldn't find peace anywhere. Dragica came many times to my house to break the windows. She was looking for my husband. She would come repeatedly and once I came out, grappled her and thrashed her. My son Đorđe went out too, since he heard the noise coming from outside, he too grabbed and punched her until she started bleeding and then he warned her, "Don't you ever again dare come to my house or I'll kill you!" After that she gave us up and the other mistresses

⁴⁰ See the glossary at the end of the book.

didn't disturb us, although he had many of them. When he took Zlata he did not beat me or maltreat me anymore. He lived with me and I was married to him, and he took Zlata to his mother Seka. When I heard of that I told him, "Either I will leave this house or you will", and he replied, "You will!" Then I said, "I cannot go, I have a daughter to tend to and I have nowhere to go. I will pay you off and you will leave my house." That's how it ended. I paid him off and he left. We built this house together; we took up loans and built it.

You have mentioned a word 'filthy', what does it mean to you?

– Well, the worst thing is when somebody tells you that you are filthy, that can mean you are a witch, but it can also mean that you do not keep your house clean. When people say, "What a filthy person she is, she is real lazy bones".

Do you believe in magic?

– Sure I do! I have experienced it myself! A woman told me to go home and look in the pillow. There I would find something ... and I really did. I went to a person to break the spell, which was on me, but I did not go to a Romani woman, I went to a Serb woman to ask her what was going on in my house, what was wrong with my husband, and whatever she said was true. And it was all because he brought in God knows whom, while I was at work. And I have to tell you that he made love to Olga. I caught them together, and I will never forget that! She was my bridesmaid, she was the godmother of my Ružica. This is how it was. I set off to work and then I realized that I had forgotten my monthly bus pass and I had to return home. When I got home I really had a sight to see! Her husband heard of this while he was in an inn with other Roms. They told him that his wife was cheating on him with Luka so he came to our house late at night; knocked at the window, I opened the door to see who could that be, and then he whispered: "It's me, it's me..." and I replied: "Come on inside, I'll make some coffee for you", "I just stopped by to ask you, and I want you to tell me the truth, is my Olga really cheating on me with Luka?" I said, "That's not true, who told you that?" I didn't want to tell him the truth so that they wouldn't fight and so that no one's head gets chopped off. I told him that it wasn't true, and that he shouldn't listen to hearsay. And I saw my husband with her in bed that night. I reached the door and it was locked, although I knew he didn't go to work, so I started shouting, "Luka, Luka" but there was no response. So I went to the backyard, since there were no houses in our backyard and everything was open. She escaped through the front door and she didn't see me. As soon as she got out she started running and then I shouted after her, "Why are you running, you whore, is it because I've caught you with my husband?" She blushed and ran away. She looked as if somebody killed her. She made no answer, she just ran away, but still I wouldn't admit the truth to her husband. I had a big row with my husband, we raised hell, and we quarreled wildly. I told him, "So you

bring a whore to my house behind my back?" He brought God knows whom to my house, who knows who put a spell on my house. I could never find peace in my house, we always fought and argued and I believe it was due to the spell; and I saw it with my own eyes. I saw Dana once come out of there, but I might be wrong. She went out around midnight and she was doing something in the canal, I do not know what, I never asked her.

Do you believe in ghosts?

– I do, I really do! The dead when they die sometimes go out and that is true! When late Lepuša died I attended her funeral, I was in her family's house. You can ask Sneška about it. I came there and told her, "Sneška I am afraid to sleep all alone, I'll sleep here with you!" It was when I returned home after the funeral, they had a window and a couch there so I lay on the couch. At midnight I was still awake, I couldn't sleep, somebody lay with all weight on top of me, I swear to God! I wanted to cry but my voice failed me because there was so much weight on me I wasn't able to breathe. But Sneška felt something was going on, she jolted suddenly and turned on the light and it all went away! And now I cannot but believe in those things since that was the night Lepuša died, and ever since then I believe in it.

Have you ever made magic?

– No, I have never and I don't know how! I do know that our elderly women made some magic and they said, "Who gives a damn!" They said that they were taking whatever they wanted from other women and they cast spells for them, and so I believe Romani people lie when they boast of making magic. But then again, perhaps those who are not Romani people also lie when they claim they know how to make magic, who knows! I went to a Serbian woman and whatever she told me was true! And I cannot get that out of my mind, because when I found it in the pillow, in the pillow bag - where you put feathers, it was all wrapped and ripped into pieces. I found feathers all colored in green, red and blue. The woman who told me about it also explained that the person who put a spell on my house hid it in the pillow, and that I should take it and burn it as far as possible from my house. I did as she advised me, but I already divorced Luka and the magic was made for us to split. It doesn't matter that we are separated now, what is important is that I threw that out of my house. There you see, there are all kinds of things going on in the world.

Did you have rest on holy days?

– I never do the washing on Sundays, I do it on Saturdays. You know what Bible says, "Six days you should work but the seventh day is Lord's day and you shall not do any work." I have rest on Sundays, I don't do the washing, and when it is a holy day I don't sew or iron.

Have you celebrated the Women's Day in the firm where you worked?

– Well, that is not a real holiday; it is state holiday. It is the Women's Day. But even then I didn't receive any presents, no one gave me anything, not even my husbands. If only they had brought me a flower and said, "Here you are!" Neither my first nor the second husband showed any respect for me, none of them cared about me. What kind of man is the one who does not care about his wife? ... He is not a man at all.

What about Christmas and Easter?

– There were no holidays more beautiful than those two. All the children would gather, we would knock from one door to the other and everybody would give us something: eggs, money...and in no time you had a basket full with all sorts of things! No one does that anymore. We are losing the tradition we used to have.

On Christmas day you bring straw in the room and children wallow in it ...well those were the days! Now there are no such things. You can see yourself that there are no big celebrations nowadays. Perhaps the only one is the New Year's Eve. And in those times you had so many happy days, and as the old saying goes, that was life! We were poor though, but that was life! I'm saying it as it is, this what we have now is nothing: we only know of grief, you can see that small children are all ill, and it's all because of these poisons. Things now are not as they were before. I'll tell you how things were before. When your father tells you to sit, you would not dare stand up. And you were supposed to sit quietly until your father tells you to go out and play. It was the father who determined the time until one could stay outside and play. If you fail to come home on time, you will be punished: you have to kneel on the corn grains until your knees are well swollen. You must not get up until your father tells you to. A girl was not supposed to wander around like they do now. God forbid, it was unthinkable. Or to get married and not to be a virgin. She would be sent back home the very first thing in the morning! And look what we have now. Nothing is as it was before. When I married my first husband I was a virgin, I was fifteen and I didn't know what a man was. When I moved to my husband's house I didn't sleep with him for two weeks. I would run to my mother-in-law and beg her not to leave me alone with him, since I had no experience with men. And today, just try to find an honest girl! Even my grandchildren ... how can I know what kind of people will they become? I cannot guarantee for them. Here, Ana is already seventeen, and she is a good student, and Milkica is even better. But how can I know what will become of them; you cannot be sure in anyone. All our tradition is slowly disappearing and nothing is what it used to be. Once you were not allowed to go out without your family. When a girl goes out her mother has to accompany her, to keep an eye on her. And today you have girls walking alone,

no one cares about it. When I lost my chastity, Romani people took out the sheet to prove to the whole world that I was a virgin. No one does that today. In those days you knew exactly who was an honest girl and who was not. My mother-in-law waited for two weeks, she had the most important role, she invited the guests and the pogachars⁴¹ arrived. So my mother-in-law announced that her daughter-in-law was a virgin, and I was a fifteen-year-old girl...what did I know? In those times everything was nice, and now these things are no more. I can notice change in my own children.

Have you ever had time for yourself?

– No, I have never had time for myself since I started working. I am seventy now and I am still working. I have never been to a spa, to the seaside, an inn ... anywhere. I have never worn any makeup, I have always looked natural. I have never gone anywhere neither with my husband nor with my girlfriends or while I was still a girl, since my father never let me go out. When I got married my husband never took me with him and I was ignorant of many things. I gave birth to children and spent all my life bringing them up. Even today I spend my time with grandchildren.

Have you ever had a girlfriend?

– Yes, I had a lot of girlfriends in the firm, and we were all on very good terms. We would confide in one another about our grievances, and those were all non-Romani women. I did not hang around with Romani people much, because they tend to gossip about each other much, and non-Romani women are not like that. My best friend is Goca; she is a mid-wife. She is like a sister to me. She helps with deliveries in Belgrade, she works with me, travels ... I visit her even now. She is retired and I often go to her and we chat things over.

How many times did you abort?

– Well, I did it many times, since neither my first husband nor the second cared for me. I took no preventive measures, no medications, because I didn't know there were such things. At that time you did not have those medicines, and no one used them. Many women, both Romani and non-Romani had to abort. Nowadays those things are different. Now you have everything, but what use is it for me? Once I aborted a four-month-old child. With Luka I risked my life, because I realized what my husband was doing to me. The doctors admitted me to the hospital, and they told me I was running a great risk, so I barely survived. I had many abortions in the hospital.

Now, as you can see, I am ill, I go to the doctor and try to help myself. I take care of myself: I wash myself although I have no bathroom and to tell you frankly, I live pretty much the same way Gypsies lived before.

41 See the glossary at the end of the book.

What job did you have in the firm?

– When I divorced my husband I moved to Belgrade to seek a job and I was accepted in the city's park department by the non-Romani people. They told me I would work for three months as a tryout, and when they saw how diligent and honest I was, they employed me. I planted, watered flowers, and did whatever I was told to. Just like the others. I always had paid vacations and while I was pregnant I had a maternity leave, which lasted for four months.

They did not know I was a Romani woman. When my co-workers told my boss, that I was Romani, he called me and asked me what was my nationality, I replied, "I am a Romani". Then he said, "You'd better not say that to anyone". I told him, "Why not, that is my nationality and I have nothing to be ashamed of". That is how it ended and no one ever asked me again what my nationality was.

Why did your boss say that?

– Well, because of the others, so that the others wouldn't think ill of me. So that others would not taunt me, you have all kinds of people. But I always said that I do not care who is going to say what about me, when I know that I am Romani. I have never felt sorry for being Romani. Even today I am proud of being one, of being born by a Romani. I am Romani; I cannot pretend that I am not.

What do you know of public life here in Yugoslavia?

– During Tito's presidency, we all lived comfortably and no one was afraid of anyone, unlike today. There was order, we had enough money...credits... you could take up as much as you wished. And today you cannot buy anything. Not even a loaf of bread. We lived a full life then, thank God, we had all we needed. We built up this little house, we took up a credit, and we installed running water and telephone in the house. And now you cannot build anything. I could die if I lived off the pension I receive, So I started cleaning rooms in private houses. Somehow I manage although it's difficult for me to do it now but I would starve otherwise, I have to work so as to earn extra money. My children cannot support me, they, too, don't have any money. I have to work to feed myself.

When Tito died, all that luxury of life perished. My dear child, a person cannot live like this! When he died I lived in Belgrade, I worked and all of a sudden I heard a siren. The whole world was weeping, both the old and the young. I attended Tito's funeral with my company and it was then that I told my co-workers: "Tito has died, so will we" and that is what really happened. I worked for so long in the company, and today I cannot pay my power bill and telephone bill out of the money I receive. And I am not entitled to the humanitarian packages in the Pensioners' Association. They say I have no right to receive them since the packages are intended for Romani people without pension. And what

would I get there: some beans, oil and a couple of cans. That is all. And they tell me I cannot get even one package since my pension is a thousand dinars. That is not fair. I am a pensioner, I pay for the membership regularly, but still they will not let me get anything.

What religion do you practice and do you believe in God?

– I am Orthodox Christian, and of course I believe in God, my child! I believe in God since I was a small girl, and even today my grandchildren pray to God, and whenever they go to bed Miloš, Ana and Mima, say a prayer. Sometimes, whenever I feel well I go to church, whenever it's a holiday I light up a candle in the church, and when it is St. Ilija's⁴² day I go and pray to his icon. When the icon of the Virgin Trojerucica⁴³ was brought here I went to pray to it. I wept so much and I was so unhappy, because I felt she wanted to tell me something. I know a few prayers from this book that I am reading, but I can't tell you that in Romani but in Serbian. Our Lord ... Jesus Christ taught people how to pray and held a sermon and showed them that Lord would answer their prayer if they follow Jesus' faith. He gave them the following prayer: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." That is what Holy Bible says; it is just that I cannot see well anymore so my grandchildren read it to me. My grandchildren also read to me that the time will come when no one will respect anyone, not even one's own brother, sister, father or mother, that the world is coming to an end and that the great evil is to fall upon us. I believe in it, and you can see it for yourself too, there are so many earthquakes, killings and planes are crashing somewhere at the end of the world every day and so I believe in it. I only hope my children and grandchildren are safe and sound, but if you ask me what will happen I can tell you the evil will befall on us, everything is getting worse and worse and the way it shouldn't. I read only Holy Bible. There are Seven Day Adventists who walk by and give away books about God, but my children will not let me read that, since they themselves do not believe in it, and will not read it to me, and my sight is too weak to read.

⁴² See the glossary at the end of the book.

⁴³ Trojerucica pronounced as Troyeruchitza means literally "with three hands". This icon is renowned in Orthodox Christianity for its power of healing. According to the legend Saint John Damascene was persecuted because he defended the veneration of sacred images in the dispute with the Byzantine emperor Leo III who prohibited use of icons. Saint John's hand was cut off as a sentence and he was sent to prison. He prayed to the icon of Virgin Mary and his hand healed. He made a silver hand and put it on the icon of Virgin Mary as remembrance of his miraculous healing and that is how the icon got its name. The icon is kept in the Serbian monastery Hilandar on Mount Athos.

I spend more time watching television. Mostly, I watch news, I watch that evil that's going on in Kosovo, why all those people fight, sometimes I watch series, but most often when the 8 o'clock news are over I go to bed. I do not listen to radio, there it is, I should tuck it away so that it cannot be seen.

Do you know any Romani stories or fairy-tales?

– No, I don't know any of those things, I never sung songs or told tales. Even my mother never told me stories. Sometimes my grandmother would tell me a tale, but I can't remember any of those stories, because it was before the flood. None of my children can tell tales, or recite poetry. I have never told them any stories, or sang lullabies, or anything ... I only gave them pacifier, I didn't even lull them to sleep. I just put a pacifier into their mouths so that I could go to work.

Have there been any significant changes in your life since 1989?

– Well, I had children and then my children married. My son left his wife and children and headed to Italy where he stayed, so that I live by myself ever since then. My daughter-in-law took her children and left me too. She rented an apartment as she did not want to live with me anymore, well what can I do about it now? At that time war broke out, my grandchildren went to the front lines. I prayed to God to spare their lives. I worried a lot and even got ill because of it, and I kept saying, "Lord, just spare my grandchildren's lives, let them be safe and sound!". That's how it was. There you see it all started falling apart when the former Yugoslavia split, see what was done, and now we are suffering now.

There was that bombing as well and we had to run away and hide. We were hiding, we made trenches here in our yard, and we hid in there. Mikica and Đoka dug them, and we would hide our children in there. We were all scared when we heard of bombs exploding. I lived during the World War II, and when I remember it all ... I did not hide in the World War II, and it seemed to me that I would get killed in the bombings. I only prayed for my children and grandchildren, as I am old and do not have much to live. I do not care if I die. I would hide my children and go out and tell them to kill me since I have nothing to live for.

You have mentioned your elder sister?

– I haven't visited her for a long time now. I should pay her a visit, but I do not know if she is ill or not; I have not heard from her at all. She lives with her son, and her husband has died. She was married during World War II and she was taken from Čortanovci to a death camp, in Jasenovac. She told me what happened in there, the ways they were tortured, killed ... and that one day somebody came and ordered that a small group of women should be released, and that is how she survived, but that happened when the war was over. She

suffered a lot there, she was beaten, forced to hard labor, and when she could not lift a heavy bag she would be hit. She was not happy with her husband either. He would beat and molest her. He died young. What goes around comes around.

What has influenced your life the most?

– I guess it was the separation with my husband. I was left with two children, for whom I toiled and grieved so much, and he never contributed with a dinar. That was the most serious blow in my life. He never helped me, he never bought a single candy to children. Before he passed away he called for our daughter because he could not die without seeing her one more time, and I advised her to go to him. There you see that there is justice in the world. I told her, “Go and see your father, although he left you and did not want to hear of you, you should go and forgive him”. And so she did. No sooner did he see her, a tear rolled down his cheek and he passed away. He could not die without seeing her one more time.

What was the happiest time of your life?

– The happiest time of my life was when I brought my son into this world. I was happiest then. When I delivered him, and when the mid-wife brought him to me, I saw a chubby, pinky and a pretty little baby, he was like a doll and I thought, “Oh, Lord I praise thee! Bless my son and give him a long and happy life!” My son left me, and I cannot see him and that makes me sick at heart.

Does he support you?

– No he does not. I told him, “My child, do not send anything to me, but send something to your children, you are leaving them here, they will need it more!” My son is married over there in Italy to a Slovak girl and has a son whom I have never seen. I visited him in Poland while he was living with her there but it was only when they moved to Italy that she became pregnant. My daughter-in-law is very good and while I was with them she would always call me “my dear mommy” while my first daughter-in-law never showed any respect for me. The first daughter-in-law was not Romani, she is from Pirot.

You say you have been to Poland. How is life there?

– Well, the town I lived in was beautiful and I liked most of the things I saw there. My daughter-in-law wanted to buy me whatever I wished for but I told her that I needed nothing but medicines. So she took me to a pharmacy and bought me a pile of medicines.

Have you ever traveled anywhere else?

– Well, I traveled to Italy to buy goods, to Hungary, Romania. I was a smuggler and I was happy. Tito was still alive and I could travel wherever I wanted, I did not need a visa. I traveled everywhere and made money and had

all sorts of things, and now I have nothing. I would bring merchandise from there: fabrics, jeans, skirts, shirts, all kinds of things. And I would sell them here. I also brought meat for us, turkey, salami and so on. When I made a tour I went with other Romani people, the bus was full of us.

Have you ever experienced any kind of distress?

– I have. I was robbed in Romania! A woman and I, we went to sell jeans and a Romanian told us to hide somewhere so as not to be seen by the police. So we went with him and sold him eight pieces of jeans. He was counting money, and I watched it, so I took the bunch of money and he told me, “Hurry up, there’s the police!”. When he ran I looked into my hands and saw only six leis, and the rest were sheets of paper. When I realized what happened my heart fainted. I suffered a huge loss that time. At the other occasion my wallet was stolen with all the money I had. I had my son Đorđe with me then. After that everything went smoothly. I told myself, let the bygones be bygones! Thank God, since then I had no problems, and I managed to raise my children.

What was the worst period of your life?

– I had very hard time coping with the death of my family, my loneliness and the death of my dear mother since I had no one to confide in and she was all I had. She lived in a separate house here in my neighborhood and I visited her every day. She passed away three years ago, and I looked after her. There was no one around to help her.

Tell me what is it that you have wished for as a young girl, and what came true?

– I am grateful for loving Luka and living with him, but it’s not my fault that he wanted other women too, so I had to divorce him. I had really loved him and that is why I married him. I would share my life with him even now, if only he was more of a man. He lives in Pazova and we see each other from time to time, but nothing more than that. Our daughter works in the same company with him. His son from his third marriage visits my Ružica often.

What is it that did not come true?

– My father gave my hand to the person I did not love, but to the person he considered right for me. I loved Luka, but he did not allow me to marry him but ordered me to marry another man whom I did not like. I could not confront my father’s decision, I had to obey him and accept this man’s offer. I cried my heart out, but only when I was sure there was no one to see me. I told my mother that I did not want to marry him and that I would return home immediately, but she advised me not to be a fool as my father would kill me if I did that. I begged her, I said, “Mother, where are you sending me, I don’t even know where I’m going.” That was horrible! I accepted that life because of my father, I bore two children

and if he had not married another woman I would probably have stayed by his side because of the children.

How do you see yourself today, as a woman in the past fifty years?

– I see myself as a tormented and troubled woman. I wanted a good life, good husband with whom I could go out, but I cannot deny I had a miserable life. Neither do I have better life now that I am old, nor did I have good life while I was young. I am old now, ill; I feel pain in my legs, arms, everywhere.

Old age is very hard to endure, may no one suffer it! You are alone within four walls. I am haunted by the thoughts of my death. It is clear now that I will die alone, I have no children around me, no one. I am not afraid of death and I would like God to take me. If only I could close my eyes forever. I know I have to die. That does not scare me; I only fear long sufferings like those my mother went through. She was in bed for a year and a half and that was horrendous. She would pee in her bed, I had to wash her, turn her around...that is the only thing I fear. That is why I would like God to take me now, in sleep. That's what I wish most.

How would you advise your daughters to lead their lives?

– To be good, not to be cheeky, not to argue with people, to be good to everybody and God will help them.

If you happen to learn that your daughter was harassed by her husband, what would you tell her to do?

– Well, Ružica's husband was a drunkard, and I told her, "Don't leave him, you two have children". That does not mean that if he maltreats her, she should succumb to it. No. I warned my son-in-law not to bring misery to their lives, or otherwise Ružica would leave him. I urged him to give up the booze and look after his wife. And he took my advice. He is a real man of the house now. My other son-in-law used to beat my daughter and she put up with it because of the children and lived with him, but he died and she is alone with children and grandchildren now. I never encouraged them to leave their husbands; I never wanted to interfere with their marriages, God forbid! I was ready to endure anything because of children. My sons-in-law were not like my husbands; they did not abuse their wives like my husbands abused me. My son-in-law Dule would not harm my daughter Ružica while he is sober. He drank, came home numbed by liquor, and would go to bed but he did not beat her. If any of my daughters suffered as much as I did, than I would advise them to leave their husbands.

What would you tell your granddaughters?

– To live peacefully with their husbands, not to be impudent, to respect their husbands, and if he doesn't respect them and if he is a rascal and a rogue,

then they should separate, if possible before they have children. And in case they have children then they bind them, but I was not bound by anything. I brought up my children all by myself, and I made a wedding party to each one of them. I did not interfere with their choices of partners. Ružica met Dule while she was commuting to the university in Zemun and she got the diploma of a professor of chemistry and household education. She was supposed to teach in school, but she could not find a job in that branch and now she works as a clerk in an office with her father, who provided her with that post. She went out with Dule and agreed to marry him later on, although he is a Serb. He came here to propose to her and she accepted, and I did not want to interfere. They got married and we threw a wedding party. In the beginning they lived with me, and then they rented an apartment and later still they made a house and are happy now. They have three children. The other daughter worked with me in the city's park department, where she met Radovan in the park. He took her to Germany. He, too, proposed to her and we celebrated their wedding. I did not sell her but, formally, they gave me a token for the food and drinks that were served. She was dressed in the wedding dress, both of my daughters, and I have their photographs. Đorđe's wife was in her wedding dress and she wore a long veil. Radovan was a Romanian. By the way, my son married three times. First he married Romanian Romani, she was Radovan's cousin, then he married a Serb and in the end he married a Slovak. We only celebrated his marriage to the Romanian girl, and he just brought the other one and they had three children.

In the end, is there anything that I forgot to ask you?

– Well, I love our patron saint's day, our patron saint is Saint Ilija, when all the girls and boys gather right here in front of my house, and when I hear our music in my courtyard, all people dancing, singing, when the girls are introduced to boys according to our Romani customs. In old times it was all more festive than it is now, there were lots of tents from one end of the yard to the other. Romani people arrived with horses, in carriages, and they all tied towels around themselves, and rode horses, and it was an occasion when boys met girls. Boys would often propose to girls. Parents would come, too, to spot a suitable bride for their son. And now girls go out alone, run away from houses, they marry without anyone's consent, or divorce.

I see a sour-cherry juice on your table. Did you make it?

– I have been making it for years now. I make pickles, I pickle cucumbers. I like to cook. And at the end of this interview I'll tell you a recipe, a Romani recipe, which is my favorite – it's poppy seed strudel, our Pazova is famous for it. You put milk, yeast, and flour into a bowl and mix it. Leave it to rest for a while, then you spread it and when the dough is thin enough sprinkle it with poppy seeds and roll it. Beat eggs and smear them over the roll. Put the cake in

the oven and bake. When it is done you have a poppy seed strudel.

That's my only comfort, I don't always have money to buy newspapers, I read what I can. I go to Duško, I get that journal for women, "Bazar", even if it's three years old it doesn't matter. Also I read that other newspaper "Politika", then sometimes I buy newspapers, what's the name – "Blic", but there are swear words and some people say it's Croatian newspaper. Well they are. But then I only read, I don't get involved in politics. There are also some novels, there are nice things which interest me so that's how I amuse myself. Now I really don't know what else I can tell you about my future.

Ruža, 68 years old (1932)

What kind of family were you born into?

– I was born into a Romani family. My father was a musician, and my mother was a housewife. She worked in the village for some landladies: washing laundry for them, ironing, or doing anything else that was needed to bring us up, her children. My father earned for a living by playing music. Sometimes he was not able to earn anything, yet sometimes he was. However, in these cases my mother earned some money, thus we were never poor. Some Romani people had to go digging, but my parents did not have to do this. The worst happened when we were looking for a job and they said that they had nothing for us, they threw us out. My mother used to pick mulberries in the streets, and then we would put those mulberries into a barrel and leave them there for a week or two. Afterwards we would take that to a brandy-maker and have some brandy made, which we would sell later. If we had twelve liters of brandy, and that kind of brandy was expensive, we would earn quite a lot. Then we had some money for a living. If we were not able to earn some money that way, my father would play music at a party or a wedding, and that was how we made it.

How many children did your parents have?

– There were three of us: three sisters. We had no brothers. Lela and Sofija, who was the youngest, now she is dead, and Lela is the eldest. My parents did not want to have more children just to get a son, because they did not have a house of their own, but they lived in a shanty in Zemun; they lived there. In winter we went to school from there: it was snowing and there was no path or anything, we were falling in snow all the time. Not all of the Romani people lived in such houses; some of them inherited a house from their grandparents, yet we hadn't inherited anything from anyone. My sister and I took care of our parents till they died, and I signed that I did not want a part of our family house. I left my part to my sister's son Nebojša.

When you were a little girl did you have any toys?

– I didn't know what a toy was. I brought up my two sons without toys as well. When I was a little girl my mother used to make for me little dolls out of rags. She would wrap a corn cob into a piece of rag – that was the body. She made the arms from reed and the hair from some yarn, and all that was very interesting for me. She would say, "Look, my dear, what I had made for you!" I would jump for joy. I would then make little skirts and blouses for my doll, and some footwear, caps, socks and little panties as well. I would take a needle and some thread and my mother would show me how to sew. Yet I preferred

playing in mud. I would take some mud, then I would throw it on the ground to make it softer. I would hollow it out with my fingers, so that I could pour some water into it. If I wanted to splash other children I would smash it on the ground and it would splash all the children standing around me– so their faces got dirty and they cried for their mothers, “Look what she had done!” Then, there would be a row, and my mother would be angry with me, “What were you doing, Ruža, why are you getting on my nerves?” And then she would smack me and pull my hair. My mother smacked me because I was such a devil. We had a ball that we made of rags. We would play a game called ‘paws’. Four players were needed; they were playing in two pairs against each other. We would dig two holes in the ground: one player and his pair behind his back were standing next to one hole, the other pair next to the other. The first in the pair would throw the ball over to the other player, if you did not catch the ball, the one standing behind you would do that. That meant that it was your turn to stand behind and bray as a donkey because you lost. Children do not play such games these days, especially not with balls made of rags.

What did your mother allow you to do, and what she didn’t?

– I was more afraid of my mother than of my father, because my mother would hit me with a wooden spoon or a rolling pin, and my father would slap me and say afterwards: “I’m sorry”. She was bringing us up, and she had to require obedience because my father was often out playing music, especially during night. Not everyone was a musician. Some people were working a Romani farm cooperative; they had daily wages and a Romani labor brigade leader. I was a little girl and I also went digging there. Other children did the same together with their mothers; a child would dig next to its mother, so she could help. This was useful for me because I learnt how to dig and earned some money as well. My parents told me, “If you want you can go there to work, we are not forcing you; if you want some pocket money, we can give you some, but not as much as you need.”

When you were a young woman were you allowed to go out?

– Yes, I used to go out to the center. In the Gipsy lane there were boys who played music, and we young women and little girls danced. They were practicing and we used it as a chance to dance and have fun. We were falling in love and having fun there. There was nothing like, “Hey, you’re like this, or you’re like that!” Everything was done together. Serbs were also friends with us; there was no difference between us, although we had been provoked, when I was a little girl and when I was picking mulberries with my mum. They used to jeer at us and call us names. And I did not want to go to school, and I cried and asked my mum why they were calling us names. My mother would say, “They’re rude, but I’m going to see the teacher, they mustn’t behave like this.” At that time we

were not called Romani people, but Gypsies, however, now we have that fine name; God bless the person who said that people should call us by that name. We have to thank him for that.

Did your parents let you go to school?

– They did. My younger sister, Sofija, knew how to read and write. I went to the first grade three times because there I met the man I am living with. Well, he was a boy, I was a girl (we were of same age); he was doing well at school, he finished primary school, and I stayed in the first grade, so my parents signed me out. Now, I can write my name but only in block letters. I did not have to force my children to go to school, both Vesa and Blaža wanted to study. I was just worried because they were too small when compared to other children. Once, they had lit a cigarette, and I hid and followed them to see where they were going and what they planned to do. Then, I found them smoking. When they saw me, they tried to hide the cigarette in the pocket. After that, I let them smoke.

When you were a girl, were you allowed to wear a miniskirt?

– You could not go out in a miniskirt, or with your back not covered, or wearing a deep cut blouse, as they do these days. And an elderly woman, when she went out, she could not go out bareheaded. In case that someone called on her place and said, “Hello, anybody home?” she would not go out without a scarf on her head, no matter whether she was a Serb or a Romani woman. She had to cover her head at least with her hand. Women put some make up occasionally, still not as much and as often as they do today. There was no eye-color, or whatever it is called, eyebrows were not plucked, hair was not cut short. Our parents were telling us that only whores did that to make themselves more attractive. They forbade us to do those things. When I had put this silver tooth, I was smacked because of that. I was digging in the farm cooperative and I saved some money. There was this dentist by the station who fixed golden or silver teeth. I wanted a silver one. My father and mother were digging in the garden, and I mother asked me to go and fetch some milk. I was very happy because I had a chance to go to the dentist’s that day. I had put the bucket in the bag and pretended that I was going to fetch some milk. When the dentist had fixed the teeth, he said to me: “Little girl see if you like it, do you feel any pain? I can fix it while you are here.” I said, “ I don’t feel anything and I like the tooth very much!” I do not remember how much it cost, I know that it was not very expensive, and that it was in at that time. As soon as one girl had it done, the others wanted the same. Well, the late Buba had it fixed, then that Bandarica, the late Mariška’s sister, and so one after another had it done. We spent a lot of time together picking mulberries. When I got home, I smiled and my mother noticed the tooth and said, “ Oh my God, what have you done? And I said, “Why are you making so much fuss, I’ve just put a piece of foil around my tooth!” She thought

it was the truth because I had been doing that before. Then she called my father, “Slavko, come and see what your little girl has done!”, and I said, “No mum, please!”. And she said, “Why are you afraid if it’s just a piece of foil?” When my father came she said, “Here, have a look, she’d have a silver tooth put!” I smiled and he said, “U marla devla!”⁴⁴, and he slapped me because of that and told me that I had to report from then on every time I wanted to go somewhere and what I planned to do, and he would decide whether he would let me go and let me do what I wanted to or forbid me to do it. Yet, if they had had a son, and in case he had done something like that, he would not have been smacked, because he were a son! He would have been allowed to do whatever he wanted. If you let your daughter do whatever she wants, she could bring something into your house. My grandson does not come home for a day or two. If he were a girl, they would ask where she was and what she was doing, and she would be smacked for sure and as it is I know a son will not bring a baby home.

Did a girl have to be a virgin before she got married at the time when you were young?

– It could happen that if the man wanted to take the girl home and she did not do it with him first, he did not want to live with her. If there was a wedding, and if it was proved during that first night that she was not a virgin, there would always be a row and a lot of trouble. In that case his family wanted to fight with her family, sometimes even a murder could happen. Her parents would say, “What have you done to our child! My child is not for your house. You have taken her and embarrassed her!” If he had embarrassed her, then he should not push her away, and if she knew that she had not done that with him, she should not have married him.

How did you meet your husband?

– My house was the fourth from his in the Gipsy Lane. We have known each other since childhood. He played tamburitza⁴⁵ and we were dancing sometimes. He did not dare ask my parents for my hand. He used to pass my window whistling. I knew it was him and I wanted to go out, but my mother always asked me: “What is it? Where do you think you are going?” And I would say: “Where am I going? I am just going to see a friend, I won’t sit with you all day and night! I’ll be just half an hour, an hour tops.” Then she would let me go, but I wouldn’t go to visit my friend but him and his family, in their house, and not like young do today, they do God knows what in street and behind mulberry trees. We would sit and talk, he would kiss me. Sometimes he wanted to do nasty/was a bit pushy, but I would say: “No, when I go home I know that I am yours, but if you want to do such things I am not going to. I do not know if you

⁴⁴ “God kill her” in Romani.

⁴⁵ See the glossary at the end of the book.

are going to marry me or not. There won't be a place for me in my mother's and my father's house if I do these things with you!" And he would say: "I will take you to my house as soon as my brother comes from the army, I don't need any other woman, just you." Still, he dated other girls as well, and I knew them all. We, Gypsies, organized a show, a kind of mock wedding, in order to show some traditional customs. The late Ljuba Dimić organized all that. We even went to Čurug with that show. I was a 'mother-in-law' and my 'son' was supposed to play music; he had a tamburitza in his hands, and I had embroidery in my hands and a needle and walked around the stage. They had built a fire with some wood and corncobs and we danced around the fire. Then Ljuba said, "The bride and the groom are coming!" And I was supposed to be angry with my 'son'. "Where have you been so long?", I was shouting at him and he said, "I've been working, not playing, because they bothered me. They have some other company, and there was no place for me and they said that I did not know how to play the music they did." I had raised my hand to slap him but his 'father' tried to protect him and said, "Don't slap him, go away, next time it'll be much better." Then they went to ask for the bride's hand and ask for her dowry. They asked for food to feed their people and their children: meat, onion, peppers, carrots, and a lot of other things plus money, they would put money on the table. There is such a custom even today. And then, my husband-to-be got angry with me because I did not want to be cheeky with him when we were together, and when he asked me to go out with him I said that I could not, and he was angry again. Out of spite he would go out with another girl from our street, and I would be jealous and then we would not be on speaking terms for a week. And when he realized that there was no use in doing that he said, "Be ready, in a week you'll come to my place." I did not dare tell that to my mum because she would not let me go with him. My sister Lela was married to his older brother; Mile and Bata are brothers and Lela and I are sisters. My mother did not like that. For instance, if we were together in the same house it would be difficult for both of us: if her husband slapped her, or my husband cursed our mother, both of us would be very unhappy. That is why it is not good for two sisters to marry two brothers. After some time, my sister and her husband moved out. And when Bata told me to get ready, I put some things and tied them in a headscarf, because I had neither a suitcase, nor a bag, and also, I did not have enough time, so I just tied my dresses and shoes in a bundle and hid that bundle from my mother. It started to snow, I remember that very well; I was fifteen or sixteen at that time, and he was two years older than me. My mother had just bought me a pair of new shoes and I put those shoes on. My mother said, "Oh, Ruža, dear, why have you put those shoes on, the weather's awful, where are you going?" I said, "I am going to watch the show Ljuba Dimić and our Gypsies prepared." My father was playing music there, and my husband Bata as well. He said to me, "Go to

my place and sit there with my stepmother, and I'll say that I've got a headache and I'll come there soon. And so I went out and my mother said, "Fine, if you don't mind wearing your new shoes in such weather, I don't care, too. There'll be some nice days and you can wear them then!" And I said, "Come, mum, let me go now, I want to have them on now." And so I went to the center, and there was his stepmother waiting for me and she said, "Bata told me to take you home with me, he'll come at eleven o'clock; he is going to say that he's got a headache and he'll come home then." I went to their place with her and we lay in bed and talked till he came with his tamburitza in his hands. He said that he had told them that he was sick and that he had a headache. And we celebrated that night but not there, in their house, but in the Gipsy Lane, at his grandmother's. My parents were very angry; my father came with an axe and my mother said she would piss into their bowl – that was very offensive remark at that time. Both our families were equally poor, but my parents didn't like that I got married and went to the house which was just two or three houses from their house, but later they made up and came to a dinner, and his grandmother said, "Well, in-laws, this is the bowl you said you'd piss into. Now you're eating out of it!" My parents were not angry with her, but my father said, "We're sorry, dear friends, yet I was offended when your son had left the whole orchestra in the middle of the show. So, he wasn't ill, but he'd stolen my daughter and brought her here." I did get married in a wedding gown and I did not mind that. When he went to the army, we had to get married officially, so that I could get some welfare for the children. In other case we would not do that because Gipsies did not use to get married officially because if a woman leaves her husband she could ask for her dowry back. And also, because people used to get separated frequently, so they would have a lot of problems and fuss with getting a divorce.

At first we lived in his parent's house and then we built another house, just for ourselves. Now, he is a retired musician. We have two sons, one died, that was Vesa, and the other one is Blaža. After being married for a year, I gave birth to my first son, and in the second year came the other. We didn't want to have more children, to try to get a daughter. I say it would be better if we had a son and a daughter, but never mind that, God bless my children. Now I have just one son. I wish I had a daughter, for who will mourn after I die, or who will fetch me a glass of water if I get confined to bed, and who will look after me. I pray to God to give me an easy death, as he gave my mother. She had put two frocks on herself, she had asked for her walking stick and went to rest. Then she yawned and fell asleep forever. I wish God gave me such death, so that I wouldn't bother either my son or my grandchildren.

Have you ever had a job?

– No, I have not. I was a housewife. I cooked and ironed; I coped with the

children, and washed them. I liked everything clean and tidy, and I liked doing the housework, ironing my husband's shirts and polishing his shoes, helping him to get ready for his work. When he left for work I would tidy up. My job was to bring up the children. As they were growing up they were not spoilt and never asked for things we were not able to buy. That never happened. We were happy to have enough money for food, because in these days life was very difficult and miserable. Even when my son noticed that someone had a nice coat or suit, and wished to have the same, he knew he couldn't have it, we couldn't afford it. My husband's salary was not sufficient and I couldn't work because I had two children, and my husband's grandmother was like a mother-in-law to me. She was a very difficult woman to live with. I thought my children not to steal, or fight. They grew up without having a fight with anyone, because I was telling them every day not to do that. "Go out and play, I don't want you to fight with other children, because if you hit someone, he will hit you back, and then his parents will come and there will be a lot of trouble", I said. That was how we taught our children. I used to smack them and cry afterwards because I was sorry. But I had to smack them, for you have to do that, only you have to be careful where do you hit them: you should never slap them because you might shake the whole head, and never hit the hands because you can hurt some nerves and the child might be shocked and get fever for fear. That's what old people taught us. You should smack your children only on the bottom.

When your sons were old enough, did you let them bring girls in the house?

– I did not let them do that, but they were also not keen on doing that. Whatever they were doing, they did it in the center, or anywhere else, no one asked me anything, and I did not know anything. Whatever they did, they came home afterwards and went to bed to sleep. And now, my grandson brings two girls home; there is no shame or respect, as it used to be! People then knew what could be done and what was not the right thing to be done. Today you don't know who is older and who is younger, there are so many nasty things going on, everybody is loose and cheeky, no one is afraid of anyone, when women are so loose how can men not be too. Male child should have an upper hand over female child, so when a brother tells his sister to shut up, she must shut up. Now, the sister jumps down her brother's throat. This is not nice. My children were no drunkards, and they didn't come home drunk early in the morning. They went to school and finished primary school. They did not continue their education or become handymen, because they wanted to become musicians. Both their grandfathers were musicians, and so was their uncle, and they wanted the same. Blaža's son is not a musician, and we will see what he will become.

When did your sons get married?

– They were young when they got married. They were sixteen or seventeen. It is better when they get married young because if they are older they might quickly get tired of each other. And when they are young they fall in love with each other and then neither he nor she will look for another partner. It is better like that, I love you and you love me forever. If she is fine and honest, and if she knows how to treat him well and make him comfortable, he won't get fed up with her very soon, and he will not look for another woman. Yet if she greets him with curses as soon as he gets home, or if she throws something at him, well, in that case he will beat her, and she will scream, and that's not a good life. For if you are a woman, be a woman, and if he is a man, he should be a man. Woman's duty is to wait for her husband to get home, to take care of him and the children, to wash, to dress and to tidy up. The household rests upon a woman, and man should provide things, bring them home, and chop wood, if he wants he may help his wife in the kitchen. When my husband was young, he did not want to help me with anything, he was ashamed to go to the market. He used to say, "What? Go to the market so that everyone can see me helping you?" We had a small child then and I would say, "So what if they see you?" It was very difficult for him to get rid of that notion, but in the end he started going to the market and buy what I needed and by the time he got back, I would do all the housework, cook lunch and tidy up. And when I had to go shopping no one did the housework, so it was better that he went, and I stayed at home and managed everything else. We got on well until other women started to poke their noses into our house. Then we were arguing a lot. Then he would go with this or that woman and that was no life, no. Some shameless women, tramps, who don't have their marriage, so they intrude into other people's marriages, and that is not nice. I always told my sons not to beat their wives, but to help them, and I told my son, Vesa, "Vesa, dear, don't beat your Goga, she is as good as gold. She earns for a living by whitewashing houses, she comes home very tired and she needs to eat something, to wash herself, and to lie down and have some rest. So don't mistreat her. And he would say, "Mum, I won't mistreat her, as long as she is nice with me I'll be nice with her but when she is cheeky then it's best for me to leave the house so that I wouldn't have to lay my eyes on her." Then, when she came to visit me, I would say, "Please, Goga, do not do this or that." And she would say, "He is nervous and I do not like it when he is drinking!" Well, alright, but that shouldn't count because he had a traffic accident and his leg was broken. He had had a metal rod in his leg for a year or two. And when he had that bar taken out of his leg he started drinking. It had hurt him a lot, but he did not want to complain. We would come and ask him, "Vesa, son, does it hurt you a lot? And he would say, "No, it's not that bad! But it was very bad, only he suffered and kept quiet. Then he turned to alcohol and then his liver got sick. Now it's been four years since he died. He has two

daughters: Ruža and Sofija. Ruža is married and she lives in Šangaj and has two children. God bless her. The other one, Sofija lives here; she is also married and has two children. The other son of mine has two daughters and a son.

How did your son's wedding look like?

– I asked for Goga's hand. She is also from here, from Žabalj. I told my son, "Dear, do you want to get married?" We had noticed that he had several girlfriends, and he was dating Goga as well. We wanted to propose marriage to Bojana, but he said he did not want to marry her because we were some distant relatives. I said, "What kind of relatives are we?" He said, "I don't know, that's what I heard." Later I heard that we really were blood relatives, in fact my mother and her grandmother were relatives. He said that he loved Goga and that he did not want any other girl. Then my old man and I went to visit her parents and we talked about everything just like you and me now. I said, "Good afternoon. Her father said, "Good afternoon to you too. I said, "May this what we are going to ask you bring you good fortune. We would like you to become our in-laws, we saw that our children love each other, and they are dating, we wanted to tell you this so that you would know. We could tell her that she should elope but that's not a nice thing to do, because we want our son to get married, we want to prepare a proper wedding for our son." Her father asked me then, "Do you know that we are related?" I said, "You know what, the oldest should take the sin on his soul." He looked at me and laughed, then he said, "Well, who is going to take that sin, you are not that old, I'm older so that means that I should have the sin on my soul." I said, "It is going to be your sin if you separate two young people who love each other, let them get married, well that's what a sin would be, and if you decide differently may God give you good health and may luck follow you wherever you go." He said, "Well, I don't know, if my Goga wants to get married!" We called Goga and her father told her, "My dear, they came to ask you whether you want to get married." She lowered her head, she was embarrassed and she said, "Dad, please leave me alone now and I will tell you some other time." Her father replied, "Don't do it some other time, if you are embarrassed and won't say anything in front of them, tell it to your mother and sister." So she went out and told her mother that she accepted. Then, we came on Sunday again to seal the engagement. We came with our next-of-kin and her people asked for three pigs, and some money, I am not sure now how much, a wedding gown, a veil, and a wreath. I said, "We would take care of that. We don't want to take her just like that, we want to be proud of her and you." She had stayed at home with her family for a month. Vesa and Goga were going out during that month, they were together all the time, they were kissing in the street, and they went to bed together even before they got married. During that time, I visited her occasionally and I would ask, "Goga,

my dear, how are, what have you been doing?" When that month passed we got ready and went to her house to bring her home. Yet, when we got there, I saw her lying in bed. I asked her, "Goga, my dear, what's wrong?" She said, "I don't know, I am so ill, all I do is throw up!" I said, "Well, how can that be, just a month ago we came to ask for your hand and you were well, what can it be now when you are sick and you are throwing up?" Then I went to the doctor's with her, and we found out that she was pregnant. My son and I knew it was his baby, yet he was afraid that we would drive her out, so they had slept at my sister Sofija's. The second day the 'pogachars'⁴⁶ came to see whether she was welcome in our house or not. If she was spoilt, she might go back home, why should all those 'pogachars' fuss about anything. They got married in the church and at the registry office. When they returned home after the wedding, I gave her a golden ring and a necklace, I threw some wheat on her and I handed her a little boy to hold, still, my granddaughter Sofija was already in her stomach. It turned out that what people say that a bridesmaid will give birth to sons if she holds a boy in her hands is not true because she gave birth to two daughters. You throw wheat on her so that the following year would be fruitful and she as well. Then we gave them some bread and salt to eat from each other's knee, and they should say, "We cannot live without bread and salt, and without each other as well, for you cannot eat bread, or any other kind of food without salt." Some people put sugar in 'pogacha'⁴⁷ so that they should be sweet to each other. We gave each of them a spoonful of sugar. You gave them bread and salt so that they cannot be separated, and sugar to make them sweet towards each other. In the morning, after the couple had slept together, the linen on which they had slept was shown and burnt in the fire that is lit. Some feather is thrown around and that is called 'peryanica'⁴⁸. The family and the guests dance around that fire and cover themselves with soot. Then the bride takes a basin with some water, and a towel to help the guests wash themselves and they pay her for that. Fire is lit so that people can dance around it, and feather is thrown to make everything in their lives as light as a feather.

After the wedding we didn't lend her wedding gown to anyone, it had been there, in the wardrobe for many years. When we bought that house they moved in it, and she took the gown and the veil with her. I do not know whether she gave the gown to anyone, but it is believed that it is not good to lend your wedding gown to anyone, because you may 'lend' your happiness and good luck. It is much better to burn it since you can never be sure who may have evil thoughts, or know who can use it to cast a spell on you. It should be strictly

46 See the glossary at the end of the book.

47 See the glossary at the end of the book.

48 The term comes from the Serbian word "perje" pronounced as perye which means feathers.

observed that no one pulls the bride's hand while she is taken out of the church, because that means that person is pulling her away from the family she married into. Thus, some people who are close to the bride, or the groom should stand at both her sides to prevent something like this to happen. When she gets out of church, the bride should throw her bouquet over her head somewhere behind her back. The one who catches the bouquet will be the next one to get married. And as she was leaving her house and as she was entering our house, we were throwing wheat on her, so that she should be fertile. When the 'pogachars' come to the groom's house, they can bring some furniture, or a rug, or a lamp, and a 'pogacha', which should be big and prepared with nuts, raisins, honey, and sugar. Then the bride and the groom should hold the 'pogacha', standing one across the other, and try to break it in two pieces. The one who gets a bigger piece will dominate in their marriage. When my son Vesa and Goga were doing this, Vesa got hold of a bigger piece because she did not look at the 'pogacha', but absent-mindedly gazed at something else and after he got hold of pogacha he immediately broke it. After that her parents came to dinner. It is a custom to bring a new dress, or a new shirt to your child's in-laws house, and tie it on the host, or hostess, but that depends on their financial status. That is done in return and only once, when you come to their house for the first time after the wedding. After the wedding, whenever we celebrate our patron saint's day, we invite them to our celebration, and they do the same. My daughter-in-law was young when she got married, but she knew how to cook, wash and iron. If she did not know from the beginning where some things were kept, she asked us. After that, she watched how I did some things, and she did all that the same way. We have always got on well, and we have never argued, as mothers and daughters-in-law often do. To be honest, we had once an argument, but it was caused by other people. Namely, I did not like her to put on other women's clothes. If you have your own garments, wear them; do not put on yourself other people's sweat. And she used to do that, and that was why we had an argument. My son has left us, but whenever Goga and I meet, we hug each other and cry.

Did you look after your grandchildren?

– Yes, all of my grandchildren were born here. When my son Vesa was in the army, my daughter-in-law was here with Sofija. She was small, and when he got back from the army, we bought him a house. Sofija was a toddler then. Then Ruža was born, and whenever they needed something, we were there to help. I looked after them and sang them songs that I would make up at the spur of the moment. I would sing, "A little bunny hopped towards his mummy, he went to school, he was no fool, if he got an A, his mummy let him play." The children liked that, remembered the songs, and asked me to sing them again. My parents had never told me stories and fairy tales, now people do this. People used

to be very ignorant and backward. Nowadays, people like to be dressed nice, to enjoy eating, to get out, to have friends, and to date. But also now women want men to pay for everything when they go out. There's nothing for free and before you weren't supposed to that.

Did you and your husband build this house?

– We had a little house and we sold it, and then we started building this one. There was an old house on this site, but we knocked it down. My son and my old man got credit, which was possible then, now it is not. There are some more things that should be finished in the house, the dinning room, for example. My husband is a musician and he himself was giving money for his pension, while he was working. And now, he is retired, and he cannot get credit. If he plays music, he can earn some money. If he does not, he will not earn anything. He does not have a monthly salary, so that we can count on it. We used to live better when Tito was the President. We could sleep in the street, or with the door wide open. And now, you dare not sleep in your own house, you have to be locked, because you do not know who might get into your house, or who hates you. People could travel then, and now you think you might get killed. You have to be careful what you say, because you do not know who might use it against you.

Do you remember the time when people's crop was taken?⁴⁹

– I heard about that, but I do not know if that is true. I heard from an elderly woman who used to come here. She was from Bosnia. She told me that some people on horses surrounded her and then they got in carrying guns. They pointed a gun at her and asked for wheat. She dared not say no, but showed them her supplies. Her children were small, they did not have enough food, and those people took all the wheat. They even took her cow, so she had no milk for her children, and took all the pigs from the pigsty. They said, "The army has to eat as well, because soldiers protect people, and you can manage somehow." After that, they put her on a horse, so that she could show them rich people's houses in the village. She started to cry, and her children started to scream, and a commander who came by heard the noise and asked them, "Where are you taking that woman." They said, "She is coming with us to show us what else we can gather because the army is hungry." He ordered them to let her go. If that

⁴⁹ After the World War II economic situation in Yugoslavia was so grave that people in towns did not have enough food. The government passed a law which stipulated that each village household had to give certain amount of wheat, corn and also certain number of live stock. Villagers resented this law especially because local authorities made these amounts much higher than they objectively should have been. Those who were not able to give what was their due were first maltreated so that they would relent and if they still did not hand over enough wheat, they were taken to prison. Some people who had money bought wheat and livestock from their neighbors so that they could give their share.

woman lied to me, then I am also lying to you. I have not seen that myself.

Do you remember that our country had some disagreement with Russia?

– I was nine or ten then. I went to visit at my aunt in Turija, when the Russians came into our village. They attacked our women, and they did not care whether they were young or old. There were a lot of the Russians in the center and in the cinema. They were roaming the streets, opening every door– they raped any woman they saw. I was at my aunt's, when my uncle came there, now he is dead, late Mija. I was crying and I wanted to go home, because I missed my family, but he told his sister's husband, he was ashamed to tell me, he said, "Tell her not to cry and ask to be taken home because a lot of awful things are going on there, little children, ten or eleven years old are raped. Even if they see a little child asleep they pick her up to see her age. And he told me, "Don't cry, uncle Mija will come and take you with him some other time, now the Russians are here." One day, my father was walking down the street when he saw his mother being taken away by the Russians. He approached them and told them, "Bacuska, where are you taking my mamushka?"⁵⁰ And that Russian said, "We are taking your mamushka so that she can find us girls." My father said "She is too old to be able to do that." "In that case", the Russian said, "you'll come with us." And where could he go when he knew that there were at least two or three girls in every house. They went then in another street, when Mila saw them and asked my father what they wanted. And my father said, "Go away, you silly woman, they are looking for girls." And she said, "Well, they don't have to look for other girls, I'm here!" she was not married and she told them to go into her house. When our neighbors from the Gipsy Lane saw what the Russians were doing, they found two elderly men and a woman to make a lot of noise in the yard by hitting a metal trough with rods and rolling pins. When they heard that, they started to run away. The second evening they came and asked my father if he had a girl for them. And he had hid only Lela, because Sofija was too small, and I had been in Turija. He had also hid my mother and our neighbors Anča and Anda, late Pera's wife. He had put a big trough in the barn and hid them under that trough. When they came, they saw that the barn was locked. The women who hid there had taken the ladders up. They asked, "How come you don't have women?" My father said "Well, I don't." The Russians said, "Where is your wife?" My father replied, "She died and my girls got married and left." They asked, "Who is cooking for you?" My father said he was cooking by himself. And so, they went to Bandra, Miloš's mother. She was lying in bed covered with a large duvet. Under the duvet, there were her three grown-up daughters, Tojka, who is now living in Zrenjanin, Dana and Ruža. She pretended that she

⁵⁰ "Mamushka" is term of endearment for mother in Russian.

was ill, and if anyone came in, she coughed a lot. The Russians were afraid of a serious lung disease, and when they heard her coughing, they ran away shouting, "She's ill, she's ill!" They went later to Šundra, Mara's mother. Her father was Jojko. Pilko was also there. They asked him who that was. And he said that that was his mother. And they said, "Now you'll see how we will fuck your mamushka." He cried and begged, but they had just sent him out and did whatever they wanted. I remember that in the beginning we invited them to dinner, they were not that cruel and merciless in the beginning, but they started looking for girls few days later. They asked if anyone who had two or three spare rooms could put them up, because the whole army was there. The streets were crowded with tanks and lorries. We had three of them in our house, and I remember very well how my mother made potato pies with sausages. They sat at the table and waited for us to start eating first. They thought that we wanted to poison them so they pointed at us to start eating first. The next day, when they heard a siren they went to the center to a gathering. On the second and third day, they raped us.

Do you believe in God?

– I do, but it has been a long time since I was in church, because I do not have enough time. When I cook, or do the housework, I say, "Dear God, please forgive me!" Sometimes I fast, but very often I forget to fast before Easter. My memory is bad now, and when I cook I try the food I am preparing because I forget that I am fasting at the moment, and then again I pray to God to forgive me. Sometimes I want to wash my laundry and I put it in the washing machine, and when I remember that it is a religious holiday or Sunday, I turn it off.

Why do people celebrate Christmas?

– Well, Jesus Christ was born on that day. Christmas lasts for three days. The first day is Badindan⁵¹, then comes Christmas day, and the third day is Stevandán⁵². On the third day you sweep the straw from your floor. On Badindan we prepare lean food, we usually fry fish, prepare eggplant soup and noodles with poppy seed, noodles have to be made without eggs. All that is eaten in the evening for dinner, and after that children go to church to see how Badnjak⁵³ is burnt in the churchyard. I usually do not go because I have a lot to do in the house. We had always hurried to take the straw in the house earlier, because both my sons and my old man are musicians, and they went to play in the evening. At six o'clock the host takes the straw in and says, "Christ is born!" And I greet him and say, "That's the truth, Christ is born. God bless you and give you good health and happiness and may our and everybody else's children be

51 See the glossary at the end of the book.

52 See the glossary at the end of the book.

53 See the glossary at the end of the book.

healthy.” Then he spreads the straw all over the house, in all the rooms, he also puts some under the table and under the tablecloth. Then after we had dinner he puts walnuts in every corner of the room and divides them into pieces and says, “This is for God our Lord, this is for Jesus Christ and this is for Christmas.” He also gives us some and says, “Here you are, my sons!” And he shares all out, and gives them according to the seniority and says “You can crack the nuts and eat them this evening, but do not do that tomorrow because your teeth will hurt you.” We light a candle and the votive candle for dinner, and either my son or my grandsons reads the Lord’s Prayer. Then the young go around village as *korindjashes*.⁵⁴ I also used to do that when I was younger. They go from house to house in the neighborhood and sing, “My name’s little Jaša, I come from a farm, I mean you no harm, my mother sent me here, what will you give me? If it’s a cake, I’ll wait, if it’s a stick, I’ll escape.” If the host tells you to wait, he brings you a little basket full of cakes, walnuts, bacon and sausages, and when we later get home; we have a lot of things to share out. Now, I’m old and I do not do that. I stay at home and during the night prepare everything for tomorrow’s lunch. I cook soup, roast turkey and sauce. A male turkey must be roasted, because he represents the host. We put female turkey into soup. That night I prepare stuffed cabbage and we make *kolach*⁵⁵ and *chesnitza*.⁵⁶ Turkey’s head and legs should not be cut off because of our old man so that he would have a long and healthy life. I stuff the turkey with bread and diced apples, and also some prunes. Then I sew it up and cut the legs just a bit at the ankles, so that it can get into the oven. Legs should not be cut off completely because turkey represents the host. I used to stretch the layers of pastry for *chesnitza*, now I buy ready-made filo pastry; it is much easier. So, I grease the baking tray with some fat and place the first layer of pastry. Then I spread some raisins, sugar, and honey over that first layer, and cover all this with the second layer. Then I put some walnuts, and raisins and so on, till I have only a couple of layers left. Then I put a coin in the middle, and I must not put any mark that would help me get the piece with the coin in. That is not nice, and I never did that. You put a coin in *chesnitza* so that your whole family and whole house can be happy, and always full. This is how I make *kolach*. I break two eggs, add some milk, sugar, lemon and then I pour flour in and knead the dough. When the dough is ready I divide it in three heaps. After they rest for a while I spread each one and make three rolls. These rolls I weave into a plait and then I spread some egg yolk on it. I put *kolach* into a deep saucepan and press some walnuts on the top of it on four sides in the shape of cross. In the middle, I put a rose that I make from a very thin layer of pastry. I roll out some pastry, I cut it into stripes, and

54 See the glossary at the end of the book.

55 See the glossary at the end of the book.

56 See the glossary at the end of the book.

then I roll everything up and form a rose. When kolach is half done, I spread a beaten egg over it.

What should the head of the family do on the first day of Christmas?

– He goes to church and lights a candle, he prays to God for our health, and lights candles for the dead. My lunch must be ready by noon, then we burn incense and say the Lord's Prayer and then we eat. On the first day we do not go anywhere, we do not leave our Christmas. On the second day we visit the parents of our daughters-in-law. On a plate I put a piece of chesnitza, a piece of roast turkey, a piece of kolach and a handful of walnuts and apples, if we have some, and we take all this to them. If we visit our godfather, I make another special kolach, and we also take a piece of roast turkey, a piece of cake and a piece of chesnitza. You always take just one piece of everything so that we have enough for everyone. Of course, they give us all this as well. I have never given those pieces we got to someone else; I am always taking to others my roast turkey and everything else. When we break chesnitza, the children and I stand by the table, facing each other, and everyone tries to get hold of a bigger piece to see whether he will get the coin. When chesnitza is broken, you cannot see where the coin is, then I cut it into nice pieces with a knife and I set every piece aside for someone. The first one is for the Lord, the second for Jesus Christ, the third for Christmas, and then one for the house, for my old man, for me, my sons and grandchildren. Chesnitza is eaten on the first day after lunch, and the roast turkey on the second. On the first day I prepare some other meat for that day. If we ate the turkey on the first day, we would try to predict the future. We put some coins and a walnut in his beak; we put some money on chesnitza as well, so that our house should be full of happiness and money. These days you should not give any money out of the house. At the baker's we either pay in advance, or after Christmas. Whenever I paid for anything on the first day of Christmas, we had bad times. I always buy something new for Christmas. It can be a dish, a pot, or a pan, some glasses, or coffee cups. That means you will have something new throughout the whole year and you will have enough money. Then, the one who finds the coin in chesnitza gives it to me and we put that coin together with the rest of our money. But before that, I put that coin on kolach till Christmas is over. Then I go to the market with that money and buy ducklings or young turkeys, because when they are bought with that money, they will grow quickly and be fine and healthy.

What do you do on the third day of Christmas?

– On the third day of Christmas I sweep up everything. While my family is still sleeping, I get up at four or five o'clock in the morning and tidy up everything. I am always sweeping with an old broom, and then I buy a new one to have it till the next Christmas. You should not throw away the old broom,

because you will have headache and your eyes will hurt you. You can stick it somewhere in the backyard. The straw is put somewhere in the garden where no one will walk over it, and I put the straw from the table under a hen that lies. I put the head of the turkey behind the icon of archangel Michael. It leans a bit, so I can put it there. It lies there for a year till the next Christmas. The bones of the turkey are never given to the dogs, because people say that the members of the family will fight like cats and dogs. After Christmas, you also keep turkey's head, legs, and the coin from chesnitza.

Why do you celebrate Easter?

– Jesus was crucified and he rose from the dead on the third day. Easter is celebrated for three days, on Good Friday, Easter Saturday, and Sunday. On Good Friday you fast and dye eggs. On that day, I cook eggplant soup, or fish chowder, I fry fish on oil and make cookies, but I never try them while I am making them. I do not eat fat food on that day because I did it once, and I was very sick, so I have decided not to do that ever again. On Good Friday I go to church because you do not do anything on that day, people make popcorns and sit in the street and talk. The next day I cook lunch: I make stuffed cabbage, soup and meat. You burn incense in your house before you start to eat lunch and say the Lord's Prayer. This year, my granddaughter Jasna said it, because I have forgotten. In the evening of Good Friday the Easter bunny leaves eggs for children and of course, that Easter bunny is me. In the evening I open the window and they ask me, "Why did you leave the window open?" I say, "Well, leave it children, Easter bunny will come and bring you eggs." Then they ask me, "Mum, when will Easter bunny come?" And I reply, "It will come while you are sleeping." And I used to take Easter eggs and put two by Blaža's and two by Vesa's bedside. I also put some chocolate, candies, and toys and I spread clover in the hall. As soon as children get up they would run to the hall to see what is there and they are so happy they shout with joy. Then they say, "It's good that the window was open!" This year I left presents for my granddaughters, although they are grown up. They are married, but they still love this. My mother was leaving presents for me, I learnt that from her, and I taught my children and grandchildren the same. And that is how this custom will continue.

Who is your patron saint?

– I celebrate archangel Michael. It is celebrated in winter. He has scales in his hand because he is weighing human's soul. That was my father-in-law's patron saint and my husband inherited it. At my father's we celebrated Đurdevdan.⁵⁷ You inherit your patron saint. Because if I am celebrating Đurdevdan, same as you are, then how can you leave your patron saint's celebration and come to

⁵⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

mine or how can I come to your celebration? As it is I invite you on my patron saint's day and you invite me on yours. The day before Archangel Michael's⁵⁸ day we buy suckling pigs and we prepare them for roasting, we take them to the baker's to be roasted. I dress the poultry, make koljivo⁵⁹, I make kolach and buy some wine. We have always called our priest to come to bless our home and he comes after the service. First the priest tries kolach and koljivo and then everyone else takes some. Then we pray and cross ourselves. Then we ask the priest to stay for lunch but he says that he has to go to visit other people as well and we stay in our home and celebrate with our guests.

What do you do when someone dies?

– First of all, they wash him. If he is a man, men wash him, and if she is a woman, women wash her. He is washed to be clean when he gets to the other world, not dirty. And his sins should be washed off with him. That water is thrown on some clear spot, where children will not walk, or under the roof. He can be dressed in an old suit, but it is better if it is a new one because he deserves that. He will not need clothes anymore. When my son died, we dressed him into a new suit, and we put another new suit in the coffin with him. You also put a toothbrush, a towel, some clothes, a bar of soap, a shirt, pajamas, and so on. I do not believe that he will go on living in the other world, because when someone dies he does not exist anymore. I can cry and sob at his grave, but he is gone. You also put some money at his side so that he can pay for his grave, and so that he is not thrown out. Whoever comes to see him puts some money and sends regards, candies or money, to his beloved ones who died, they say, "Say hello to my son or my sister!" People say that when he is taken to the graveyard, the dead wait at the gate to see their living. When a dead man smiles that means that he is looking forward to meeting someone he loved, and that person is waiting for him. When people go to the funeral, someone from his family should stay home. It is not good to leave the house without people in it, because the spirit remains in the house, and it can turn into a vampire, and come during the night and scare the children. Then you will hear door open, but you cannot see anyone. Yet, if someone stays and guards the house for six weeks, there is no reason for fear. Three women should stay at home; there should always be an odd number of them. They cook beef soup with rice for *daca*⁶⁰, and while he is still at home, in the casket, only lean food is prepared. Then you eat some lean *pogacha*, made without eggs and yeast, and you should sit facing his feet. You do that because he is leaving his home and he should not be hungry on his way to the other world. Otherwise, he might say, "They could

58 See the glossary at the end of the book.

59 See the glossary at the end of the book.

60 See the glossary at the end of the book.

hardly wait to say goodbye to me and to see me leave my home, so they have not given me anything to eat." When they bury him, they first put him in the grave and then everyone takes some earth between three fingers and throws it in the hole, so that the soil falling over him wouldn't be heavy to him. When he had to die, death should be made at least a bit easier to him. Some people throw money, but his next-of-kin should not do that. I have thrown some soil on my son Vesa, because I did not know that and then he came to me in my dreams and asked me, "Mum, why did you throw earth on me, it is so heavy for me, I just can't bear it." When someone's teardrop falls on a dead person lying in the coffin, he won't come to you in your dreams. And my son Vesa came to my dream and he told me this, "Mum, I'm all wet, don't cry any more, I'm drowning in your tears." After the funeral, people wash hands in a basin that is put in the graveyard. Everyone does that to keep bad things away. Since he had to die, let him bring all that with him. There is also lean pogacha and everyone takes a piece and eats it. It is also good to have a little glass of brandy. Some people put a burnt piece of coal in the brandy to keep fear away. When we came home after the funeral, we washed our hands again and dried them with a towel. Then we sat at the table to eat for his soul. We put his plate with some food from *daca* on the shelf, and a glass of water. When we got up in the morning, there was some water missing in the glass, and the food seemed to be touched, as if a pigeon had pecked it. Some people wanted to stay in the house so that the children would not be scared because his soul was in the house for six months, it was under the eaves and whenever we got in or out of the house a quiver ran down our spine. We were not afraid it was just like some kind of wind. Then we knew that he was there, only he wouldn't show himself up. He did not ever scare anyone; we could go outside even at midnight. I remember, when my father-in-law died I dared not come in. I saw him walking around the house and I was petrified, my heart would explode and that lasted for six weeks. Then I went to the graveyard and told him, "Dad, please don't scare me anymore, because I'm really afraid!" When someone dies you put a candle in his hands so that he is not in the dark and so that other dead people wouldn't throw him out but accept him and so that all of them can be together. If they do not accept him, he would come into our dreams, and we would be very upset. The day after the funeral we visit his grave and bring some food and drink. We leave all this there, and later the gravedigger comes and takes this food and drink. He can use it, and our deceased is covered with earth and *alleluia*, he is no more. Some brandy is poured over the grave and then we drink either brandy or juice and we light a candle. The priest comes to say the prayer and incense the grave. We bring *pogacha* which we break, standing facing the feet of the deceased. Then we share it between us, but some should be left for him as well. After the funeral, we do same thing after a week, six weeks, half a year, and a year. Yet, you always have

to do that a few days before the exact date, so that no one else dies.

What has had the greatest influence on your life?

– Nothing has influenced my life. My sisters were there with me, then all my relatives and my children. My son Vesa had an accident, and he had the bar in his leg. After some time, it was taken out of his leg, but he turned to drinking, because it had hurt him a lot, and he did not want to say that. That is why we did not finish our house. In fact, we did not feel like doing that, because whenever we had some money, we gave it to him because he had to go see the doctor and pay for some tests.

What were the happiest moments in your life?

– When my children were healthy and happy, and when I gave birth to my first child, my son. And I was happy when he got married, and when I got a grandson. Everything was great before he died.

Which was the worst moment in your life?

– Now, the worst thing that happened to me is the loss of my son. It has been four years now since he left us.

Did you have any problems in your marriage?

– Oh, so many times. Now he is older and he doesn't go to work. But when he was younger, well, you know what musicians are like. There were often some singers who were dancing around him and they would fall in love with each other, and that made my life hell. I had two children and all sorts of things happened. Well, I got over everything although I wanted to leave him, still, it was a shameful thing to do. He told me, "Don't be crazy, she's rude and a drunk!" but I went to the bar and I saw what was going on. She was not just trying to spite me, but other women as well. He told me that she was not going to work there anymore, and that he would find another singer, and that's how it was. I pretended that I was going to return to my mother, but how could I break her heart. They would accept me and protect me, and they would love me and hate him. Yet, there was no use to tell them what was going on because one day we would maybe get over it, but they would still be angry with him.

With whom do you live in your house?

– With my son Blaža. He is divorced and has three children. There are also my old man and my granddaughter, her husband and my great-granddaughter. We live from my husband's pension. We used to live much better off music. Gipsy women carried heavy bags from the market. Everything that was good and nice we could afford, and now we do not have enough to pay for bread, electricity and water. And if you do not pay your bills, you'll have to pay the interest rates as well. I am sorry because they disgrace our Yugoslavia. They gave

some help to pensioners. In the package, there was less than half a kilo of salt, and half of a candle. What a shame! I am an illiterate woman, but I was very offended by half a liter of oil, one kilo of sugar, a quarter of kilo of salt and a candle. That is awful! Refugees receive more than pensioners. They get enough to sell. Yet I wish no one had a life they had and survive what they did. They are in a worse position because they had to leave their homes. Their life is more difficult because they always have their houses in front of their eyes, it's a hard life for a mother who lost her son or whose children are orphans or cripples. My Boža doesn't receive salary every month because he is playing but if some drunkard comes along he will toss a few coins. My son – in – law fixes refrigerators, he hitchhikes to Novi Sad and that's how he also comes back to Žabalj. We have our garden but everything is dry because of draught, I didn't sow in time because I didn't have any money to buy the seed. I have one pregnant sow and four pigs.

What did you want to achieve when you were a girl?

– I wanted to have my own house, and dear God gave me one. I did not want to have a daughter, because I am a woman and I know how I suffered. I have got over many things and I have experienced many good but many bad things as well. I used to think that men are in a better position because they can handle everything, and women cannot because men can use force and beat someone up. And a woman has to be silent, even if her husband comes home drunk, she cannot shout at him because he might hit her. I was brought up in that fashion, and I am still like that. Yet if I had done things he had done, where would I have been now! Who knows where I would be, and my children would be motherless in that case. That is why I kept silent and suffered and our children have both their parents around, and he gave up everything in the end. And that is it. We have our house and our children.

Have you taught your daughters-in-law to tolerate everything?

– I told my daughter-in-law as soon as she came into our house, "Don't be angry, don't be rude and don't argue. You know what you have to do, and I know what I have to do. I'll help you as much as I can." It was customary here for a young bride to wash her father- and mother-in-law's feet, and she did that several times. But I did not let her do that anymore. I had washed my father-in-law's feet for a month and then he told me "Don't do that anymore, I'll do it." I was not embarrassed to wash his feet because I washed my father's feet as well. I think that everyone should wash his own feet, because everyone who has hands and eyes is capable of doing that. Well, if someone cannot bend, or is used to that, then you should do that. But if someone is healthy and just wants to spite someone's child, that's not good.

Would you change anything in your life, or do something that you were not able to do when you were young?

– I wish I was young, around thirty, and I wish I could go out and have fun, to go and come back whenever it pleases me. I joined that club for women pensioners, we had an outing to Nadalj, and we were in a restaurant there. My husband is not jealous. He let me go there because he realized that I work in the house like a slave. We visited also a monastery on Fruška Gora, in Vrdnik. We gather in that club, we have good time and we travel together.

What kind of advice would you give to your granddaughters and other women?

– I would tell them not to get married before they are forty, because marriage is an obligation, and you are tied to your husband and your children. And when you have children, you have to suffer and tolerate many things because of them and you have no pleasure of your own. You are always silent, and you suffer till you get old, and then there is not much you can do. And a female child should always go to school, so that she has her own job when she gets married, and so that she can earn her own money and not wait for her husband to give her some. Moreover, it is easier to live when you have two salaries.

Nada, 65 years old (1935)

Tell me something about your childhood.

– My mother is from Serbia, from the village Draginje. I am her only child. My mother was married twice: once to my father, but they divorced. She gave birth to me in my grandparents' house, because they had separated before she gave birth to me at her parents'. I do not know why they divorced.

I do not know exactly when she remarried, but my stepfather brought me up. He was from Titel and he died. He lived in Draginje for a year, then we moved here to Mošorin and stayed there. My mother suffered a lot, she had to work in the field, she worked hard so that she could raise me. My stepfather searched for work from one house to another, he coated the walls of houses with mud, he worked hard and toiled in order to bring me up, may he rest in peace (she cries). I loved him as if he were my own father, he brought up my children and grandchildren too, and he gathered everyone around him. Mom and he lived together for some twelve or thirteen years.

I didn't go to school. At that time there were no schools in Serbia, children were taught privately in homes, but those places were far away, so I didn't go. That's why I am illiterate.

Did you have any toys when you were little?

– No, I did not, I didn't even know what a doll was. As soon as I got a little bit bigger, I had to go and search for work, I suffered a lot, I had to work in the field, I had to work in order to earn money for food.

Did your mother tell you any fairytales before you went to bed?

– She never told me any fairytales, just kept repeating the same thing, even when I got married, "Oh, what a misery, oh what a misery!" That's the whole truth. I asked her, "Mother, tell me what is it, this misery?" She replied, "You'll see, my child, when the roof of your house topples over you, then you will see what it is!" At that time, back in fifty-four there was famine. Duško was born then, my son, and my stepfather left us then and married some other woman.

Did you go out when you were young?

– I went to an inn with my mom – to Julka's. Music was playing, so we would sit for a little bit, sometimes I would go to cinema. I was twenty when I married Aca from Žabalj. He lived in Mošorin and he minded pigs when we met. We lived together at my place. We didn't have a wedding party and we didn't even stay together for long because his sister Jela was always picking a fight. She was married to my cousin and I was married to hers. Back at that time they were selling picture frames in the village. I married him because he

was poor, just like I was. I stayed pregnant and was carrying Duško, but my sister-in-law always had a bone to pick, so she managed to separate us. I gave birth to my son at my mother's. My husband got drafted, we never lived together again. He came to see his child once or twice, but never after that.

What was your life like with that child of yours?

– My mother went to work in the field ... people reaped wheat then, not like now, it was reaped with a scythe. My mother would make bundles, she would place a rope in front of her and then put handfuls of wheat on it until she made a bundle and then tie it with the rope while my stepfather was reaping, they went to the field in the evening while it wasn't hot. In the morning wheat was reaped until around nine, ten o'clock, then people would come home when it became hot, then they returned to the field at about four o'clock in the afternoon. When my mother and my stepfather got separated, she went to the fields to glean after the reapers. Our life was very hard then. My Duško was born and my mother would take a sack, and glean in the field. In the evening she would thresh the ears, winnow the grain when the wind blew, then she would put the grain into a sack and carried it on her back to Djurdjevo to mill it. She was struggling and suffering a lot. (she cries). I helped mum as much as I could, I went working as a day laborer, I worked wherever I could.

Then I got married for the second time. I met my second husband in Krčedin. We lived together for a month or two, then I left him because when he returned from the army, he got into a fight with a policeman, he took off the policeman's belt and his cap and put it on his head. When my mother heard about it, she told me to come back home. After that I married my old man. His father was from Mošorin, he was married before, but had no children from that marriage. When he came home on leave from the army, he got married, but when he returned to the army, his wife went back to her previous husband. When he returned from the army, I was living in Mošorin and married him. We did not get married in church, just in a registry office. People married like that for ages. I had three children with him: Jovica, Jovanka and Marica.

All of them went to school and finished it. My son became a priest, my daughter Marica got a degree to work in textile industry and she started working right away, Jovanka got married to a waiter after the elementary school. My son Duško from the first marriage finished four grades and didn't want to study any more. When my husband left for Austria, my mother bought a house in Ruma and he found a new wife and got married. He has a family there, he has got a job and lives there.

What was your husband by profession?

– My husband was a farmer, we had our land. Then he went to Austria and I stayed in my mother's house with the children. I toiled and struggled, both

me and my mother struggled to raise four children. Then he came to fetch me, I stayed there for six months, I worked in a factory. My mother got ill, I had to return, also one of my children started school, so my husband stayed there. After a while he married a woman from here and took her children, while I stayed here with four children. I had a hard life, and there in Austria he enjoyed himself with that other woman and her children. I wrote a letter to the school where my children went telling them that my children couldn't go to school hungry and cold, so they paid for twenty kilos of bread each month. I couldn't buy more than a kilo every day, if I had bought two instead of one, the children would have eaten it right away while it was still warm. My son saw that I was hiding bread, he wanted to go and take some more, but I hit him on his back and said, "How dare you eat that much bread when you know that I won't have money buy any bread for tomorrow!" My husband didn't send anything for the children from Austria, he even threatened he would come home to kill me, to beat me so badly that I would die in a week's time. When he and that wife of his came home for Hungarian Christmas to visit his father, he brought nothing for the children, not even a candy. The children did not want to see him when they found everything out. In Austria I took my children by the hand and walked through the woods, while my husband bought golden earrings for that other woman, he would eat, drink, take pictures and have fun, he danced, while me and my children were just watching. So I realized it was just to no avail, and then I returned home. In the winter I would take an axe and go to the woods to cut firewood in order to keep my children warm.

He came back to me from Austria after six years. He wouldn't have returned if that wife of his hadn't returned to her husband. They went hoeing together, worked together and I went to another employer to work so that I wouldn't be embarrassed. When he got back, we lived together but it kept getting worse and worse all the time, until he died, that was two years ago. But it's of no use now, because I fell ill, I got heart disease because I was working so hard while he was in Austria.

Do you believe in God?

– I do and I pray every day and night and I don't go to bed until I pray (she cries). God bless my children, may he give health to them, it does not matter how I am.

Why do people celebrate Christmas?

– Because Jesus Christ was born then and Virgin Mary baptized him, that's why we celebrate it. On the first day before Christmas we prepare lean food: prunes, noodles with poppy seeds, and on the next day you go as korindjash⁶¹.

61 See Glossary at the end of the book.

You recite songs, for example, "I am little Sue, a goose bit my shoe. My mother sent me, what will you give me? If it's a cake, I'll wait, if it's a rake, I'll escape." People give you walnuts, or money if they have any, oranges and things like that ... In the evening you prepare stuffed cabbage, roast meat, you prepare what you have: duck, turkey, pig, soup is cooked and cakes are made. On Christmas Eve about six or seven o'clock, straw should be brought into the house. You go inside, and you say to the host or to the poloznik⁶², "Christ is born." Poloznik is the one who takes straw in the house. If a child enters first that means that child is poloznik, or whoever enters your house on the first day of Christmas. If that person is a man then you give him a shirt and invite hi to lunch. When he enters the house he sits on that straw and dinners is served there, he peeps and gaggles and we throw wheat and corn on him. The dinner used to be served down on the straw but nowadays it is also served on the table. When my children were small I used to bring in lots of straw and then I would spread tablecloth over it and then they would eat on it. On the second day of Christmas you take various things to your best man: kolach⁶³, walnuts, oranges and apples, and your best man invites you for lunch. My best man is Serbian and I always return from his house with an empty bag.

On the third day of Christmas you clean the house. You get up early and you take out the straw and when you gather that straw if you have cows or horses you put it in the stable, if you have hens or pigs you put that straw in the pigsty, you stick it on the ceiling and that is good because it protects your livestock. Even now I have Christmas straw, I stuck it on the beam in the pigsty. You can give bones from roast meat to dogs, but you should keep head and feet, it is good to keep that in the house because people say that when you throw away the head of the roast meat you are throwing away the host.

Why did you choose Serbian to be your best man?

– When my son returned from the army, he wanted to get married, and then we were in such a hurry we didn't know whom to ask so we asked that man.

Who is your patron saint?

– My family honors Saint Nikola⁶⁴ as their patron saint. However my son's patron saint is Saint Jovan since he took it over from my husband when he died. Saint Jovan's day falls after Christmas and for that day I prepare soup, roast meat, and cakes. But I do not make koljivo⁶⁵, and I do not serve wine and cakes, because my son is not here so I do what I can to honor the saint. I usually go to

62 See glossary at the end of the book.

63 See glossary at the end of the book.

64 See glossary at the end of the book.

65 See glossary at the end of the book.

church, light a candle both for those living and dead, I prey to God, kiss icons, if I happen to have some dinars, I put them on the icons and that's it.

How do you celebrate Easter?

– It is children's joy. When Easter comes, we dye eggs on Good Friday, we cook fish chowder, make popcorns, and on Easter we bake cakes, roast meat, cook soup, stuffed cabbage so you prepare what you have.

Do you believe that after a person dies his or her spirit stays in the house for six weeks?

– I believe that because I experienced it. On the first night after someone dies, you should put a piece of bread and a glass of water on windowsill. If you see that some water is missing from the glass, it means the deceased drank from it. The right thing to do is to give bread to the dead for their soul and to pour water over their grave, it is much better than to give them meat and cakes. But it is our custom to take cakes and meat to the graveyard or to take first tomato and first apple, everything that is best and nicest is taken to the graveyard because it is a shame and you get embarrassed in front of other people if you ate something and didn't give it to the dead first. And when it is a patron's saint day or Easter a priest comes to the graveyard to read something and then you are supposed to carry nice things that you have.

When my husband died I was not afraid. But I saw him coming back three times. The first time he grabbed some sack with money from me, the second time he came to sleep with me and he did.

What is your life like now?

– I do not have a radio set, it is broken, I watch television, though. Gypsy songs and things Gypsies say. My daughter – in – law and grandchildren are with me now. They fled from Kosovo, because there is a big war in Kosovo, but my son stayed in Kosovo. I think about him every day and I cry a lot, I do not know how he is, I can't hear from him, there are no phones there.

My daughter-in-law doesn't have a job, I live from hand to mouth. My son is not sending me any money, how could he, from the war? My poor darling, he doesn't dare take off his shoes for a whole week nor sleep in his house. My daughter – in – law gets humanitarian aid in Titel, but it is also inconvenient, you know, we cannot go to get it, it is too far away. So, poor Marica sends us some flour and all.

When you were a young woman, did a girl have to be a virgin when she got married?

– There were all sorts of cases, some girls had boyfriends who let them down, some got married. If she marries and she is not a virgin and parents spend a lot of money for the wedding, then the parents have to give all the

money back. Rows were quite common and all sorts of things. I was a virgin when I married my man.

Is it true that in Mošorin there are a lot of witches?

– There are some rumors, but I don't know whether to believe in that or not. I did not see it with my own eyes, but some people did. Witches have bloody, evil eyes. If they see you when you are crossing the street, you can get ill because you get a headache.

How many grandchildren do you have?

– I have eleven grandchildren and I am a great grandmother too, because Duško got married very young. All children finished school, all have jobs and all of them made their place in the world. The parents of my grandchildren make them go to school. My granddaughter, the one that is with me, is struggling with mathematics. Her mother helps her, but she doesn't want to try very hard, so I tell her, "Do your best, my child, make your dad happy when he comes back." She needs school so that she can achieve something in life, earn her living so that she wouldn't have to depend on her mum and dad. I am so sorry, my heart aches because I didn't finish school, but when I was young there were no schools in Serbia. When I moved to Mošorin it was late already, because I was already a young woman and then afterwards I got married.

Apart from working as a day laborer, did you do any other job?

– Yes, my mother and me with three children worked in a graveyard for thirteen years. We were arranging graves so that I could support my children.

What can you tell me about the customs you observed when you were preparing your son's wedding?

– We went to fetch the bride from Draginje and we paid 1000 DM for her. We and our guests drove in seventy cars when we went to get her. Her parents demanded that she have a wedding dress, white shoes and gloves. They organized a separate wedding party, but according to the custom we took as present three pairs of slippers for the elderly women and also a roasted pig. When we arrived in our village, we went to the local registry office and they got married and then they got married in church as well. The wedding party was held in the local cultural center. When we returned from the registry office, we gave her a little boy to hold, so that she would give birth to a son. And now she has four girls! After that women were throwing wheat on my daughter – in – law. When she and my son walked in, music was playing and we sang and danced. In the evening pogachars⁶⁶ came, her mother brought white sheet and pogacha⁶⁷, she put it on that sheet where they were to sleep, that is the custom in their village.

⁶⁶ See the glossary at the end of the book.

⁶⁷ See the glossary at the end of the book.

After midnight the newly weds went home, the bride changed into another white dress and they returned. The musicians played to the best man until midnight and after that to pogachars. When the bride came back, her mother gave her a white sheet and put pogacha on the sheet, that's their custom. The next day we showed the sheet, we made a big fire and the music played, the sheet was as it should be, she was a virgin. After that we enjoyed ourselves and had fun for two days and two nights. Our neighbors also gathered to see if my daughter – in – law came to my house as a virgin.

What is the custom when someone dies?

– My husband died in the morning and we immediately sent a telegram to our son in Kosovo. It was peace then, war hadn't been going on. He came as soon as he received the telegram, the very next morning. And when my husband died I asked women in the neighborhood to come so that we could wash him. We washed his face and wiped him with a damp cloth, while he was still warm. Before my son arrived, we took the burial equipment in Žabalj on credit and my son paid the bill afterwards, when he arrived. We put his things beside him into the coffin – his shirts, trousers, coffee, cigarettes... the money which people put on him, we did not want to take it but placed it beside him. We also put in the coffin apples, oranges, everything he got from people when he was ill, we gathered all those things and put them beside so they went to the grave with him. We knew he would die, because he was ill, so we had prepared a new suit for him. It was a huge funeral. Women came to prepare *daca*⁶⁸, they cooked chicken soup with rice and we roasted two big pigs. When people came back from the funeral, the women had already laid the tables, they had put a basin with water and a towel for those who came from the graveyard. Those who were not coming to *daca* washed their hands at the graveyard. The following day you usually go to visit the grave and you take some brandy, beer, cookies, everyone brings something and leaves it on the grave and then afterwards grave diggers take those things. On the third day you go to the graveyard again and you take a candle with you. When someone dies from your family you must not paint the walls in your house for a year, you also do not dye eggs for Easter but just leave them white, you also do not light a candle for Christmas, you just prepare ordinary lunch, when the whole year has passed then you can do these things again. You observe first a week after someone died, then six weeks, then half a year, then a year and you must observe a year a month in advance. My husband died with his mouth and eyes open so I put five-dinar coin onto his eyes and tied his jaw with a scarf because otherwise he would look awkward and people would be afraid.

What does it mean when someone who died appears in your dream?

68 See the glossary at the end of the book.

– I see my mother quite often in my dreams, as she ties her scarf or washes clothes. But she never asked for any food nor did she say that she was hungry. Whenever I go to sleep I say, “Dear God, let me have a nice dream with my mum in it.” If you dream somebody who died and he or she asks something from you, some food, it doesn’t matter if it is your mother, father or just anyone, you should always take some candies or cookies and give them to the children in the street, when I do that I think: Dear God, let this be for my mother, for her soul! The dead may appear in your dreams afterwards or they may not. I light candles for the dead on All Souls’ Day. I pray both for the dead and alive and the candles are lit so that the dead would have light in front of their eyes, so that they would not be in darkness. In Mošorin there is a big feast for Passover and then I light candles for the dead, for All Souls’ Day too, the only difference is that the candles are lit on graveyards then.

Do you believe that saints can heal?

– If it is true, then probably there is something after death, as old women say if you during your life give from your hand then on the other world you will have things, but if you do not give things away now, you will be hungry after death. There is something on that other world, women say that there are a lot of tables with all sorts of food and drinks on them, but if someone did not give things from his hand to anybody on this world then he can only watch through windows others eating and drinking and he wouldn’t get anything. Then he appears in your dream and asks you to take something to his grave because he or she is hungry. It even says so in the Bible that some will watch and some will eat.

Do you believe that Hell and Paradise exist?

– I do. When my mother was ill, she suffered from high blood pressure, she said, “Child, don’t be afraid, your mother shall die.” She felt that she would die, and my son Jovica felt it, so he went to the kitchen and started to cry. I didn’t know what to do, it was night, so I told him, “Be quiet son, grandma is unwell, let her sleep.” She just told me, “My child, don’t be afraid, I left some money under my pillow for you, you will need those ten dinars.” It was quite a lot of money then. I was washing her face all night and I wasn’t afraid. When I saw that her jaws were getting stiff, when she got cold, I put a candle into her hand so that she would have light. Before she was about to die, I pulled her feather pillow under her head so that she would die easy and she just gave out three sighs and that was it. She kept telling me, “Do not be afraid, my child, your mum will not frighten you.” She had enough presence of mind to go out into the kitchen, she didn’t want to die in front of my three children in the room. She talked to me as much as she could, she asked me, “What’s the time?” I replied, “Mum, it is four o’clock.” It was winter and it seemed dawn would never come,

my three children were there I didn't know what to do. I couldn't go outside and call anyone and I couldn't leave her and go back in later so I did what I could. I entered the kitchen and look for her things and Jovica felt something, so he went outside and cried, "Grandmother died, grandmother died!" I told him, "Keep quiet, son, grandmother is not well, go to sleep so that grandma could sleep." And when it was seven I woke my older daughter so that she could go and fetch my older son. When she arrived she laughed and cried at the same time, everybody asked her what happened, "What did you come so early, what did you do?" She told them, "Come, grandmother died." and they came, they bought a candle and went to take the certificate and pay for the grave.

Has ever a friend of yours told you about a witch strangling a child?

– There is a woman in the neighborhood, she has a bridesmaid and people say that her mother is a witch. That young woman said to her young bridesmaid that she didn't feel well when she visited her and her mother said she was a witch. People say that witches have tails. There was one boy and he said that a witch tried to strangle him so that woman took him to court and he beat that woman so much he almost killed her and then she got sick. He said that she was a witch and that she came in his dream to strangle him but that woman used to come to our house and I used to work in her house and she gave things to my children with her own hand and now what the court said I don't know. Men can also be wizards, people from around here say that there is a man with a tail, I never saw him but some children got ill and their father then went to that man and he threatened him and said that he would kill that man if he didn't want to give with his own hand some bread to that children. The witch must give things with her own hand so that the child would become healthy again so when that wizard gave some bread to the children they became healthy and that's the whole truth.

How can you defend yourself from them?

– One can put some garlic, but that's not really it. When a baby is born, you should put a fork, a knife and a broom upside down into one corner of the room. You make a little pouch and you put into it some salt, bread and black-thorn berries. If a baby is born around Christmas, you should put some walnut cakes, nails of a turkey, a piece of the apple from the roast meat into that pouch, tie it around the child's neck or place it under his or her pillow to protect the baby from the evil eye.

Do you know what is a customs when a new house is being built?

– When you lay the foundations you should kill a rooster on the foundations, where main entrance will be, people say it is good to let the blood flow on the house and then the house will be full of happiness. When the construction

is finished then the neighbors should bring towels, shirts, and brandy and all that should be tied to the roof then you throw a party and everybody has fun. And when you move in, you give housewarming party and also sanctify the house: you invite the priest, he takes some basil and some water and blesses the house so that it would be a happy house and that the family in it has good luck and so that the house has protection from evil. And when it is your patron saint's day or Easter priest comes ... also when somebody from the house dies and when he is taken out in the casket in the yard the priest comes and reads a prayer and blesses the house.

Do you believe in magic?

– I do believe in magic, I also believe that someone can read fortune in coffee drags, I believe in everything that follows a person in the house and if someone knows and can guess what happened in your house then I believe in it too.

How many Romani houses are there in Mošorin?

– There are Zlata's three houses, Danica's house, Belja's, Rada's and mine. There are seven houses. They trade with scrap metal and bottles and their children go to school.

How old was your daughter when she got married?

– She finished elementary school and she got married when she was sixteen. She eloped and we did not beat her because of that, she married so young because she loved him. She has two sons, they go to school. The older studies at the University, the younger one is still in elementary school, and they are good pupils. My other daughter was twenty-one when she got married. She was already employed and she met a guy in Titel. She also eloped, so we didn't have a wedding party. She has two children now, a son and a daughter and they are good pupils too.

Do your daughters visit you and help you?

– Sometimes they do. They come to wash me sometimes. But they can't come all the time, they also have husbands, children, their duties. I have very good sons – in – law, one is an inspector and he is a very nice person, he comes and helps me, he asks me, "How are you granny? What are you doing?" The other one is a waiter and likes to drink a bit more than he should. My daughters are not very healthy. The younger one has pains in her legs, her legs become very swollen. My daughters do not help me financially.

Did you pick pea and hops when you were young?

–Yes I did, when I was in Djurdjevo. You had to get up at four o'clock, the landowner would come to pick you up and take you to Djurdjevo. It was measured how many kilos you picked. If you picked fast and filled the sack it

was good, but if you didn't, you wouldn't get any money. They paid two dinars per kilo. I struggled and spent my whole youth in other people's fields so that I could earn money and support my children and send them to school so that they could earn for living. I also kept silkworms. I used to pick mulberry tree leaves and then I would make some sort of bed from reed and put the silkworms there. We would get silkworms, feed them with leaves and after, when they grew up and got their wings we sold them. I was working in other peoples' fields for money, a day's wage was five dinars back in fifty four. I would go to the field and after we returned to the village, I would just jump off from the trailer and rush to cook something for my children. They would always be hungry and they would fall asleep soon afterwards, and the next morning I would go to the field again.

Where were you during the air strikes?

– I was at home alone, I thought what would happen to others would happen to me too. My daughter invited me to come to her place, but I didn't want to leave those few things I have. I used to sit up every night and watch the airplanes. I did not dare put the lights on, I was just sitting in darkness. Airplanes were flying, my son was in the war, my thoughts would go from one thing to the other, I was worried so much I got ill, my heart aches, I have nothing. Although I am ill, I still go to help women in the garden so that they would give me some potatoes and onions. I have one little piece of land, where I sow greens, carrots, and parsley so that I would have something to eat during summer, I also have four ducks and a turkey. When my man was still alive, I kept pigs, but now I am ill and I do not need anything. I don't grow any corn, it's too expensive, I don't have a tractor, so I can't work in the field, I have two acres of land, it stands uncultivated and my son is far away, so I can't work the land.

Have you got any friends who visit you?

– I go to see the women I work for, I can survive thanks to them. I go and work in their garden, weed their onion, so they give me some onion, beans, parsley and some other things I need.

How do you spend your time with your grandchildren?

– I have a granddaughter who is four and a half months old. She is not healthy, however, she has hernia and cries all the time. There are four small children. I put her in her carriage and when her mother has to wash the laundry I take her for a walk, I talk to her, sing to her and she coos.

Drenka, 65 years old (1935)

Tell me something about your childhood.

– I was born in Kovilj in 1935, on January 29. I was born as a premature baby of seven months and stayed to live with my mother, my father had died. My mother suffered a lot, she had terrible time in life. I have also been suffering all my life, I am suffering today and will continue to suffer in future. So, I got married when I was eighteen. I have four children but I am alone again, I am living alone.

That means you are ready to get married?

– Whoops! Well if there is some rogue, if he has a lot of money, it wouldn't be bad, if he has big salary, that's you need for living, right? I don't mind being alone, I don't have any worries, I don't have any problems, no quarrels with anyone. I have two sons and they have gone to Germany and so they have left me. They came today, it was nice ... they visited me. Alright, they have helped me, they are my whole life, but they are also a worry to me. I installed pipes into my house because I didn't have water in my house. I was really troubled with no water. Now everything is nice and easy but until when this nice period will last I don't know, we will see. Now we are selling some goods to earn some money. We are going to work. You must work, you cannot just sit around, you have got to live it doesn't matter if you are young or old. ... My sister Verica weaves baskets to earn money, I am working with second hand goods. We are making ends meet somehow, it is alright, we are still satisfied. Things can't get better in these hard times, if only this heat did not bother us so much, it is hard for all of us, all people. I suffer from a heart disease but I am quite pleased with the way I feel, right now and what will happen later I do not know.

What can you remember from your childhood?

– I remember my mother working, then war came, I can't remember any good things. We had... My brother was taken away by the Hungarian fascists to forced labor, so I feared a lot. I really had terrible childhood. My father's name was Djoka, my mother's name was Milica. I can't remember my father, he died when he was sixty. My mother was forty eight when she gave birth to me. Two years more and she would be fifty. That is why I was a premature baby, I was called Nena from a nook. My mother had nineteen children. Just my brother and I stayed alive, all other children died. My brother Slavko, a musician, also died, from the elder ones just he stayed and me. Well, so far it is good. Oh God, I don't know all the names of the children, just a few of them. They were Drenka, Bata, there was a Zorica, Ružica and I can't remember any more.

Slavko, yes and Bojana, I don't know any more. They died young, my mum did not mention their names. Just three of us survived. Bojana, my elder sister, Slavko and myself.

My mother's name was Persa. I didn't have father or grandmother, nobody. Everybody died before I was born. On my mother's side I also don't know anyone. I just heard names from my mother, that is all. They also died before I was born.

Did you or anyone from the children go to school?

– No. The war was on and my mother couldn't send her children to school. I can neither read nor write. It is a pity. I'm sorry I don't know how to read. That is the only thing I miss and then everything would be just fine.

What did your parents do?

– They were day laborers or worked on machines. That's how it was back then. They did not collect feather, nor were they trading. These things didn't exist then, at that time people worked only for day's wages. They worked on machines, they went working for day's wages just to earn for bread, they also picked corn. ... Nowadays people trade, now all they do is open all those shops. Even worst people can have a shop these days and sell goods. Help yourself. But it was quite tough back then.

Who were your friends?

– Oh, well! We were playing school, we went swimming ... We never quarreled, nor hated each other, we would never hit each other and now, now, there's a lot of hatred among people and there is a lot of injustice. And things were nice back then, we were playing together, and even now when we are old, we never quarrel either. I didn't have any girl friends, I had my sisters, cousins, girls from the neighborhood. Yes, I had them and even today we respect each other. The oldest one is Verica, then comes Živka, my brother's girlfriend, Mikica, Bojkica, Ruža was my friend, Živka, I had a street full of friends, all of us used to play together all the time. About thirty, twenty of us would gathered, play together, made things with newspapers, we would put on a veil – as if we were getting married. Our parents would stand outside and watch us play. It used to be just fine, not like these days when a girl stays out until midnight with her boyfriend, or even longer and comes home at three o'clock in the morning. There aren't any bastard children any more, no such things. This is how things were then. We would play and then just go inside after that, even though we were big girls, we would go to bed with our mum and dad. If a serious groom appears, he will knock at the door and propose to a girl. These days brides offer themselves. And that's the truth, isn't it?

How did you get along with your brothers?

– Fine. Just fine. We didn't quarrel, didn't hit each other, anything like that. And it's been like that ever since. Ivan, you know him, he has grown old. Digica, oh boy, Vlada, the same way and there she is seventy now and nothing like that has ever happened between us. She brought me up, actually, because my mother had to go to day labor, so she was looking after me, rocking me, feeding me, poor thing.

Didn't your mother remarry?

– No, she didn't. She lost her only husband and that was all. My mother did not remarry. But I was a little bit naughty.

How many times did you marry?

– Dear me, I don't know.

What else can you remember from your childhood?

– I liked when my mum gave me a dinar to go and buy some candies. My mum would take one candy and crush it in a handkerchief and give everyone a small piece. We would go out to the street with it to boast that we ate candies. That's how life was in those days, we were content with so little, with that small piece of candy. The piece wasn't big enough even to feel its taste, but we were happy. We went to taunt other children. Nowadays it's chocolate they want and not this kind, but another one. Most of my friends were Serbs. But I also had friends who were Gypsies, yes, but I was always with girls. Everybody loved me very much, even today when we are old nobody bears a grudge against me. One of my friends is a judge now, another one is a doctor... Whenever I visit them they welcome me warmly. Really! Lawyers and those others, they are all in high circles now. They went to school and got education. I stayed poor, miserable. I am not educated, but nobody can cheat on me. I'm kidding! I am so sorry I didn't go to school. I can neither read nor write, not even sign my name, nothing. I am blind although I have eyes, that's what I am.

How do you vote at the elections then?

– Well, then it is no problem, I just encircle, make a circle and that's it. There is nothing to be signed, I make an "x". It's like a cross, I make a cross although I haven't been baptized till now. No, I was, I was. All of us were baptized when we were little, we had just six weeks, then children got baptized.

How did you get married for the first time?

– I eloped. I was eighteen. He came as a guest, it was our Patron Saint's day and so we met. My parents did not want to give me to him. They said I was too young and that I was supposed to wait until I was twenty. I eloped and save them money, I am not married now either. Gypsies are like willow trees. But even if people are not Gypsies there are some who don't want to get married. Why should we get married? I didn't get any property with that man and

why should I need him? It is being done only when you want to get something. Alright also for the children's sake and things like that.

We had one child. They forced me to go and clean the streets, to work. And I did. My mother – in – law was never satisfied with me. She demanded land, she demanded some dowry, but I didn't have any, my family was poor. They demanded dowry. That's how that aunt explained it, they wanted me to give them fortune, to bring them some land. I didn't have any, so we got separated. He was from Novi Sad and his name was Ranko. Everything was just fine for three and a half years. I told you, I didn't bring anything for dowry, so once I came home for a visit, I stayed and got separated. I never returned. Never. Why would I return, it's just like when you cut bread once, there is no more afterwards. The child stayed with me, I was not going to give my child away. I am not going to give my children to anybody. I gave birth to them, I will raise them. I gave birth to four children. ... I gave birth to Ružica when I was nineteen.

What can you tell me about your next marriage?

– I didn't marry for the next five years and then I married again Dejan from Titel. But it was of no use! I returned home to my mum, to my folk's house. He didn't like my child, he just didn't like her and that was it. He wanted me to live in rented flats all the time, but I didn't want to live like that with my daughter, to take her from one house to another, so we separated because of the child. We had a nice dinner together and then I just left him, nice and easy. I lived with him for four years. We have a son, now I have four grandchildren. We separated. Once I get separated, that's it, I don't give any part of my life to that person anymore. I will not let anyone bother me. If we can live nicely, alright, if we can't, you hit the road and so will I. That's the way I am. That's how it was, that's my rule. Why would you want to go around, at one moment you are here then the next moment you are gone, that's nothing, it's like a swing. I never married again. I married just twice... I am alone now, each to his own devices and I am fine. Thanks God, I am going to spend my old age the way I have to and the way I can. I am just waiting for death to come, there's nothing else to it.

Oh, well. I hope I will get some presents. I still celebrate my birthday. You'll bring me something, won't you? I don't celebrate anymore. Some ten years ago I did. My God, there's nothing left. Ten years ago everything used to be just fine, but now things are different. ... I used to celebrate my birthday when I was little. My mother celebrated it. She would buy some candies and tell us it was for the birthday, so we knew it was someone's birthday, we were singing and playing.

When I got married, she would come and bring presents to us. When you don't have your mother any more, you have nothing. I loved my mother very

much and she loved me. I never offended my mother. Even when I was not quite happy with something, I would just laugh it off, but I would never offend her.

I have grown old now, I am alone, and everything is gone. As long as it's like this, it is fine though ...(the interview was not continued)

Živka, 65 (1935)

– What was your childhood like?

I was born in Stari Banovci in 1935, on the seventeenth of August. My mother died when she was eighty years old. My father was young, twenty-six years old, when they had taken him to concentration camp in Jasenovac. That happened at the beginning of the Second World War. He was killed there. We did not know where he disappeared, we just got that letter, somebody else had written it, that he had gone to that man, or some other ... but, actually, that man was dead, so it could not have been him that had written that my father was killed. Thus, we did not know from the very beginning that he was killed there in that contraction camp. The day he was taken, the whole street was taken as well. In one house there were five sons, and all of them were taken there. I will tell you what it was like. I was seven. It was autumn. My father got up earlier than we did. He told my mother that he was going to drive the pigs to pasture, and there, in front of our house, there were many big fields. They were not cultivated. He said that he was going to let the pigs graze, and then, he said, they would go together to work in the field. She said that it was fine because the children would get up by then. Then suddenly, a neighbor from the other street came, and there was some other man with him. It was war at that time, and there was all that chaos going on with the Germans, and some people informed the Germans how many men there were in every house. They were reporting the exact number, there were five, there two and so nobody could hide. And then, he came to our house. He asked my mother where Nikola was, that was my father's name. She said that he had driven the pigs to pasture, up there, in the fields. He told her to go and fetch him. I remember that, although I was seven, she had waved him to him to come, and he came, and he had to go with them immediately. And they did the same in every house in the street. Finally, when they have gathered all those men from the whole street, they have taken them to Stara Pazova. There was a prison there, as this one, here in Dunavska Street. Well, they had taken them there, and we went there to visit him. They were allowed to have visits. And when we went there, my father told my mother to take care of us. And he said he did not know when he would get back home. He knew what was going on, and he realized what would happen. He was there in that prison for a week, perhaps two, I am not sure. And then, they were taken to Jasenovac. We heard that, people talked about that. Well, he was there in Jasenovac for about two months. When he was there, he did not come home at all. After that, we wandered the fields, my grandfather, my mother and my

aunt. She also had three children. My parents had two of us, my sister and me. My mother had more children before me, but all of them died. She had four of them. Then, she gave birth to me, and I survived. I do not why her children had died, I have never asked. I do not know, but there were no doctors at that time. You know how it was at that time, people did not go to the doctor that often.

Where did women give birth then?

– At home. A midwife would come, and they would give birth at home. No one went to a hospital, no one could even think about that! My mother had two of us. I was seven, and my sister a year and a half, when the war started. When they had attacked us, there was a lot of shooting, killing, burning and everything else. Then my grandfather hitched a horse to a cart, and we sat in the cart and drove off. There were my grandfather, my sister, I, my mother, my aunt and her three children. She had three sons and my mother had two daughters. We were driving over the fields and we were looking for abandoned farms. We would sleep there. My mother, like any other mother, did not sleep at all. She took care of her children. She told us that rats were running in the abandoned houses and farms, and that they could come near our heads. We were sleeping while she sat there and looked after us. There were no pillows there, she only took a blanket, or a duvet to cover us. We slept on straw. She was trying to protect us from rats, she thought that they could come near us, or jump on us, and scare us to death. And then, when the shooting calmed down a bit, we got back home. Then we stayed at home for a day, or two days. Then we went to Stara Pazova. There we visited our father, and our grandfather visited his son, and that was all. Later, when he was taken to the camp, we could not go there anymore. They were killed in the camp. And our grandfather survived. They were not taking elderly people, just the young, up to forty-five or fifty years old. Those people were interesting for them, and they took them away.

You were seven when the war started. It was time to go to school.

– Well, there was no school for me at that time. When the war was over, children started going to school, but rarely. My mother could not afford that, to let me go to school. To be honest, there was no one else to work in the house. We had to survive! I wish I had gone to school. I learnt to read and write all alone. When something is written on television, I can read it, both in Cyrillic or Romani alphabet. My children laugh at me. They say, “We finished primary and secondary schools. Our mum didn’t go to school, and she knows how to read and write. If she had gone to school, where would she have been now?”

Can you tell me something about your wedding?

– That was as usual. I was seventeen. I was born in 1936, and my husband in 1932. My mother is from Beška. I went there to visit my grandmother. And

my husband had a sister there. We met and fell in love with each other there. Then, his father came to ask my mother if she would let me marry his son. My mum said that I was too young, just seventeen; but then they asked me and I accepted. And that was how it happened. We got married at the registry office. I had white wedding gown, but there were not a lot of people present. My husband is a farmer and he has always been a farmer. We have never had a permanent job, but my children have. He was twenty when we got married. In May, in 1952, I had come to their house and he went to the army in September. So, I had lived with him for four months before he left. I stayed at home with my father-in-law. My husband was supposed to be there two years, but then they reduced that period for six months. He had not been home for a year.

Have you heard about Goli otok?⁶⁹

– Yes, I did. I heard that they took things from people, that people had to pay a lot of money. Well I know that my father-in-law had to pay taxes. They really pestered people with high taxes. Tito was very important then. He was then what Slobodan Milošević is now. They ordered the farmers to hand over all their wheat and everything else they had. If someone did not give that, and if he had enough land, but not enough crops, not as much as the government thought he must give over to them, they were sent to prison. They were beating people in prisons, they had even pulled out men's moustaches. Many people were in prison. They were beaten up. They had to sell their houses to buy wheat and corn so that they could hand it over to the government what it demanded and pay the taxes that they had to pay to the government.

And what happened when they had paid everything?

– Then there were some other taxes to be paid and so on. They let the people who paid their debts free. It is the same with you. When you had graduated, no one bothered you anymore. You had finished with that and nobody maltreats you any more. Well, that had lasted for, I do not know how many years. Not very long. Then they had come up with something similar. Then, you had to give huge amounts of money, not wheat or other crops.

How many children have you got?

– I have nine children: three girls and six boys. My oldest daughter is Divna. She is married and she lives in Rumenka, and her husband is an engineer and he works for city's water power supply then, there is Branislav, he embroiders underwear. You have seen my other son outside, he is a cook, but he has not got a job at the moment, and he works in the field with us. Vlada also lives with us, he works in a cake shop. Mića works in "Jugodent", and Saša works in Water supply. And Ljilja is unemployed.

⁶⁹ See glossary at the end of the book.

How did you protect yourself from unwanted pregnancy?

– Well, it's not exactly that I had to protect myself. When I went to the doctor, he told me, "You mustn't have an abortion." That's because something was wrong in there. "You have to give birth to the baby if you get pregnant." It was usually a three-year span between my children. Well, then, I had enough of those pregnancies. I wasn't able to walk. My legs hurt me a lot and I had problems with veins. And when Saša was small, he was two years old, something inside started to hurt me a lot. I went to the doctor's and the doctor told me that I had to be operated as soon as possible. I was in hospital for about a month, at gynecological department. And they took all that out.

Did you give birth to your children at home or in hospital?

– Two of my children were born at home, that was usual at that time. All the others were born in a hospital. There was a midwife, who would come to your place to help you when you were in labor. My husband called her and she helped me. Sometimes they are not as fine as they used to be. They are not polite enough, but too rude. And then, when you are in labor, and are in great pain, they scream and shout at you. They should prepare you well, and be by your side all the time, and help you when it hurts you. They are just not nice, they don't try to help you, to please you, to ease your pain. I had better experience when I was at home than in hospital. You could expect that. She would come to you and concentrate on you, explain everything. She helped me a lot and massaged me. And all that to make things easier for both of us.

When Tito was the President, there was free education for children, and children could go to the seaside for free. Did your children go?

– They did. Our school "Nikola Tesla" had this summer camp "Lišnje", and children had been there for two weeks. Sometimes they went to the mountains, it depended on what the school had planned. But they did not go for free. We paid for that. When they went to the seaside, we did not pay the full price, just a half. All of my children went to the seaside, I do not remember how many times Saša was there, he has been everywhere. Other children went as well, but not as many times as he did. He was in the mountains, at the seaside ... in Budva.

Did he tell you something about his holidays?

– Of course he did...he said it was very beautiful there. He wanted to bring us some water, so that we can try it. Well, I said why didn't you do that. "Because I did not have a bottle," he said. I said, "Don't joke with me." That was because I was not able to go to the seaside. I was not able to go when I was young, and when I lived with my mother, I didn't go because I had to work, and we didn't have enough money...when I got married, my husband went to the army. When he had a leave, I was pregnant. When he came back home, our daughter was

born in April. Then I got stuck with the children. We had to work in order to manage to feed the whole family. I have never had a permanent job. We have always had a lot of friends and acquaintances. Someone asked my doctor if he could offer me a job. Then I went and cleaned other people's houses, but that was not a permanent job, I did that once or twice a week. I did the housework. The lady whose house I was cleaning usually went somewhere while I was cleaning. Her husband was a manager, and she was a doctor. And I cleaned other houses as well, only that one was a doctor for noses, ears and throats. They would leave the key for me, and I would lock myself while I was doing the housework. And then when she comes, everything was spick and span. She would come home when I finished. She worked till two o'clock, and I cleaned till two o'clock. And she had always paid me as soon as I finished for that day.

Had you learnt anything from her?

– There was no need for me to learn anything. She did not need to teach me how to iron, or sweep. She was a fine woman, and she was very kind. I have always worked in fine houses for people who were educated and polite. They were doctors, and they were very intelligent. They gave me some extra money as well. He would say, "Look, how clean the flat is!" When that other woman was cleaning for them the parquet was very dark and dirty. It was terrible, they didn't take care of it, and neither did that woman who was working for them, she didn't clean it properly. Then the lady said, "Here you are, take this sandpaper, and this cloth, try to make it clean if you can." When I had finished with other things I had to do, I took that paper and the cloth and polished it so nicely! When they got home, the man was very pleased. The parquet was as shiny as a mirror. Women who cleaned for them before me did not do it properly. But if you do something, you should do it properly, or you should not start doing it at all. Still, if they take you to do the work for them, and if they tell you to do this or that, you should do it, of course, but you should do some other things that you were not told to do as well. For instance, I would wash and iron the curtains in the bathroom, or in the dinning room. Those are big houses, big flats, and they have big rooms. And as soon as you come in, you can notice the difference, or smell the fresh air. They were very pleased, after I cleaned everything, and they would smile and show their friends all the rooms and say that I had done great work. I pretended that I did not hear all that, as if I did not know that they were talking about me.

How do you feel know, after all that?

– Sometimes it was difficult, we had good and bad times as well. But if you are smart and clever, you struggle, you take a line and do not cross it, you cope with the money you have. You don't spend everything today but leave something for tomorrow as well, because tomorrow, you may not have any choice,

you might not be able to earn any money. So you have to save some money to have some in the bad periods as well. You have to do that. My husband and I went to work, and my father-in-law was looking after the children. My mother – in - law had died before I came to their house. I had never met her. My father - in - law helped me a lot. And then, when we went to work in the field, my husband and I, we took the children with us. The small ones, less than two years old stayed with grandfather at home. He looked after them and cooked. And we worked in the field. Our land was quite far away from our house. Well, it was near Čenej, you heard about Čenej, didn't you? Then we sold that and bought a piece of land near Veternik, by the Živinarska cooperative.⁷⁰ We took our children with us when we went to work, either when it hoed, or picked fruit, or whatever. When they were six, or seven, they went with us, and they helped us. When they came home after school, they got on their bicycles and came to the field to help us. That daughter of ours who is in Rumenka now, she worked as a cook in Subotička street. She worked till two o'clock and when she got home, she would change her clothes, get on her bicycle and go to our garden. The garden was near the playground and she did there everything that was needed until I got home. My garden has always been looked after well. Now, Ljilja does the work. She hoes and sows. The other day we picked the plums. This morning when I got up, my son had already milked the cow. Then I prepared the milk, everyone went to work. I washed all the dishes. Then I diced the plums and added some sugar, and I put everything on the stove to be cooked for jam. I stewed some as well. There are still a lot of ripe plums to be picked, we are going to do that tomorrow. We will leave some because not all of them are ripe, so we can sell them later, or leave some for ourselves ... well, it is nice when you can earn something, you can never have too much money.

Should work be divided between men and women?

– No, it should not. We should help each other. Well, when Ljilja can't manage to do everything, then Mića and Vlada will do it. They realize that she does not have enough time for everything, or that she has to help me, and then they take their shirts, or trousers and wash them or iron them. There are no problems with that. They wash their clothes, they iron them and put them in the wardrobe, and it should be like that. I don't have problems with that, so that I have to worry because of that. The one who has enough spare time will do it. They were brought up in that way. They take lunch and eat it, they do not wait for me to serve everything, anyway, we can't manage to eat at the same time together, except on Sundays, and then we gather and have lunch together. During the week, they have different working hours, everything is shattered, that work, I mean, and then they have a cooked meal waiting for them in the kitchen, and

⁷⁰ Farm where poultry is being raised.

when they get home they eat on their own. And they do not leave anything behind themselves, no dirty dishes, and no crumbs. No one leaves dirty glasses or plates on the table, never. Very often Ljilja and I are busy doing something, and when Vlada, Mića, or Saša see some dirty dishes in the sink, they wash all that. One day, Saša milks the cow, the other Vlada does it, and they make a kind of arrangement. I do not ask them whether they are employed or not, they have to do their work in the house as well.

How did your husband help you with all that?

– Well, when he got home from the army, we had to work a lot because our daughter was born. But my father – in - law was there to help, he worked , and he was to me as a father, because I was just seven when I had lost my father. I do not remember him very well, just as a kind of a shadow, I remember that was driving the pigs to pasture...I remember that he was darkish, a bit darker than me. It has been ten years now since my mother died.

Where did you live after the war?

– At my mother's house, well, we had our house there, which my parents had built. When they got married, they built the house. My mother lived there, it has been ten years now since she died. The Germans set other houses to fire, not private ones. My father got that piece of land from his father, and then they built the house, and we had our own house. My grandfather, my aunt, my mother, we all lived in that house. My grandfather told us that whatever would happen to other people, would happen to us as well.

What was the happiest moment in your life?

– When my first son got married, the son I got after our first daughter. I told my husband that we would celebrate that, no matter what it would cost ... It was a wedding reception in the tent that was twelve meters long, there in our yard. Then we did not have this fence and that balcony, and there was enough room for that tent. There were so many people there! A big band was playing and it lasted for a day and a half, till Monday. On Saturday in the evening, our guests came. We had a lot of friends and relatives. There were also that hen party and stag party. We were singing and dancing all the time ... in the morning, we first had breakfast, there was music playing all the time, then the cars were decorated, and they went to the bride's house to bring the bride here. They went there by car, and it is usual to have lunch there and then around two o'clock they came here. And then we celebrated for the whole day, and night and it all lasted till Monday. Not until then did the guest go home. The wedding lasted for almost two days.

How long were you dating with your husband before you got married?

– We had seen each other maybe twice or three times during that whole

year. We had simply decided to get married. It was not like it is with young people today. These days, they meet every day, they call in on each other every day, and they are upset if they cannot meet every single day and they say, "Oh, why didn't you come, where were you and these sorts of things." It wasn't anything like that when I was young. I do not like that. I am a bit embarrassed when I see those young people going out so late and so often. My granddaughter is fifteen, and she gets home at five or six o'clock in the morning. I tell her, "My dear child, this isn't good, it wasn't like that in my time" and I tell my daughter the same. And she says that there is nothing she can do about it. I think that she should forbid her to do that, because she is a girl, and it isn't good for a girl to stay outside so late. Then I tell my Lenka that no one was doing that when I was young. If I had behaved like that, my mother would have beaten me up, but not with her hands, but she would have kicked me with her feet. When we had met, we were together for an hour, and then everyone went home. We got on a train and he went to Novi Sad, and I to Stara Pazova, and that was it. It was just a couple of words, he asked me some questions, and I answered, and that was all. People divorce very soon these days, and I think that this is because they dated for such a long period, and they got fed up with their love. If they meet, they date for half a year and then they get married.

Which was the unhappiest day in your life?

– I was really shaken when our three cows died. It was two years ago, there was something in their food, something poisonous probably. We fed them as usual. We had bought that food, but we cannot prove it to anyone. It was around midnight, when I heard our cows making noise. I got up early in the morning and when I came to the cattle - shed I saw one of them lying so I said to her, "Come on get up, why are lying like that?" But it didn't help, she just kept lying. I tried to make her move, but she remained in the same position. I tried to hit her with a pitchfork, but then I realized that she was dead. The other one was lying over there, the third also. Then I woke everyone up and told them what had happened.

You had survived the Second World War, and the latest one as well, what is your experience?

– God forbid something like that happening again. But a living soul can survive everything. During the Second World War I was too small to think about that. But during this latest one, I was afraid for my sons, I feared that they would not be dragged to war as reservists. When there was this war in Croatia, one of my sons had been taken for four months. He was in those reserve forces just near Croatia. That Mića, a pigeon breeder, well perhaps you do not know him by name, he was also there one month, somewhere behind Bačka Palanka, near Osijek. They were somewhere in some basements, bases,

in trenches, I do not know where. He did not bathe or wash himself. When he got home everything on him was dark and hard. It was horrible. When my son had been there for four months, I was crying night and day. All the time you could hear about people who got killed, or that there was a lot of shooting going on somewhere. That was terrible. He was a cook, and he was not hungry and that was all, but all that is meaningless when you worry all the time. They slept in those cars, then in some schools, pigsties, in barns and sheds. They would cover themselves with a blanket and sleep. They could not sleep in houses, and no one would like to put you up.

And what about this bombing?

– That was horrible. God forbid that happening again. Well, I don't know how anyone could survive that again, because people panic, and so on.

During the Second World War I was small, but I remember that shooting and burning, and that people were impaled on pointed stakes. That was done in our village. Our grandfather told us not to look at that side and said that we should turn around. Then he spoke sharply to my mother, his daughter-in-law, to cover the children and pack them in the cart, because we were going then on a farm to sleep there, so as to prevent us from watching and being afraid. And then when we got home, my grandfather said that all the flies swarmed around that man, although he was alive. He told us about that when the war was over ... In winter, when we had enough time, we would sit in the evenings and talk. He told us that people were tortured during the war. They were killed, or impaled, or Germans poured petroleum over men and set them to fire. Surely such things happened in this war as well, but no one talks about that. Perhaps someone was there, and he may have told his parents what he had seen. Terrible things happened in Osijek, but all this was done secretly and no one talks about that.

Did you live better when Tito was the President, or now?

– Well, I'm not sure ... but I think that it was better then. And it was better because you could live normally while he was the President. You could get credit and work, and build yourself a house. He let people have credit and have everything else, the cost of living was not that high. People could go anywhere, and buy whatever they wanted. Now you cannot do all that. You cannot get credit even for some smaller things, let alone building a house. Well, some people had used it very well. For example, our neighbors, who buy milk from us, they got credit from the army, because that man was an officer. He had built a one story-house and all that with an interest on credit of one per cent. Other people did the same, but now you cannot do that. Sometimes a bank offered credit, and you could get it to build a house, and pay your rates every month. We had built our house by ourselves. Some workers helped us. We brought all that material in the car. I did everything while they were building, I know how

to make mortar, I dragged the bricks, I know how to plaster the walls, or to connect the sewage pipes. I set the sewage pipes in our yard. I didn't do that all alone, they helped me. And I connected all those rubber bands and pipes. Yet, I am not trained to do that. However, that was not the first time I had organized everything. We had a kind of family agreement, and we decided what we were going to do and how. When the workers come they had to listen to me. I told them how to do it. When someone is working at our house, my children say that I am the boss, and that I know how to explain to them what has to be done. Some of them don't like that, and some don't mind. If I did not tell them how to do it, they would fumble that. Either do it the way it should be done, or don't do it at all.

My husband also worked a lot, and helped me, but he prefers staying behind. He had a stroke a couple of years ago, and he drags his foot a bit when he walks. It is not that he does not want to help, but rather he has no idea how things should be done, this arch for example, whether it should be square or round. And he told to handyman, "Well what do you think, make it as you think fit." And I said, "No, no, you are going to make it as I tell you to." He also didn't like the idea about the sewage system, he protested and told me to forget about it. We had that septic tank which was always full, and then we had to pay to have it cleaned, and that was quite expensive. I told him that we should take the pipes and dig and make all that. I dug all those ditches ... they should be eighty centimeters deep. I had to set the pipes and my husband was sitting and watching. A neighbor came and he watched me working as well. Well, he had helped, he handed the pipes to me. We could not make a mistake, because those pipes and rubber bands are made in standard size, they are straight and when they are set correctly, there can be no mistake. See the way you are writing now, if you think later that you didn't write this correctly you can correct it, maybe you write something today like this and tomorrow you'll make it even better. Well, with pipes it's the same thing.

It was the same when we worked, I was arguing with the plumber. He came here to tell me that everything was fine, but it was not. I told him to do that the way I said, but he did not listen to me. He fastened the pipes too tightly, who knows what he did, and all the coils on the pipes in the bathroom cracked ... He said that he was going to fix it, and he told me that I had not bought the right shower, and all those things for the bathroom. I replied that all that was good enough and brand new, and that he should have listened to me and fixed it as I told him. The next day he was supposed to do that again, and he brought me the keys, because I had given him the keys and told him to bring them back when he finished. So, he gave me the keys and asked for money, but I did not want to pay him until I saw the next day what he had done. I told him to call by the next day in the afternoon, and that I would give him the money then but first I want-

ed to see whether faucets leaked and whether he just glued things together and then later they might fall apart. He started yelling at me, we argued because he wanted to be paid immediately, and I did not want to pay before I saw what he had done. The next day, when I came there and saw that he did not fix that as he should have, he fastened the pipes under the bath-tub too much, and he bent the shower and the taps out of shape. I did not want to pay him, and I found another plumber who did it properly. When my son got home I told him what had happened, and that it was not fair, and that we had an agreement. He had not done it properly, and we agreed that he should be paid only if everything was fine. I told him that he had not dug the ditch for sewer pipes, my son and I did it, although we agreed that he would do that. He did not say anything, but remained silent. And my husband did not say anything either. When the man had left, my husband told me that I should not have argued with him. Then I was so angry I started swearing, "What do you mean I shouldn't have argued? I told him to do things properly and he didn't and I wanted to give him money, it wasn't about money, I even wanted to give him extra if he behaved like a man but he didn't," I said. After that, my husband didn't say anything.

How do you feel these days? Are you in good health? Do you feel any changes as you get older?

– I do. I have pain in my veined legs in particular, especially when the weather is about to change. That is terrible. I feel as if the veins are burning inside my legs, and as if my muscles are broken. I have always worked a lot, I have been doing both men's and women's jobs. My husband has his work, but I do two jobs. I do not argue. In any case I would have to do it, sooner or later. When I finish my work, I am peaceful. I have never felt tired, I wish only those veins would not hurt me that much. I do not feel tired.

Zlata, 60 years old (1930)

I would like you to tell me what was your childhood like?

– I am going to tell you as much as I can remember. I remember when my dad said I was five. When someone asked me how old I was, I would show five fingers, like this. That meant I was five. My dad used to tell us stories, mostly during the winter, when he had nothing to do in the fields.

Did you have any brothers and sisters?

– Yes, I still do. They are still alive. I have two sisters and a brother. My sister Zora is two years older than me. My sister Gordana is three years younger than me. My brother Vojislav is six years younger than me. We are all alive thank God. I pray to God to let them live longer than me, I wish I could go first, because I saw my parents in the casket and so I pray to God to let me die first.

Did you go to school?

– Yes, I did but for three years only. I can sign my name. I can read Latin alphabet. There was an old man, his name was Joca. He asked another man, Slovak, “Janko, is it possible that this child can read a horse’s registration card, after only three years of school.” The man replied, “It’s possible. She’s smart. She taught herself.”

Why didn’t you continue going to school?

– I can’t explain why. Probably because we couldn’t afford it. Let me put it this way, my mom used to say, “She’s a girl, and she’ll get married. It’s not like she’ll be a doctor or professor. She’d better work.” When I was nine they already took me to the field. They did the same with all other children.

That means it was already before the war. When exactly did that happen?

– Yes. I was eleven when the war broke out. I remember that Independent State of Croatia occupied our country, that Germans ruled our country, that they bombed Belgrade on the sixth of April in 1941, the planes cut telephone cables and power cables at the railways station in Stara Pazova. I remember that my mom and dad told that people were taken away, the Gypsies, they were taken to the concentration camp in Zemun at the fairgrounds. We, Gypsies from Pazova, weren’t taken there, because people from our village protected us. A lot of Gypsies from Vojvodina, from Srem, were also taken to the concentration camp in Sisak. My mom used to send parcels to her parents.

What did you mean when you said that people from the village protected you?

– My mom and dad used to say that some people told them, those people protected us, they told them that Gypsies from Pazova were not into politics,

that they were not lazy, that they worked and they were not on the side of the partisans. But, I remember that a lot of Gypsies joined the partisans. That's right. I remember when my dad said that there was one man, I don't know if he was a commander, he went to Vojka on the motorcycle, and the partisans killed him in Vojka. After that, Gypsies from Vojka were hung on the lampposts from the railway station in Pazova all the way along the road to Indija. Eighteen Gypsies were hung on the lampposts.

Why?

– Because the Germans said that they killed that commander.

And they didn't do this?

– Yes, they did. The war was on. My grandma said, "War is a brother to no one." People were killing people, brothers were killing each other.

How did you manage to feed your families during the war?

– Some people had hard times. But not everyone. Some people worked very hard, some were cunning. We had enough, my dad had some friends, here in Pazova, who had a lot of land, and they used to give us corn and grain. My parents kept pigs, so we didn't lack.

And you could marry after the Second World War?

– It was in 1949. I was twenty, and Gypsies came to ask for my hand. They brought me gifts.

Did you know your husband to be?

– I knew my bridegroom. He was a Gipsy from Pazova. I didn't want to marry him, because I knew his family. They were alcoholics. I told my mom, "You are arranging everything, but this is wrong. Why should I marry Giga? Everybody in his family likes to drink, fight and quarrel. My mother replied, "My child, his mother is from Sremska Kamenica. They are a fine family. Maybe he is going to be like his mother's family. His mother passed away when he was six. He is going to respect clean shirts and clean bedclothes. Marry him, because Gypsies are already saying that you are a spinster." You know, Gypsy girls were marrying very young. I was really frightened. I was shy. I was afraid. I married because I obeyed my parents.

And they got money for you?

– They sold me. They haggled. They sold me for 6.500. It was a time when we had to change money and it was done very quickly. It turned out that they got a lot of money for me.

What did they buy with that money? Did they give you anything?

– They didn't give me anything. My dad made me a wedding party. Nobody in Pazova made a party under the tent, my dad was the first one. Whether it

was summer or winter, Gypsies made their weddings outside. My dad wanted a tent. I left my parents on July 27th, 1949.

Did you marry in registry office or in the church?

– No, nowhere. His father married a Gypsy woman from Krčedin. They lived together in Krčedin. They came in a carriage to take the bride. A pair of nice black horses drove me. Yes. But I didn't like my wedding. No, I wasn't happy. Normally, people were merry, but I wasn't, because I knew him. And it was just like that, from the very begging, till the very end, until the day he died. We lived together for forty-seven years. He was drunk more often than sober. We have four nice children. Three daughters and a son. He went to fairs and markets. He looked for people who made a good deal so that they would buy him a drink to celebrate. He knew how to live. He had a cane. During the summer he used to wear brown shirt, brown pants and a straw hat. He lived for pleasure.

What did you do for a living if he enjoyed himself?

– I was working. I did everything. When children grew up, they helped. But when they were small, only I worked. He used to take my wages. I worked during the corn-hoeing season. I would work for six weeks for landowners, and I earned a nice sum of money, so I could manage although we were poor. He would take all of it from me. He would hire musicians to play for him, a taxi would drive him around. ... He knew how to live and enjoy himself.

Why didn't you divorce him?

– I don't know why I didn't. I can't answer that question. I was ashamed of my parents, of my family, of other people. It was a shame to separate and to remarry. I thought that was the way it should be.

Is it hard to be a Romani woman?

– Yes, it is. Romani woman is a slave. It is hardest for her. She lives nice while she is alone, but after she marries, she enters into a big prison. Because her husband does not want to do anything. Even if he works, he appreciates just his efforts, he respect only himself while she is no one and nobody.

Tell me, what should I do if I want to help Romani women?

– I pray to God and to you...(she pressed her hands together and cried). If there is any chance, please, help me. I already begged everybody I worked for, in those families mom and dads died already and children are still alive, they are fifty or sixty yeas old, there is Slobodan, Sreta's Jova. He told me, "Aunt Zlata, I want to help you, but I don't know how much I'll be able to help you."

So we should help older Romani women.

– A young woman, if she is healthy and normal should work, she should earn her living. But she shouldn't support her husband. No, she shouldn't. I

was wrong when I supported a young and healthy man during all these years. But now I see that the things changed, she is in command. She says, "Go and bring that to me." I couldn't say that. They are educated today. They should go to school. That's what I think. Of course they should. Everybody should go to school, every woman should know how to read and write, every man, every nation. School is necessary for everyone. Parents should make an effort to educate their children. Romani children should get help, they should get free schoolbooks. It would be nice if this country could help the children whose mothers, whose parents can't afford to send their child to school and that child wants to go. I know a lot of well off Romani people who don't want to support poor Romani people. They don't want to and I almost approve of that. Why didn't he work? Why didn't he earn enough and then give to his children with everything they need? If he is healthy, if he is normal, ready for work, let him work then, let him pull up his sleeves. Nobody died because of work. I didn't mind working, it wasn't hard, I didn't hate it. I was just sorry because he would take all my money and spend it. Work was never too hard for me. My hands and legs were healthy and I could work.

You did all kinds of jobs and you worked in the field.

– I was working in the field, I was gardening. Yes, I had a nice salary when I was gardening. I know how to do everything. I used to work in the houses. I was doing laundry in twelve households, before they bought washing machines. It's a hard work. I was washing clothes, cleaning houses, painting walls. Just yesterday I was talking with my neighbor about my life. He said, "Aunt Zlata, everyone respected you, everybody appreciated you." No one ever told me, "This is the last time you worked for me." No one. It's the truth. I am telling you honestly. Everyone can hear this. When I worked I wanted to do everything properly.

You didn't tell me this, did you ever tell fortunes?

– No, no. I never did that. There are Romani women who do that, but I don't believe in it. I never did it. Neither my mom nor my granny did it.

What is the happiest day of your life?

– The happiest day of my life was when my son married. When he brought a Russian girl, I was the happiest person. I didn't know what happiness meant until that day. When my son married they were with me. They were at our home for two years. My granddaughter Sandra was born here. I washed her diapers with pleasure. My neighbor Milja heard through her little window when my daughter – in – law woke up and asked me, "Mom, why did you wash our clothes?" I replied, "My daughter, last night you said that you had a headache, so I washed your clothes while you were sleeping so that you don't have to."

Their clothes were in the bathtub, and children's clothes were in the basin. I washed them all and hung it in the yard, there was drafty. My son started building a house and left his mother and went away for his wife's love. So it was written in the Bible, that a man will leave his mother and his father and go with his wife. He calls sometimes and writes. You should always listen to your parents, except when it comes to marriage.

And what was the saddest day of your life?

– When my mom died. My mom died in 1950, when I was twenty. She was forty-two, and my dad was forty-five. He became a widower, he was without my mom. He lived with us, his children, until 1980. He was seventy-five when he died. It was very hard for us. We were very sad, because we had a very fine and good father. Many people in Pazova knew him as a good and honest man. His name was Toša.

Why did your mom die so young?

– After my mom's death, midwife Marija told me, "Zlata, this was the fourth time, that your mother had an abortion all by herself."

Why didn't she go to the doctor?

– She thought she could do it on her own. She was listening to some old women. She didn't do it herself. Someone else did it to her, and she got blood poisoning. She had grown up children, I was twenty, my sister Zora was already married. Gordana was seventeen. Voja was thirteen when our mom died. My dad went somewhere.

He had somebody on the side.

– He sort of went ... One night he came back home. It was one o'clock in the morning. I remember we were in our beds. I was married when my mom died. I was married for six months already. Giga went to the army. In those days they served two years. He was in Zagreb, and later he was moved to Ljubljana. I was at my father's home with my brothers and sisters. I rented my house. I couldn't be there alone, I was a young woman. I went to my father's place. My father sat at the table and then he said, "I'm not going to bring a stepmother in this house, but I expect you to paint the house and to wash my clothes. This is my order." And so it was. We took care of him. We really listened to him. He never hit us. Not even when we were children, when my mom was still alive. Mom used to hit us the way mothers do, she would hit us with a broom or a spatula. She used to pull my hair, she said, "You will go to somebody else's house and you won't know anything. You have to learn! You must know how to wash, to iron, to paint walls." And I am grateful to her. I thank my mother, I thank her for being so strict.

Divna 65 years old (1936)

Tell me how many children did your parents have?

– How many children did they have? Let me recall ... Two brothers first, Milan, then my mum had two more, but they died, so I don't remember them. Mum told me that she had two sons first, then she bore my elder brother Milan and me. I had one more brother, who was blind. He died.

My elder brother was fourteen and he was living at my father's. My mother married my father, who was a musician and you know what musicians are like, he was never at home, but playing all the time. My mother was the one who cared for us all the time. My mother lived in a flat in Sombor and my father sometimes didn't show up for a week or two, so my mother was with us alone. He left my mother later and got married, so my poor mother didn't have a choice, she had to live with us at her brother's children place in Stapar for a rather long time.

My aunt from Žabalj found a man for my mum. He was a good man indeed, his name was Trnda, he was also a musician. She recommended him to my mum, but my mum did not want to marry him at first. She was thinking about her life, she knew that her life was hard, she also went through various suffering while she was at the place of her brother's children. She was wondering what her life would be like, because she had once been disappointed, so it was hard for her to make a decision. She had to find out various ways to survive. She remarried at last and we had a good life with him. My stepfather brought me up since I was three.

I have never experienced my father's love. When I grew up and already had my own child, I visited him sometimes. He was never nice to me, he always behaved as a stepfather would. But I can say only good things about my stepfather. He raised me and I felt he loved me. We loved him, he also loved us and sacrificed everything for us. My mother had children with him. They had my brother who now lives in Belgrade. When my mother gave birth to our brother, my stepfather went to the frontline, in those times it was called munkasi.⁷¹ It was either in 1940 or 1941. To tell you the truth, I don't know. I know the country was under the Hungarians. When he returned from the war, we had already moved to the Gypsy lane in Žabalj. He lived for another two or three weeks, then he got some water disease⁷² from the consequences of being beaten up in the war and he died. I was small, my brother was also small so he can hardly

71 Forced labour imposed by the fascists in Hungary during W.W.II.

72 Folk term for symptoms which are related to heart disease. The body is not able to eliminate the excess of water and consequently edema appear on the legs of the diseased.

remember him. After that my poor mum stayed alone. She worked in other people's houses as a housekeeper, in a judge's house.

I didn't have a happy marriage either. When I divorced, I also went working with her to be able to support my brother who went to school and to get the monthly bus ticket. We suffered a lot in order to start him on the right path in life.

What did Romani people do when you were small?

– People were working in the fields. They picked hops, peas, they hoed corn or sold waste iron. You know dear, times were different then than now when people have their professions. We mostly worked in the fields or in other people's houses.

I left school before I finished second grade. I had to stay with my brothers, because mother went to work. I had to leave school in order to look after my younger brother and the other one who was handicapped. I am sorry I did not finish school. If I had not had to look after my brothers, I would have finished school, I would have had some profession to make a living. My brother finished school and works as a clerk at "Beobanka" in Belgrade. He has one child. He goes to the first grade of secondary school, he has turned seventeen.

I worked for our Gypsies as well, I looked after their children so that we could support my brother. My brother was fond of school. At that time, we had nothing, my child. Just poverty and misery. I remember it was snowing, he returned from school at midnight, he was studying by the lamp, there was no electricity. His hair would be covered with frost, ice and cold were all around, sometimes he had nothing to eat.

Life was tough in those times. My mother worked hard, we went working. Some people ate corn bread, my poor mum sold things out from the house. It is embarrassing to say that we slept on wooden boards because she had sold everything just to be able to give us some food. That is how my mum got ill.

My poor mother was even in jail. A man was selling poultry and nobody knew he had stolen it, so people were buying it. Do you know Mara Sondrina, Olgica's mother? The two of them had been very good friends, so my mum went to prison so that she wouldn't be alone. Do you know her husband Pilka? He and everybody else got imprisoned because of the hens. As they were walking down the street, people were shouting 'hen thieves'!

Where did you go out when you were young and how did you meet your friends?

In Laze Kostića Street in Žabalj, in the Gypsy lane, there was everything one could wish for. There were dancing parties, singing parties where even other neighbors and Serbs came and everybody around the corner. Everybody was coming to Laze Kostića street, to the Gypsy lane to see our dancing and singing.

Sometimes we went downtown, but those girls who were stuck up, they stayed away from us. They were not worthy even my little finger to tell you the truth. They gossiped about each other and they were wearing my dresses, but I never took anything that belonged to them, ask anyone who is still alive and they can tell you ... Bojana was the number one girl, then Sofija, poor thing, she died and also Dana – they were the most popular girls. They, however, didn't have anything to wear, they had just one dress both for everyday and for Sunday, what can I tell you dear, they were poor. I did have, though. My mother went to work and bought me everything that was fashionable, especially shoes.

When did you meet your husband and how did it happen?

– I did not even meet him, I was very young, I was about sixteen, seventeen years old. I can't tell you now whether I was a year or two older than him or he was older than me, I do not know exactly how old he was. His name was Vlada, he came from Šajkas. His brother Kona was coming to the Gypsy lane and everybody knew him. He was trading with horses. They were very dangerous, like those hit men. That Vlada is your mother's relative, Cikarojka also, she is the sister of your mother's mum.

What did the two of you meet?

– Kona was coming to the Gypsy lane and wherever he saw me he said, "You will be my sister – in – law! You will be my sister – in – law!" I would go home to my mum crying, "Mum, there is a black man there and he keeps saying that I will be his sister – in – law. I try to avoid him, mum, I am afraid of him." My mum said, "Leave him be, don't listen to him, he may be joking." But one day he did show up at my mum's, while I went away to bring some milk to one woman at the dairy. So he came to my mother to talk to her. My mother told him, "Listen, Kona, my child is still young, she will not get married until her brother finishes school, she has to support him." He said, "I wish him good luck!" And he went away. When he left, my mum said neither yes nor no, I also didn't promise anything. Nothing. He left and said to his mother, "Mum, we can prepare everything and go to fetch the bride." They prepared everything. My mother was astonished! What is this? You know all those Gypsies and those people where mum worked were surprised. They said that is not the way to do things, the child didn't promise anything, neither did she know him, they weren't even dating, what is this?

They brought presents, but had to take them back just the same. They didn't come for another month or two. But he was lurking after me, they wanted to steel me, but, you know, I was well aware of that and I was clever. I did not go anywhere, or downtown, but home and someone always escorted me when I carried milk to the dairy. It was then when Bojana got married to Nedeljko and they brought a wedding dress for her, a veil. Each and every one of us tried it

on. How nicely it suited us! I decided to marry just for the sake of the wedding dress. I was carried away by the veil! After that, my child, they came again. I was with that woman again, so I had no idea they came. Can you imagine, it was hellish cold, freezing cold, wood an stone cracked with cold when they came to take me with them.

They didn't come to ask for your hand?

– They asked my mum and dad, at that time, how should I say, it was quite a sum, four thousand dinars.

So they wanted to buy you?

– Yes. At that time it was a big sum of money, my child...

Your mother agreed to sell you?

– How should I say...?

The customs were like that?

– I can't remember quite well.

Did she get the money?

– It was all they prepared at our place, they didn't prepare anything at theirs, so it was just it. I can't remember whether they gave any money. Everybody told me, "Sweetheart, can't you see how poor they are! They are so miserably poor, don't you go. Look at your mother – in – law, the way she looks, they are dirty and greasy, don't go!" I was just standing and hesitated whether I should give the present back, what I should do. But there were some older people who persuaded my mum and me that they were rich and well off. They said that Kona was a tradesman and he was rich. When they came to fetch me, my husband's older brother, that Kona, was dancing and singing. He danced in the snow as Gypsies do, "Choro Kono, nay kay chol o shoro."⁷³ He sang that to give us a hint, I guess.

So, they took me away, my child. When they took me away and when I arrived to their house and saw how poor they were, that they slept on straw, I cried, I screamed and wanted to return home that very night. There was father – in – law, mother – in – law, he, his brother and his wife, nearly nine of them lived in one room and one kitchen. I spent about two months with them, I couldn't stand it anymore. I saw how that elder brother of his was beating his wife Draga. He put harness on his wife together with the horse, and she had to run along with the horse while he was beating her. When I saw this I couldn't take it anymore. He told me, "Would you like to be beaten like that?" It was just enough to see what his brother was doing with his wife. I decided to leave them even if it cost me my head.

⁷³ "Poor Kona, he has nowhere to put down his head." in Romani.

Luckily, it was God's will, he gave me five dinars, which was a lot of money at that time, in order to go and buy some bread but I didn't know where to go, I did not know the streets, because it was night when they took me there. When they took me there, they had nothing, not even a bit of bread, all they had was a warm room. When they brought me I was young, I had long hair, it was winter, cold and I was dressed nicely. People wanted to see me and they said to them immediately, "Where did you find this child? Why did you bring her to your house, just to ruin someone else's child? She will not stay with you, her mother and parents were fools to let her come to your house." I cried! "I want to go home, I want to go home!" "O.K.," they said, "the next day we would take you home." His elder brother was very jealous. I wasn't supposed even to look up when somebody entered the house.

My relatives were about to come as pogachars.⁷⁴ It was around Christmas, or a week after. My brother wanted to come from Novi Sad, his children too, deceased Sava Burkus, but because they had nothing and were poor, they didn't want to welcome them. However, my mum came with a woman, Kosana and Sava and stayed for a short while. The next day they went home. My mum asked me, "How are you, my child, how are you getting along?" What could I reply? "It is alright." I did not dare say anything, when he was there.

When my mum left, my father – in – law asked me to accompany him to the village. Šajkas is a large and good village. He was a good man and I went with him. I saw him write some figures on a piece of paper: two, three, four, and five. He was noting the number of pigs. Everybody gave him some food. He was making a register of pigs. He was a pig-dealer and was registering the pigs that had to be kept. In each house we visited, people gave him some money, or something else. When we arrived home, he and me, his son, that is my husband, was very jealous and asked, "Where did you take my wife?" I began crying and so did he. "Vlada, my son, how could I not take my daughter – in – law with me, when everybody wants to see her?", he asked. But you cannot argue with a fool. He tore my clothes into pieces! All right, I was thinking, he can tear them, just let me get myself out of here. I had other things to wear, thank God, I just wanted to leave him.

I could see that they were keeping swine. He said to me to bring that new dress of mine he had torn to pieces to our best man who was Hungarian. I went to them with the torn dress to ask to sew him a shirt from that dress. His wife noticed something strange, so she asked, "Nohat⁷⁵, Mica, you cried, what happened to you?" I said, "Nothing, Vlada is sending this so that you can sew a shirt for him." When I left the house, my child, I was wondering where to go. It was

⁷⁴ See the glossary at the end of the book.

⁷⁵ "Well" in Hungarian

dark, but I asked them where Bora, our main best man lived. "Where does Bora live?", I asked. Some women told me, so I headed toward their house in deep snow. My husband had beaten me before that, slapped me twice telling me to go to the village and find something for him to wear and to take that fabric so that he can get a shirt. I went to our other best man, they also understood what happened, and said, "What is it, Mica?" I replied, "I am not going to return there dead or alive, you can take me there only if I'm dead, but not if I am alive, I am not going there anymore, I don't dare!" Then our best man said, "Don't be afraid, he can't do you any harm." I wasn't really afraid of my husband, but of my brother – in – law, Kona, because I saw what he was doing to his wife. I thought the same would happen to me and what would I do then?

How did you leave him with those five dinars?

– He gave me the money to go and buy some bread, but it was as if God guarded me. I was holding those five dinars crying, not knowing what to do. I didn't know where the police station was to tell them that I didn't want to live with him anymore. So God helped me and I went to our best man where I learned that they were swine-dealers actually. My mother – in – law ran bare-foot in snow to call me back. She knew well that I was there. She knocked at the door, dogs were barking and I was trembling sitting alone in the room. Here they came to take me, I thought. Our best man said, "Don't you be afraid, they can't harm you now." I asked him not to tell her that I was there and begged them not to open the door to her. He said, "Don't be afraid, police will come and they will follow you." Like hell they did. My mother – in – law asked, "Is my daughter – in – law there?" He replied, "Yes, she is. What do you want?" She said I should come home, it wouldn't happen again, her son wants to hang himself, her son wants to kill himself because of her, let her return home, it will not happen again. "No", he replied, "what do you think you are doing, you want to kill her, someone else's child, is that what you want to do? If things can't work out let her go to her house and he can stay at your house." I didn't dare go with her. He said, "Police will escort you." I went home and saw they were beating him. His father and his brother Kona were beating him because of me while I was holding the door just about to leave. Kona, his brother turned around and saw that I was about to leave, so he said, "Well, my sister – in – law, do you think you will leave just like that?" He slapped me two or three times. I told myself never mind, I will endure everything just to be able to leave. I ran out, went to his father where he was keeping swine. I said, "You know what, father, I just can't bear this any more, this is my limit, I can't take it anymore." What could he do, when he saw what was going on he said to me, "My child, what can I do if that is the case, you'd better go to your mother alive than dead." In the end he spoke to me nicely, and I was scared then, I wasn't scared of him, but

of his brother Kona. I was sure that he would force me to go back if he saw me going away. In that case dogs would tear me apart and eat of my flesh as much as they want.

I was running across the fields, my sister – in – law, Draga was running after me. It was easy for her, she was not tired, she could run easily, every time she caught up with me, she grabbed me. I was young, strong, I wasn't scared of her, sometimes she pulled me down, sometimes I pulled her down, I also pulled her hair, and hardly any hair was left on her. My hair was loose, I tore away my clothes and threw them into a ditch.

Suddenly she saw a man with whom Kona was trading, the man was riding a motorcycle. She waved at him to stop and to chase me so that they could catch up with me which was easy for him. When he caught me, he was pulling me on one side, my sister – in – law was pulling me on the other. I couldn't use my arms at all, so I kicked her. When the man saw this, he said, "Listen, Draga, I will not be responsible for anyone's child. Let the bride alone, she may be right." He sat on the motorcycle and went away. But the two of us were still fighting. While we were fighting, a mute man showed up coming from a nearby farm. He had a big stick and something on it, shaped like an apple. He heard that Vlada had gotten married and also knows who they were. I knew that he was mute, so I explained to him somehow so he could understand. He told me to run and he continued to fight with her whenever she approached me, he hit her with that stick and she fell. He said to me, "Run!" So I was running as far as the first farm near Djurdjevo, where I came to the town hall to complain on them. They told me not to be afraid and to go home.

However, I was very frightened and I began running again and when I reached the inn in Djurdjevo called "Baba" a man called me by my name, Mica. As soon as they called me by my name, I fainted and fell, I didn't know what was going on around me, people ran across to lift me and said, "Don't be afraid! He can't do you any harm." They began to call him names and that man told me to go with him to his place. I went with that man to his and his wife's place, her name was Marča. When I arrived, they began crying and cursing him and whenever somebody opened the door, I froze with fear saying, "Here he is, coming to take me away." While I was staying with that woman, old woman named Jovanka was there who saw me and sent word to my mother. There was someone who went to Žabalj and returned in the evening, Žabalj and Djurdjevo are not very far away. My mother came that evening so I went home.

Very dramatic. Did you marry afterwards?

– After that I stayed at home for three or four years and then I got married in Žabalj to Toša and we had one child.

We lived in Žabalj for a while, after that he joined the army, so I was stay-

ing both with his family and my mother, changing places. It was a marriage out of love. I loved him and went to live with him of my own will. He was my sweetheart. He was married before we met. He didn't have any children. I knew that he had to go to the army and so did he. I told him, "Go to the army!" He said, "I am not going, the first bullet is mine, either the bullet or you." I was frightened and thought he might do something. He said, "For two days if not longer, just for two days, but I want you and nobody else." I really loved him.

I worked at a bakery with my mother. He did not work. I worked for a year or two at a bakery and then he joined the army. Unfortunately, I did not know then that I would have a child. We had just one child, but unfortunately, when he returned from the army, the boy was already born, so I was staying at my mother's with my child for a while, and for a while at his parent's place, but most of the time at my mother's. His family didn't like me, nobody in it liked me. They were saying the child was not their brother's, as if I had been doing God knows what while he was away. I suffered a lot because of that and I spent some time at my mother's and some time with his family with my child.

When he returned from the army, my mother, as any mother would, said to me, "Go my dear and stay there, he shouldn't come from the army and see you here, don't let it happen, go there and what will be will be." So, I went there and when he returned from the army, he came first to my mother's house to see where I was, in my mother's house or in his mother's. When he came, my stepfather came with him.

A week before he came from the army, my mother's mother died and I was afraid something would happen to her. My stepfather said, "I am going out for a minute", when my husband burst in and stood at the door not saying a word. He just left the suitcases outside without approaching me or his family. Everybody gathered around him to kiss him, after that he approached me, just looked at the child and kept silent. His family was jealous and said, "Go to her first don't look at us" and I guess because of that he didn't want to do it. He was ashamed to come to me first. But I told him, "Look, your folks are more important to you than my child and me, go to your father and your sister!" All kinds of things happened my dear, there was a row and everything.

How did you get along? Did you quarrel, did he beat you?

– He never laid a finger on me, we were getting along well, but what's the use when his folks were so hostile towards me. While he was in the army, they did all sorts of things to me. When he returned, they were also spreading all sorts of rumors about me and I didn't like it. Why didn't he ask me questions in front of them whether I was right or wrong? Instead he wanted me to go to the cinema with him where he would ask me questions, when I had a baby to breast-feed. How could I go to the cinema with him and leave my baby behind

so that he could ask me questions? His elder sister wanted to jump and beat me up, but I said, "Here I am, I am not afraid in your room, there I am if I am guilty of anything."

What did they blame you for?

– They accused me that the child was not his because I stayed for some time with my mother, then with them.

Did he believe that the child was his?

– Of course he did! But, you see, he believed them too. Then we divorced. We got separated for a couple of times. We were not officially married. He never said to me, "Go!" I left him each time, I would just close the door behind me and come to my mother's place. He was illiterate, but there was a woman in the neighborhood who knew how to read and write. I wrote on the door, "Toša, I've gone away. I am staying with my mother now, I can't live with your folks, I can live with you, but you are listening to your people and I am keeping my child."

I also proposed to leave the child with him, I also thought I would kill both myself and the child. I was thinking like this: if my stepfather accepted my brother, that doesn't mean that he has to accept me and my child, so all sorts of thoughts crossed my mind. Praise the Lord, maybe God our Lord wanted us both to be right, so he took him. I loved him, but it seems God our Lord loved him more.

I always worked for a living. When I went to work, my mother stayed with the child, but unfortunately, the child was ill. At that time I didn't know what leukemia was. When I came home I saw that the child was exhausted. When I took him to doctor Mašić, he said to me I was supposed to carry the child urgently to Novi Sad. I asked him what it was, but he just replied that I had to carry him to Novi Sad. He was six and a half. As soon as I took him there, they put him to hospital. He stayed in hospital for three and a half months. They didn't tell me straight away what it was, just that blood sedimentation was either bad or that it was getting better, in the end they told me, when I could see it myself, but it was late already. Whenever I went to visit him or asked about his medical reports, I would faint.

When your child died, you stayed alone and never married again?

– After that I lived with my mother until her death. I married Miloš, Mara's father after my mum's death. I wasn't in love with him, I just had to marry him, because my brother and sister – in – law said they couldn't support me. Then I told myself, "A man will come into his house, no matter how stooped, crippled or limping he may be, he will be a man." I stayed in my mum's house.

Your brother got married and left for Belgrade?

– Yes, he got married and now he lives in Belgrade with his wife and child,

whereas I stayed in the house.

That is why I married that man, Miloš. We lived together for almost three months when he got ill. God forbid, it could have also happened to me. He fell ill at my place. I went to tell his daughter and relatives that he had gotten ill, they took him to hospital, where he died. I would have left him anyhow, because he was sick every now and then. I thought he could become unwell and die in my house, God forbid. I suffered enough when my mother was ill and he had his daughters and sisters to care for him.

Was your child baptized?

– Yes.

Do you get a pension?

– Not a pension, but social welfare. It doesn't come regularly. Sometimes we don't get any money for a whole year, it is the same with children's allowance. I can hardly make a living. I don't work in other people's houses any more. How can I go to other people's houses when there is nowhere to go. Some women who used to live here and who needed help, left for Novi Sad or Belgrade. Some of them died. I have nobody, just the Holy Lord, merciful God. I believe in God. I feel desperate, my life is so hard. I cry all the time. I wash my face more often with tears than with water. Loneliness is even worse, and when my brother doesn't call me, and when summer comes, when the weather is nice, all kinds of things cross my mind and then I suffer a lot.

Do you celebrate Christmas?

– It lasts for three days. The first one is Tucindan⁷⁶. Some people prepare everything in advance to avoid a lot of work that day. Most people prepare on Christmas Eve everything for the following day so that everything would be ready, the roast meat and Christmas kolach⁷⁷ are prepared on Christmas Eve. Whoever can, prepares a turkey or a pig. First that is prepared, followed by roast meat and Christmas kolach for God our Lord. When it is ready, by twelve o'clock chesnitza⁷⁸ must be on the table, as well as roast meat, whole lunch, then you cut up the chesnitza, you cut a piece for each of your relatives, the first one is for God our Lord, it is his piece, then for father, brother, sisters and the others in that order. On Christmas Eve, at six o'clock, maybe even later, you bring some straw into the house, the eldest host of the family greets you with the words: "God bless you!" Then come the korindjashes⁷⁹, everybody greets them, both young and old come as korindjashes, we also go as korindjashes as it is an

⁷⁶ See glossary at the end of the book.

⁷⁷ See glossary at the end of the book.

⁷⁸ See glossary at the end of the book.

⁷⁹ See glossary at the end of the book.

old custom. The next day you get lunch ready and see how people ride horses. On the third day of Christmas you clean the house, straw is thrown out, but the leftovers from Christmas dinner are wrapped into that straw, into a bundle as a medicine, so to speak, just in case if God forbids something happens, all the bones and everything is left aside ... It should not be thrown out. I don't know why. If one throws those bones to dogs, people say the family will quarrel just like dogs. It's mostly good to cure an illness, Christmas straw is used as medicine if someone has stomach trouble, you put it over the stomach, or if you have a fit, you should nibble on it and then you put it on your stomach for three times and then you will no longer have pains in your stomach. That broom that was used for cleaning up must not be used any more. You should buy a new one, because it should last just for one year. You should be careful not to allow anyone to take anything from your house during those days, if someone comes to you that first day of Christmas, you should welcome him by throwing some wheat on him. That person is called *poloznik*.⁸⁰ Now I live alone and there is no one to welcome on Christmas day. Last year and this year there was nobody to welcome me, I brought the straw and everything in as well I could.

When is your Patron Saint's day?

– Well, we used to celebrate Saint Petka⁸¹. Let me say again I never forget that there is one God, that there are no hundreds of Gods. Jesus Christ is just one, he saved us. God sacrificed his son on the cross for our sake. I never forget our Patron Saint's Day. I have been going to church until recently, until I got baptized.

You have now joined Evangelists?

– Yes, they are Christians.

Do they forbid going to church?

– They do not forbid that to us. They just say that you should keep to one side, you cannot belong to two sides at the same time, if you do that you go against God, you are cheating on God our Lord. They don't have a cross, they do not cross themselves like other Christians do, nor do they have icons or Patron Saints.

Does that mean that you now do not celebrate your Saint Petka just because they say you should not, because it is against their rules?

– We pray just like we would in church, but we do not have icons. They say, "We have nothing against icons on the wall, let them stay there, but Jesus and God our Lord will appear in your thought and he will say 'Move them away.'" In this Christian Church things are different than they are with Seven

⁸⁰ See glossary at the end of the book.

⁸¹ See glossary at the end of the book.

Day Adventist Church.⁸² They reject Lord, they do not respect anything, they don't have Christmas and Easter, and they don't have Patron Saints. I haven't asked my brother on Easter if his Church celebrates Easter. My brother goes to the Seven Day Adventist Church.

What happened on Easter?

– Well what do you mean my child, it is when Jesus Christ resurrected. The Romans crucified him, Jews crucified him and he gave his blood, his life for the people in order to save us and to clean us in order to give power and to give food to the poor. He said, "Drink, this is my blood, this is my body!" They crucified him after that, he resurrected and when they went to his grave they said, "Our Lord is not here." He resurrected and they saw him afterwards as he came saying, "I am with you, look at my hands, look at my legs."

How do you celebrate Easter?

– As other people do. Before I got baptized, I asked around, and hesitated at first. It was a hard decision for me to get baptized. But our sisters asked me, "Why wouldn't you, Mica, you live alone?" and this and that. When I saw others do it, who are better off than I am and what can I tell you, when I saw the parcels that were being distributed, there is just one God our Lord and I asked him to forgive me. When they did it why shouldn't I do it, I was forced and needy, I had no firewood, I had nothing, I was done for, I was ready to die, nobody knows this except my Jovanka. How many times did my Jovanka cry with me, how many times did she give firewood and coal to me, all right now... I gave it back to them, but it was so little so she told me, "Mica dear, I have no idea how you will live on like this." Thanks first to God our Lord and then to brothers and sisters, because they realized how poor I was, so they proposed to everybody to collect money, as much as they could give. Ten here and twenty there, they gathered as much as they could, so they bought some firewood, and just before Christmas they gave me twenty DM as to get over the winter. I had to. Lord knows everyone's thoughts, he knows how hard it is for everyone and how everyone feels and lives.

Why do people dye eggs for Easter?

– Well, why? God left it to us, because Jesus Christ resurrected.

What do people do on Easter morning if they have children?

– If the children are small and their mother wants to make them happy, she puts into a small basket some grass, clover leaves, eggs, a bunny and says that the bunny has brought the eggs.

Do you know why May 1st is celebrated?

⁸² See glossary at the end of the book.

– It is a national holiday. May 1st is celebrated by everybody who works, those who are employed, because for them it means getting rest. When I was young and employed, I celebrated that holiday. We had a free day. We also used to go downtown, sometimes there were musicians and singers and we just left everything behind and went there. Times have changed. Those who are employed have a holiday that is why May 1st is celebrated. It is a holiday and lasts for **four days**.

What about November 29th? Did you celebrate that day when you were employed?

– No, I didn't, because it was a national holiday, and my employer was a self employed baker.

Do you know any nursery rimes, did your mother ever tell you a poem when you were young?

– My mother was not that young, she grew old and forgot things, and she did not know any of those things. I learned poems only at school when I was a pupil.

Did you have toys when you were a little girl and how did you play?

– Yes, I had some dolls, we played with plastic dolls, but we also made some rag dolls. My friend and me sewed dresses for them.

What else did you play with?

– Sometimes my mother and father bought me... When I was a little girl I cried a lot, I loved my father, my mum didn't know what to do with me, she would buy a doll to me just to stay quiet. When we moved to Žabalj, my friends would bring their toys, I would bring mine, so we played together.

Did you ever go to the fair when you were young?

– I was at a fair just twice. I was not interested in that much, I wasn't interested in those things that used to be done before, like going to Saint Patron's Day holidays or inns, I didn't like that.

Did you go to that famous Patron Saint's Day to Kovilj?

– Only once. When I was a child, with some woman ... But when I saw those crippled people there I didn't go any more. Well, let me see, I was just once in Gospodjinci, when I was young. Several girls decided to visit an aunt. It was overcrowded, we didn't have enough chairs, and some had to stand, so I didn't go any more. I was, however, twice or three times in Petrovo Selo to see priest there, his name was Steva. I went there with my brother and with Marica.

Do you believe there are vampires and that dead people can rise for six months and they know everything?

– I believe they exist now, there were vampires before and the spirit can appear up to six weeks after death, his body is in the earth, but its spirit goes around for six more weeks. You can feel his spirit in the house, I am telling you just as the old people told me. I do believe it even today. I have never heard it, but others talk about it and they believe. I can imagine these things still happening.

Vidosava, 63 years old (1937)

What was your childhood like?

– I was born in 1937. We were very poor. My father died in a concentration camp. There were eight of us children and my parents took pains to support us; they would feed us with the food they brought in their bags. My father worked and my mother did not; she made magic. I do remember war. Mother would run with us in the cornfield, in the vineyard – anywhere and we would spend the night there. My brother was taken to the concentration camp too. He came home when the war was over, but my father never did.

We lived in Dobanovci. My mother used to take my apron and bring flour in it so that we could bake bread on fire. We had to hide fire, so she baked potatoes on embers and that is what we ate. We did not have a horse and a carriage and our father was not with us. We all ran after our mother, because we didn't have anyone to look after us. Her family, who had both a horse and a carriage, ran away leaving us alone since my mother had too many children and the times were hard – each person took care of himself only. We, children, had no idea what war was, and she, poor thing, would cry because she was worried for us. She was afraid. She used to carry flour in the apron and knead bread. She also carried pails of water to prepare meals. There were eight of us. When the war broke out I was, I guess, seven and only one of my sisters was married in Simanovce. We had a friend – a German woman. Once when we wanted to run away, because one German pointed his machine-gun right at us, the woman wouldn't let him do it. She loved us. If it had not been for her, the German would have killed us. She was very fond of my mother and she helped us that is how we survived, thank God! My brother stayed alive although he was in the concentration camp. My father was tortured, he suffered a lot in the concentration camp and so he died; he was not killed. He was in Sajmište concentration camp. My mother became a widow at an early age and she suffered her whole life to support us; she never remarried. After the war she got some help, people helped us to build a new house as our old house was knocked down and because my father died in the concentration camp the government provided us with a new house and all kinds of stuff. People took pity on our large family.

Did you attend school?

– Well, I didn't. How could you expect our mother to send eight children to school? It was wartime. However, each and every one of us learned something either in the Army or elsewhere. My sister learned how to write playing in the sand with other girls. I tried to teach myself, I suffered a lot at that time, I didn't learn how to write or read. I felt very sorry for my mother and I did

whatever she told me to do. I was a middle child in the family. I regret not going to school now.

Then I grew up. My future father-in-law came to the market and spotted me. I took my mother's wide skirt and put it on and I was only sixteen, I swept the yard. It was Đurđevdan⁸³ and we all looked forward to it, we celebrated it. On that day we played with flowers, fought each other, we were all happy. One mustn't sleep long that day since it's believed that you take the dream away from the lamb. So we would rise before dawn, and decorate the main gate and the house with flowers, lilac most often, and play with other children. So, my father-in-law came to the horse market and noticed me. He fancied me as a daughter-in-law. When he came to our house he told my mother, "I have a son who is about to get married, let us be in – laws." My mother replied, "I too have a daughter, so why not!" Then he went home and told his folks about the arrangement. Soon after that it was Saint Ilija's⁸⁴ day and I went to Pazova to celebrate it. The whole family gathered and surrounded me. They would not let me go anywhere. They were guarding me. Back then people respected chastity; it was not like it is now. A girl could not roam around freely. That is how I remained a virgin; I had no man whatsoever, but Slavko. At patron saint's day celebration, Slavko and I strolled around, while my uncle Triva and my mother followed us closely. Nowadays girls stroll around fearing no one. If a girl is not a virgin they would send her off home first thing in the morning and they would tie a pot to her leg so that it clanged loudly. Thus she would bring shame on herself and her whole family. That is why a girl was well guarded although now that is no longer practiced. Our tradition is fading away, but there are Romani people who still keep the old tradition and look after their daughters. So, there I was strolling around with Slavko, my future husband, not daring to look at him, he not daring to look at me. That was all the dating we had. After that he proposed formally. He was fifteen, and I was sixteen, I was one year older than he. When his family arrived my mother had straightened up the house since she could not present them with bread, dinner or anything of the kind. We had nothing to eat ourselves; we were so poor. They arrived on carriages and they had previously prepared the presents for me: a lamb, bread and salt. They were so sure that I would agree to marry, although I saw Slavko only once before – at patron saint's day celebration. When they entered the house my father-in-law brought all the things necessary: bread, salt that's what Romani people do when they go to ask for their daughter – in – law's hand. A father-in-law has to bring whatever is necessary. When they started bargaining over the price they had to pay for me, since they were richer than us, they offered eight million

83 See glossary at the end of the book.

84 See glossary at the end of the book.

dinars and that was a huge amount. You could have a wedding party with three hundred guests with all that money. However, my mother insisted on nine millions as well as lambs, two barrels of wine, peppers, salt and the father-in-law was expected to provide all that if he liked the bride. My mother had nothing to do with it, father-in-law's has to give all that. That used to be our custom but it is no longer kept. We no longer sell our daughters. So they bargained and my father-in-law agreed to all my mother's requests, but he would not give her another million. So my mother told him, "I cannot give you my daughter. I am poor, I cannot even make ends meet. If you give nine millions, lambs and two barrels of wine I will give her." Then they pretended that they were getting ready to go home; they sat on the carriage leaving, and then I urged my mother, "Why, mother! You got so stubborn over that million!" I stood up to my mother then, I do not know what got into me, as I was rather bashful, probably I felt afraid since Slavko was leaving too. Then my mother invited them to come back as I wanted to get married. She told them that they could keep the million. On hearing that, my father-in-law called the company back. They started unloading the presents that they had prepared for the bride and started making merry, singing "May our bride be happy". They paid eight millions for me, two barrels of wine, lambs, brandy, pepper, salt, gold, ducats. They organized great feast in no time, and it was soon followed with the wedding. I wore a long veil.

Did you travel anywhere before the wedding?

– No, I was at home most of the time. I went to Fenek when we celebrated Saint Ilija's day. It was their patron saint's day and boys and girls all went there. If a boy liked a girl he would not hesitate too long before he asked for her hand. It was not necessary that the boy and the girl meet, the whole issue was settled by the parents. For instance, when a girl is proposed, and when she meets the boy, she must not say openly that she wants to marry. She had to tell an elderly Rom all about her wish or she could sway her feet. That is how it was before. You could ask for a girl's hand even if you have never seen her before. It was not like it is now! The parents and whole family were in charge of the whole matter and if they happen to like the girl they ask for her hand. The girl and the boy have no say in the whole arrangement. Sometimes the girl elopes, but that is a great shame for the whole family.

How did you spend the days of your marriage?

– When I moved to their house, Slavko and I were very young. We were like children. The whole family was waiting eagerly to see if I was a virgin. When I got married I did not sleep with my husband right away, since I was shy. When my mother-in-law inspected our sheets in the morning she was sure I was not a virgin and she wanted to send me home. After that I slept with my husband and the whole family realized that I was a virgin. It's a serious problem for a girl

if she is not honest because she gets thrown away from the house immediately. After that I only knew of suffering. I was very young when I got married and I respected my father-in-law a lot, I brought him a basin with water so that he could wash his feet. Also, when he went to the market I would help him put on the coat, I would hand him the comb and I was sure I had to do all that. On Thursdays Roms would take their horses to the market and they would come to our house too, my father-in-law would ask me to sing in front of the other Roms, as if I were a singer. I loved to sing, but sometimes I didn't feel like singing, and he would really pester me. When Slavko's two brothers got married we noticed that he did not ask their wives to sing. I have no idea why. Perhaps those Romani girls were different or I was the only one who knew to sing. I paid great respect to them all and I obeyed every of their requests. Once I grew really tired of singing and I hit my father-in-law with a slipper and I yelled at him, "Will I ever stop singing..."

You had the courage to do that?

– I had, because Slavko told me not to sing any more. The other two daughters-in-law never sang. While I respected them all, they did not respect me. They had all beaten me, both my mother- and sister-in-law maybe because I was honest, and they were not.

My father-in-law wanted me to sing Romani songs, there's one when a boy asks his father to muster horses so that they could go and ask for the bride's hand, he liked that song because he had sons who were old enough to marry. And the song goes like this:

Oh, forest green forest,
Oh, forest green forest!
So beautiful with your leaves,
Like a girl with her hair!
When I pass through you,
When I pass near you,
I will not pluck your leaf,
Or crack your branch.

I cannot sing nice now, as I did before. My son sings now. I love singing and I like to make marry. I would sing and dance and no one else could satisfy me like I could when I sang to my heart's content. I have a happy soul and my son inherited this from me.

How many children do you have?

– Two – a daughter and a son. They are both well, thank God. My son lives with me, he has a house and my daughter has a house downtown. However, they are both temporarily working in Austria. They come and visit me from time to time and then they go back. My daughter works in a village there, and

my son is a taxi-driver and he sings too. He records LPs. He is about to release his fourth album now. During air strikes he recorded a song and dedicated it to our people here in Yugoslavia, and to his parents. I cannot remember the exact words, but I will paraphrase it. He asks the other female singer, because there are two of them singing, is it really war down here, and she replies that bombs are dropped on Belgrade and that they echo to Novi Sad. Then he asks his sister if our folks at home are still alive, he says that he feels so sorry for the Romani people from Srem, Romani people from Pazova especially. The song is beautiful and he sings gorgeously. When I first heard the song I cried a lot. All these people, whoever had heard the song, they all cried.

Have you ever been employed?

– No, I would clean windows in other people's houses, I did the laundry and that is how I supported my children. Slavko was in Austria for four years and, thank God, he gave our daughter's hand in marriage there. We were very poor then, and now our son has built a large house, may God give him happiness and health. To both him and my daughter Ljilja and her child. I have just one grandchild. My son lives with a German woman, but I prefer Romani girls and he promised he would marry one. I love the German woman, but I prefer our Romani women; so he promised he would marry a girl of our blood. My son is recording a song, which is dedicated to me only: "Thank you dear mother, all you had – you gave me, may God bless you..." (she sings). I do not know the whole song, but it is a very sad song although its music is not. I asked him: "Bora, how come that this music is very lively, and its lyrics is so sad?" and he replied: "Mommy it is because you are still alive, you have not died so the music cannot be sad..."

Did your son and daughter attend school?

– Yes, they did, thank God. My son has the diploma of a locker smith, but he went to work in Austria. My daughter did not finish the elementary school. But it is all my fault. I thought she is a girl, why should she go to school, she is more needed at home where she can watch over her younger brother. She stayed at home as I had to go to work and I couldn't take Bora with me. I told Ljilja to quit school and I still feel guilty because of that. That is the way it is: a boy is a boy, whereas a girl...there is no use sending her to school. But I should have sent her to school, and now I am sorry because of that.

My daughter has divorced ten years ago. She has a large house downtown, she has gold, all she needs. She has a son and, God be praised, one day we will go and look for a suitable bride for him. The only thing that matters is that she is pretty; she does not have to be rich. All she needs to have is long hair so that my daughter can put all the necklaces she has on her, because she bought them all for her. That is my burning desire – to marry my grandson, to see that and if

I die may his mother be happy for me. I would like to live by their side.

Do your children help you?

– Naturally. My son sends me 400 DM monthly, and everyone knows that. My son has a good heart, and my daughter is a bit strong-willed. She helps me too, but she has hot temper. She is after her father's mother, and my son is after my family. Ljilja is very hard working woman, clean and honest. She separated from her husband ten years ago and did not marry again since then. She struggles hard to provide her son with everything, he has fashionable clothes and she lets him do whatever he wants. I try to warn her of the danger because she'll spoil him, but she replies by saying that she wants her son to have everything since she lacked most of those things when she was his age. I tell her that I gave the two of them all I could give. I could not give much; I worked in the village and only made sure they were not hungry. I could not provide them many things; all I had were golden necklaces. Ljilja wore them. However I couldn't give her all those things she can now give to her son. She spoiled her son while he was still a small boy; she would buy him suits when he was only seven. I do not like that, because I believe a child should not have all he wants. But may he be safe and sound and happy, and next to her and may he listen to her. I have a beautiful grandson.

With whom do you live now?

– Well, with my husband! I am looking forward to his death, because then I will move to my children in Austria. He is ill and I tend him. I would rather leave him, but my son does not let me do it; he says I have to stay here and look after him. But he doesn't deserve it. He used to beat me. While we were married he remarried four times. He brought women to our house and he and those Romani whores of his took everything I had. That forced Bora to leave for Austria, and now he is well off. He made a house for himself, thank God, and I only pray that he takes Romani woman for his wife and have Romani children. What will I do with a German, I cannot talk with her. When I go to Austria she wants to talk with me but I cannot understand a single word. I would like to have a beautiful daughter-in-law; I would buy her slippers and a broom so that she can sweep the yard with it and I will do all the rest. All I want is to see her walking in the yard at seven o'clock in the morning. I lived with my husband only because of Ljilja. There is a difference between my children: Ljilja is twelve years older than Bora, and during all those long twelve years I yearned so much to have a boy. When I gave birth to Bora no one dared beat me. It was only when I gave birth to a son that Slavko started taking my side. Until then he would not even look at me, so now he did not deserve to be looked after. But I have to do it, for children's sake.

Do you watch Romani programs on the television?

– Yes, I do, only I cannot read. I am illiterate.

Have you celebrated state holidays, for instance Women's Day?

– We have. We, women, would buy presents for one another, but my husband has never bought me anything. He did not love me, he had other women.

Have you celebrated religious holidays?

– For Christmas we would bring straw and badnjak⁸⁵ and take them in the house in the evening. We would steal some wine, spread the straw and make stuffed cabbage. At night we would go to church, or sometimes in the morning and we pray to God, we light the candle ... On the third day of Christmas we take out the straw and we make chesnitza⁸⁶ unless a family member died during that year. People say that straw should be brought into the house in spite of the death in the family, as no straw in the house might be bad luck. On Easter we dye eggs, and if somebody dies then we do not. That is how we celebrate Christmas and Easter even today. That makes children very happy, and us too.

Will you tell us other songs too?

– “Sunday dawned in Sombor
Where we had a fair,
Dance for me, dear, dance!

I cannot remember the whole song, but I will tell you the other one which Romani people sang when they went to ask for a girl's hand. The father took out a bottle of brandy and sang:

“Oh, my, my, the bell is jingling,
And Lina's dancing,
Oh, two brothers came together,
and ended their lives together in the river.
God will bring us summer,
God will bring us summer.
Then I will pass over the river
Then I will pass over the river.
And steal a horse for me,
And steal a horse for me.
I promise before all of you,
I promise before all of you,
I will not steal a horse to sell it later,
I will steal it to ride it.”

When I was a bride my father-in-law asked me to sing the song about a

⁸⁵ See the glossary at the end of the book.

⁸⁶ See the glossary at the end of the book.

horse and a horse stable:

“I feel so lucky when I wake in the morning,
When I enter the stable and I have something to see.
I spread my and I get ready for the fair,
To find a daughter – in - law for the family.”

That is what all Romani people sang when they were preparing to go to the fair and to find a daughter – in - law. My father – in - law asked me to sing the song since he had two sons ready to get married. When we went to ask for a girl's hand for one of them, I had to sing. I used to sing beautifully, and the more I sang the nicer it was, but now I cannot sing – I am old now. I am so sorry I cannot sing any more. My father – in - law forced me to sing the song about horses and bride-to-be and he really enjoyed listening to it. We, Romani people, love horses and carriages, since long time ago our lives were quite different. Even now we own two carriages although we have no horses, as Slavko is ill and he cannot take care of them. As for carriages, Bora would not let me sell them. Those are light horse carriages with wings.

Do you have any poultry?

– Yes, I do, but I cannot struggle with horses, and my son would not let me toil any more. He promised that he would buy me horses. I love them very much. Once a horse kicked me while I gave it some water. I had to do everything, my husband has always been ill. I had to go to the stable and feed and water the horses. While I was new in the family, I had to bring a pail of cold water, sweep the yard, do all the chores in the house before my mother - and father – in - law would get up in the morning. I took it all for granted, and I did all that without a word of protest. We did not have running water in the house. Once I woke up at four o'clock in the morning and I was scared to death because I thought my mother- and father-in-law would wake up soon and I had not managed to bring a pail of water yet. That was on Christmas. I got dressed up in a jiffy, and went to bring the water. When I returned they had already woken up so I wished them marry Christmas. They were waiting for the water and me eagerly. They did not reproach me for being late so that time I was lucky.

Were Romani people afraid of the dark?

– Of course! I am still afraid of the dark. At seven o'clock, I become afraid, but I am not just afraid of anything, I am afraid of vampires because they exist. Before Romani people used to take their horses to water them, and a wizard would hide and torment the horses or he would mount a horse and the horse wouldn't be able to move so it would faint. Romani people can't see the vampire, but the horses cannot move as long as they are in muddy waters. These demons used to exist, but now they have disappeared. There were Romani people who saw them, or they saw apparitions; some could see them, some could not.

I have never seen one, but I have always been scared of them. Romani people used to tell what they had seen, and most often it was when they would return back home from a long journey. Sometimes, those demons would cause horses to go to the grave yard. There must be something out there, when the devil goes out, especially when somebody dies. These things happened before, but now there aren't such things anymore.

Fairies also exist, I saw them, they are very tall. I will tell you something, but you must promise you will take my advice. You should never cut or break elderberries. If you cut them you will fall ill. That is where fairies live and dance. When I was young once I cut elderberry branches, and I would always hurt my nails, cut myself or fall ill, since I didn't know you mustn't do it. Elderberry wood is not good fuel for making fire either, but nowadays people no longer pay attention to that. I saw fairies near a house, I was only seven then. My grandmother could foresee things, and she used to talk with fairies.

Do you go to church?

– I do. I have been fasting on Good Friday for a long time. Bora was seven when I started fasting. I used to work for a woman and she said, “Oh, come on, what is this fasting all about, now I will give you something to eat and you should just eat it and forget about all that witchcraft.” It was on Good Friday. I took the food she offered, and when I got home, I found out that our horse had got ill. I called for a doctor. When he arrived he could not figure out what was wrong with the horse. I guess it was God's message that I should keep fasting. When the doctor left our house, I crouched near the horse as I remembered Saint Petka and I prayed to her. Soon after that our horse got up on his legs and asked for some food. That was like a sign to me, there is something out there. I do not lie, there is a kind of greater force out there. God told me to fast, and now I have been fasting every Friday for twenty years. If you believe in God, he will protect you. Our patron saint is Saint Nikola.⁸⁷ We truly believe in God. I go to church whenever I can, I light a candle and I pray to God for my children, and I light a candle for the dead too. When you light a candle you always have to dedicate it to someone. First you light a candle for your own household and children, then for the dead, it must be lit somewhere far away from the first candle. Sometimes, we buy a candle in the church and bring it home.

Did you make magic?

– My grandmother made magic, and my mother learned it from her, and I did it only for a while. My daughter told me to give up magic, since it is not good, so now I have nothing to do with it. However, if a woman comes to me and asks me to tell fortune for her, and if I can get couple of dinars for that, then

⁸⁷ See glossary at the end of the book.

I do it. My daughter tells me not to do it, and my son tells me to make magic. When I want to tell fortune I look into cards or coffee drags and I usually lie. Frankly, I do not know how to foresee fortune, somebody could tell my fortune. But I strongly believe that God gave us the knowledge how to make magic, how to sing and trade with horses, goods etc so we don't have to work, and we, Romani people, have comfortable life.

Is there anything that you have forgotten to tell us?

– Well I forgot to mention that if a daughter-in-law is honest then the whole family gathers and when she wakes up she brings water to everybody and we all give her with money, and some people put money in the basin which is not good, because money should be placed in the bride's hand. The bride also brings a towel and everybody in the family wipes their face with it and celebrate for two, three or even four days when the girls is a virgin. In case she is not a virgin, then everyone is mad with her, the groom is furious with her and her family and he throws her out of his house immediately. When she is honest, they take out the bed sheet and rejoice. The bride would confide in her sisters-in-laws and so we women would spread the news of her virginity to our husbands and they all made merry. If she was not a virgin then there was no celebration. The following morning everyone is sad and all they want is to send her back home. Her husband is very sad, so they tie a pot to the bride's leg and send her home. Her whole family is ashamed then, but when she is a virgin she is the pride of the whole family. It is not good when the bride is sent back home the first thing in the morning, because of the costs the family had in organizing the wedding.

Recently, everything has changed. Now, when two people are in love they get married even if the girl was the worst in the world. Before that was the most horrible thing to happen, God forbid! That is why the father, mother, brother were all very strict. On patron saints' days girls had to walk around in the company of their mothers, and everybody knew that the girl was honest. At the time, girls were not allowed to go to the cafés, wear jeans, and I would not allow my daughter-in-law to wear them even today. My son should wear trousers not she, don't you agree with me? She cannot pretend she is a man, and wear trousers. But if my son loves her wearing trousers, then I cannot help it. And I will make sure that she does not wear them. When I tell my son that for Romani people it is a horrible thing to have a daughter-in-law wearing trousers, we do not have such customs, I hope he will stand on my side. Romani girls did not even wear short skirts only long ones. Once you could not see a woman's knee, and now they shorten their skirts so much that you can see everything. I do not like to see a woman's knee, but what can I do? No one is as honest as people used to be.

Do you think that our customs are disappearing?

– Of course! You can see that now we no longer have horses and carriage, we have cars. I have rugs and while I was riding the carriage that was such a nice sight, it was beautiful but now you cannot even see people in the car. It was so nice to put equipment on horses. I have it even now, as well as a carriage, rugs and whenever I was invited to a wedding or a feast I would put rugs on the carriage, there was nice music and I loved it so much when I went there with my children. You do not have that either, only from time to time. Now if you would put horses in a harness and sit on a carriage everyone would look in amazement, while no one would even notice you in a car. It was so good when you had wild horses put up in the harness. I love wild horses best, and when they bite with their teeth. I used to have such horses once, but not any more and I am so sorry. For example, when Romani people went to Fenek they would compete with each other who had a more beautiful horse, carriage, whose carriage was better painted, and if they liked a carriage they were willing to pay whatever price for it. Those horses were wonderful and when they galloped... oh my God! They would spend the night in Fenek and wait until dawn, and now they simply sit in the car and leave. Whoever had horses and carriage would spend the night there. People danced, sang and looked for young brides there, and if they found one, they would ask for her hand the very next morning, so as not to be outrun by another family. Whoever had a beautiful daughter could count on marrying her right after Fenek. That is no longer the case either. Romani people still go to Fenek, but generally those are girls and boys without their parents. Once the parents would hide a girl and ask her if she would like to get married, they would ask her if she wanted to get married and let her have a look at her would-be husband. When she saw him they would ask her again if she would like to marry him and while her reply would be 'no' if she started digging the ground with her foot that would mean that she actually wanted to get married. If a bride is beautiful her family would be paid lots of money for her.

Is there anything else that you would like to share with us?

– I will share a nice song with you, the song which I used to sing:

“Down there by Surčin village,
People sat down to drink wine,
A German boasted of having
Two beautiful sorrels,
They trot so elegantly,
They keep their heads so high
Their manes reach the green grass
No one can take them to the stable.
Oh, my Rade, from Bingule

Is green with envy.
Rade waits the night to fall
Only to turn into a gray cloud.
He took a thing out of his pocket,
Plucked out two bricks from the wall,
And let the two horses free,
And let the two horses free..."

And, at the end of our talk let me say that I want my grandson to marry a beautiful wife, both inside and outside, I want her to have long hair and we will treat her like a princess. I will bring her breakfast to bed, allow every of her whims, and love her dearly. I only wish that my son marries a Romani girl, and that my daughter remarries as she is a divorced for ten years now, or if she prefers she can make amends with her ex-husband, but she should get married so that she is not all alone, and I wish Slavko would die soon.

Radmila, 61 years old (1939)

Would you talk to me about your childhood?

– I was born in 1939, on August 19th. I am the last child and I have four sisters. I lived Vojka. It is my birthplace. When Second World War broke out, I was for a while in concentration camp in Sisak, with my mother and four sisters. I was three when the war started. We were forced to leave and to go to Stara Pazova. We spent the night there. We were in a train, then we were taken to the concentration camp in Sisak. I was locked up for seven days. We didn't have bread, nor salt, we had nothing at all, we couldn't see sun or moon. When they finally let us out from the wagon, they took us straight to the camp, afterwards they cut our hair, we were covered with lice. We also had to have a bath. So, fathers were led one way, mothers were taken somewhere else and the children in another direction. My mother and I were apart from each other. I longed to see my mother. My father was killed in Germany. He was imprisoned and killed. I can't remember my father. When we came back from the camp, I spent six months there, so we returned home and there wasn't a single Gypsy, a single Rom left. Everyone went to see their family. Only my mother returned home. The house had gun holes. We didn't have a single thing. We slept where those Germans probably slept. We got a discharge paper, which my mother showed. All of a sudden two men came on horses and they said to my mother that they would kill us. I can't tell you how much money we got. We somehow collected the money for the house.

Was it after the war?

– After the war, when we returned from the camp. I was worn out. We were constantly beaten there, they didn't give us food, you heard about conditions in concentration camps. So, when we returned, my mum told me they wanted to kill us again. One of them was German, the other one was Serb and he said, "Don't touch them, just leave them alone." Then my mum showed the discharge paper. When we were going by train, we saw corpses and I said to my mum, "Look a Gypsy boy!" I could see his clothes, I could see the bones, I could see his hands. She said, "It is nothing, dear." She could say something like that because she was so exhausted. When the war began, just as you are taping now, partisans held conferences at my father's house to decide where to go, what to do and those kinds of things. I can't remember my father at all.

When the war was over, my mum married a man from Zemun. I moved to Zemun to be with my mother. I went to school there. I went to school and finished just one grade, I couldn't continue we didn't have means. I don't know anything, I just know to sign my name and to read a little. There was nothing

else I could do when I was little. Afterwards I went working with my mum at rich people's houses. Our life was very hard. My life is hard even now. I have a very small pension, a little bit over three hundred dinars. I have four children. They take care of themselves. My husband died ten years ago, I was still young when I became a widow. I am ill. I was operated here under my breast. I really can't become a burden to my children. Even if my daughter loves me, my son-in-law doesn't. All my daughters are married. They didn't have wedding parties. They got married the way we could afford it.

All of them are baptized, thank God. I took them all to be baptized in the Orthodox Church. I go to church and I pray to God. I go to church every Sunday. I know who Jesus was: Christ cured people, he walked all over the world and cured people. His mother was Maria, she is called Fiery Maria. I can read a bit, and I read the Bible as much as I can. I am sixty-two and I need glasses but I don't have enough money for them. I can see the letters only when it's sunny.

Do you live alone now?

– I have one very small room, there is a couch, a cooker and nothing else. I am a tortured woman. When I married my husband, I was working very hard, all Gypsies can tell you that. I am ill now. I don't have any medicines whatsoever, I don't have money to buy them and I can't go to the doctor because I don't have money for that either. I don't know if it's true, but I heard that those people who were in concentration camps should submit some kind of plea in Ruma and then they will get some money. People told me they heard it on the radio.

I was three or four when I was in the camp. I can remember everything. When the Germans came to Vojka a willow tree stood there. My grandfather used to mend pots there, you know. We had ... I was going with my mother to thresh grain. When people reap grain, they thresh it you know, so we had a large barrel and they put me into that barrel. Then my mother came, she said, "Come on, my dear." Germans came then and said, "Halt, halt, halt!"⁸⁸ I had a doll, a small one. With that doll I was taken to the camp. I slept that night naked and barefoot. They took us away. They tortured us really, nobody did anything like that before. We were beaten, they kept us hungry and thirsty.

Were there some other people as well?

– Just Gypsies. But there, what is its name, where they killed people in Jasenovac, they wanted to strip us naked. But there was no more room, they said. By that time comrade Tito came already, may he rest in peace, and it was already forbidden to kill people. So we were sent to Sisak. Some good people were there, I can tell you, but some people were bad. We suffered a lot, we were

⁸⁸ "Stop, stop, stop." in German.

covered with lice and all sort of things.

How did you marry your husband?

– I met him as a young girl. He worked with the company “Stevan Dukic”. He was not a Gypsy. He came from Macedonia, from Preševo. We met at the dancing party and I married him, my mother knew about all that. Just my mother knew it, I didn’t have father. My husband started working in 1958 in “Zmaj”, and I worked in the fields, in farm cooperatives. I worked really hard. I have a house in the same street. We have four children and we had a good life. My husband was a good man. When we bought everything for our house, he worked a lot and soon he started to drink, so he got epilepsy. And this is what killed him. I got my children, my husband and everything but now I don’t have anything. I gave my children everything, I gave them everything I had and I kept just one small room and I live from my small pension.

Did your children go to school?

– Yes, they did, all of them. They finished school, all four of them. They are employed now. Now my granddaughter will come and see me. She goes to the medical school. Her mother works a lot to support her, she is divorced and so she has to earn for their living. She works as a cleaner in private houses and also in one company. I don’t help them out with money, and they don’t help me.

Do you speak Romani language?

– Well I can speak Gypsy. My children don’t speak Gypsy. Neither my husband nor I spoke with our children in Gypsy language. I can speak Gypsy, if you ask me now to tell something I will know everything. But it became a custom of my family, of my grandchildren, not to speak Gypsy. Don’t think that I am afraid to speak my language or that I am ashamed of it. Never.

I don’t know, my dear child, where the Gypsies came from. I will tell you everything I know, but what I don’t know, I don’t know.

What happened when you got married, how was it?

– How was it? It was very sad! I didn’t have any clothes to put on, I didn’t have anything to make myself pretty. I got married, excuse me for saying it, without knickers. I just had one little dress and I went to Stara Pazova. I was seventeen then. I was young. I chose my husband. I didn’t want anyone to choose for me. I will take someone I love, if I don’t love him I won’t marry him. We started to live together. We had nothing when we married but nothing will come of nothing. So I worked in the cooperative and my husband also got a job. We got our first daughter, Slavica, she was born in 1958. She was born when we came to Stara Pazova, so we bought one little plot and we built a small room. We managed somehow in such a small house. When we both began working we got a bank loan. We built three rooms and a bathroom. Step by step. It is

now a one-story house, middle sized one. No pain, no gain. My daughter and my son-in law now live in that house, they have a room, kitchen and bathroom. My grandson and daughter – in – law are in the middle room. My room faces the street. One of my daughters built one story-house facing the street. Another one lives in the back yard. All my daughters built their houses on that small lot. I have gathered all my children around me. If I become very ill I will have my children around me. Who will look after me? There isn't anybody else. As long as I can go and work in other people's houses I can manage, but I can't do that for much longer. It never occurred to me to get married just to have someone who would support me. Why would I want that? I am worn out so. What would I do with a husband now? You have to wash, iron, and cook for him. Now I cook some soup for myself and that's enough. I don't need anything else. I eat just once a day.

Do you know that people celebrate March 8th?

– Yes, I do. I buy presents for my children, and they buy something for me. I go to the Pensioners Club. They invite me. Only women gather there. They give me present, flowers. But I don't know why we celebrate March 8th.

Do you go to vote?

– I do, of course I go. Well, women struggled so that we would have the right to vote.

What about the company where you worked, did you feel that people treated you differently?

– Not at all. All women were equal with me. I had more friends than any Serb woman. Everybody loved me. I liked talking, joking. I didn't gossip around. They liked me, I still have a friend in the neighborhood, who comes over to visit me or I go over to her. I never had any enemies.

Can you tell fortune from the coffee grounds?

– No. I would first tell my fortune and afterwards anybody else's.

Do you know any nice Romani stories or songs?

– I know, but I wish I didn't. All are sad. I remember that my uncle used to sing, "De ma miro kaj bu kamovilo." That means, "Let me alone, because my heart aches." It was my favorite song. He told me my father loved that song very much. I really don't like Gypsy songs. I do love music, but not such sad songs. I never sang lullabies to my children in Romani language.

Do you remember how your father died?

– I remember when my uncle came back from the war, from Germany. My aunt came and she said, "Come, Zora," she said that in Gypsy, "come, Branko returned." She, poor thing, put on a dress, trousers instead of sleeves she was

practically naked. When my mum came, she said, "But that's not my Branko, it is my Duja. My uncle began crying, there were four of us, we were all very small. He brought back my father's bass, he could also play. And he said, "Branko was killed." They were not in the same concentration camp. Another Gypsy man brought to my uncle my father's tamburitza.⁸⁹ And to this very day my uncle has that tamburitza.

What can you tell me about your sisters?

– My sisters didn't go to school, only I did. Two of them live in Vršac, one lives in Zemun. I have three brothers and they live in Golubinci ... I also have one sister in Golubinci. We have big family. We live close to each other.

During the war we were all here. Gypsies in Pazova weren't molested or killed, that's because the Slovaks protected them. But in Vojka all Gypsies were killed, in Zemun not a single Gypsy survived. All were killed, to the very last one. It's very sad.

Do you know that there are Romani Societies, which want to protect Romani people?

– Jelena has just told me. She came to see me and she told me about that. I used to work for them. I can't work any more, I just can't. You have to iron, to clean ... I just can't work anymore, I have only thirty kilos now.

Has anything nice happened in your life?

– Well let me tell you this. When I was very young, everybody called me Koštana.⁹⁰ I was very handsome, I don't think I spent that much time with Gypsies and everybody respected me and loved me. Afterwards I felt some kind of pain in me. I felt that I would never have anything of my own. My mother worked so hard, she suffered so much. I was always alone. My sister would go to work, my mother would go to work and I was the youngest one. Everything sort of moved me. I accidentally found my father's photo in my mum's purse. There was his letter from the prison camp that he wrote to my mother. I cried very much ... and ... I got ill. My mother said, "I knew you would cry when you see that picture, you take after your father." My mother loved me very much. But let me tell you that I was never happy in my life, never, ever! I always in misery, in darkness. I never said, "Thank you, God, now I am well."

You loved your husband, were you happy when you were young?

– Yes I was. I was happy with my husband. I went with him to Kumanovo, Preševo, to wedding parties. Everything is different there. It is not like over here. People are different. They have different religion ... they are not like us.

⁸⁹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

⁹⁰ Koštana is the heroine in the novel "Koštana" by Bora Stanković. She is a Romani woman renowned for her beauty and gift for singing and dancing.

They are serious, there are no jokes. When I sat among them I couldn't behave like others. When my husband was here I never felt he was different. Not at all. I got along very well with my husband. After we managed to and our daughters got married, I lost all my strength. I got ill. My husband began drinking, he got very ill, so I got disappointed and things just went downhill. I should be content and I am. My children are healthy, thank God. Everything is good. Only I don't depend on my children, and they don't depend on me.

I have good friends and we see each other often. I have that friend with whom I used to work. She looks just like me, she is not bigger nor smaller, fatter nor thinner. We look like two sisters. She is also not happy with her life. Her husband drowned. She has two sons and a daughter, so she is not very ... He got drunk, he just went and got drowned. He wanted to do it I don't know why. I don't want to speak about someone else's life. They are Hungarians. She is from Bačka Palanka. She knows why he drowned. How can she not! She never told me. I wouldn't ask.

Are you sad sometimes because you haven't finished any school?

– Yes, of course I am. I wish I could read and also then I could get a job somewhere, I wish I had education. Nobody is going to give you a job if you can't read and write or if you can't count. What can you do then? I can read a little bit ... when I go to the bus station in Novi Sad, Vršac, or Pančevo I can find my way, I know letters both Latin and Cyrillic. I learned how to read and write thanks to my children. Otherwise I wouldn't know anything. As my children were learning so did I beside them. I would take a sheet of paper and study with them, I knew nothing before. My husband knew everything, he could read and write because he went to school.

Did you learn to speak Slovakian when you were with Slovaks?

– I can speak Slovakian. Nobody can trick me. I can speak Serbian, Slovakian, a little bit Hungarian and Gypsy.

I wish somebody could help me in my life. But you can't give me health. I live on my small pension and I wish someone could help me. I would go to work, I would only if I could. I am not healthy any more. I gave birth to four children, I had sixteen abortions. I am totally worn out.

Why did you have sixteen abortions?

– Well I had to, what else could I have done? What could I have done with all those children? The bigger the number of children is, the greater the poverty. I wasn't really interested in that something that is contraception. Now I can't get pregnant any more, so I don't need anyone or anything. Contraception is worth anything only if you take it regularly. But you forget. You work a lot, you have children to take care of and when you, excuse me for saying this,

when you have to sleep with your husband how can you remember to take it? There weren't any of those things when I was young, like now you have pills. Then, pardon me for saying it, you had to use some kind of syringe and then foam. Still I got pregnant. Well my daughter put that spiral, first one then the other and the third one, and so they don't get pregnant. Each of them had two children and that is enough. Why would they need more children? You can see how expensive it is. I worked for a woman and she gave me a pair of boots. Otherwise I wouldn't have any shoes to wear. I have no clothes. My pension is so small I can either buy some clothes or buy firewood. So I buy some clothes.

You know what, women are also to be blamed, not just men. We should take care of ourselves. And since we didn't, things happened. But whenever I went to have an abortion I never had a single injection. I would buy a small bottle of brandy, I would say to Rada, we had the same name, "Just two sips." I would get cleaned, I didn't even bleed or anything. Late doctor Dekanić was still alive, he was really good, he said they never had such a brave woman. Then you didn't have to pay for it like you have to now. Now you can't even get water for free. You can't go to an inn and get drunk. You have to pay wherever you go.

Romani woman doesn't have any means for a living. If her husband leaves her or forces her to leave him, she doesn't have anywhere to go with her child, she has to give her child away. If her parents refuse to take her back, she doesn't have a house, she doesn't have anything, she just has to give her child away. Why would her child suffer? If she has to suffer that child doesn't have to.

Do you know that there is an organization called "Rom"? It is supposed to take care of women's health among other things.

– No, I don't, I never heard anything about it. If I knew there is such a thing I would join other Roms and maybe they could help me and give me something. Now they gave to Gypsies some firewood, but I didn't know about it, nobody told me, nobody invited me. Here there aren't any Romani refugees. So Gypsies got everything. Some jackets, blouses, and shoes. When they have such things they should tell us on the radio, so that every Gypsy can hear it, they shouldn't tell it just to a few people.

Do you listen to the radio? Have you got one?

– Of course I do! I my children have TV and radio. Well I think they should tell us about those things on the radio. Our Gypsies should say to us: here it is, we have things for Romani people, we have things for pensioners ... they shouldn't take things the way they want to. Those of us who are old and sick, we can't go around and find out about those things.

Jelena, 60 years old, (1940)

Tell me Jelena, what kind of family do you come from?

– I come from Dimić family. My father was a trader during the raids, he was a horse dealer and then later he got ill. There were four of us children: three girls and a boy and so my mother raised us, she took us to other people's houses ... it was very hard and we suffered a lot.

When you were little, did you have dolls?

– We didn't have anything like that, how could we, we were poor. During the raids my father was ill, we had already started working. In 1941 and 1942 my father was badly beaten by Hungarians because he didn't want to be on their side, all my uncles were killed and my father was beaten. After that he had some sort of problems with nerves, he was ill for many years and afterwards he died. Then my mother had to struggle with us. My mother went to other people's houses, she did laundry, ironed and also cleaned pigsties and after we grew older we went with her and also worked for money. There was one rich woman, Solarević was her surname, she had sugar refinery near Vrbas. Her man was from America and he went to jail because he didn't want to give wheat and land to the state so we lived at their place, we weren't paid anything we just had enough to eat and drink.

Did your brothers and sisters go to school?

– We all went only to first grade and my brother Mija didn't go at all. My mother didn't mind that much because it was handy for her when we were seven or eight years old to have someone to work with her and we weren't interested either. I learned to read and write when I was twenty-three or twenty four years old by watching television, I taught myself.

When you were young were you allowed to go to the center as young people are today?

– You couldn't do that. The children would gather in Gypsy lane and today they gather there, young men played there, and you weren't allowed go to a disco and to the center. Our parents were very dangerous and not just mine but everyone's. It was that kind of time and when we grew up such old-fashioned up bringing stayed in us. This upbringing was valid both for boys and girls, and girls weren't allowed out because the parents were afraid they would do something stupid. And what can I tell you, the ticket for the cinema was six dinars then, there was no money, it was very hard.

How was it when you met your husband?

– We knew each other when we were kids, he was also from Žabalj and he was four years older than me. I was twenty-one years old and he was twenty-five. He had one marriage before and he had two children with that wife but I did not mind that, “I loved him.” My parents didn’t love him, my father said, “Now child, be careful where you go.” Because it was not convenient that I was a young girl and he was a man with two children. We didn’t have a wedding and I didn’t mind not having a wedding gown, I just came to the house with two children. I had two children with him, a daughter and a son, I raised his two as well – little Žokika was twelve months old, he was only crawling and Ankica was two years old. When she grew old she went to live with her mother and Žokika remained with his father. The children respected me as their own mother, I didn’t make a difference between my children and his. I had father and mother – in – law, they lived in a house here at the corner, and I and my husband here, only we tore this down and built a new one. We worked a bit on other people’s fields, and traded when smuggling started in Italy, Germany and Hungary. ... We would bring all sorts of things home. Then smuggling was possible, it was free democracy, our old man was there we could go anywhere, it is true we were poor but we managed for dinars – we didn’t steal. We borrowed money to go to Italy, to Hungary but we then returned it honestly. Many Roms from Žabalj traveled and became rich smuggling that 1969.

How was your life with your husband?

– He drank a lot, but we didn’t fight, whenever he came drunk I went out, I didn’t question him, I saw that it was no good.

Did you make a difference in raising boys and girls?

– I loved them equally, well my daughter is married and even today she doesn’t answer back to me, she calls me on the phone and asks, “Mom, can this be done in such a such a way, can I do that”, and my son does the same. I let my daughter go to the center, but I didn’t let my son because I was scared of his friends who robbed small stores and I was afraid that he would hang out with those friends so I always cried after him not to go. And Gordana, my daughter, I let her go but she didn’t go out much either because there wasn’t enough money, we were left in ruin so I had to take care of any dinar. I was a single mother and I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to cope with my son if he hanged out with such crowd and then it would be hard to cope with him. As it was I held fast and I wouldn’t let him go and thank God he is thirty-two, thirty-three years old and nobody has reproached him for touching anything or stealing anything.

Did you marry after your husband’s death?

– When I became a widow I was young – I was thirty five, maybe thirty

six years old but I didn't want to marry, I wanted to be my own boss so that my children wouldn't become orphans. I had respect for my dead husband and I didn't want to step over him, I wanted to take care of my children. My daughter married, she left eighth grade when she was fourteen, when she was fifteen she already had a child. She married a poor man and this bothered me a lot, we were very poor but we all worked as well so we earned for bread, we didn't beg. And so I brought her home, I left the child there and here is your child and give me mine and so long and never again ... there he is now, he is a big man now. My daughter is now in Germany, she is married and she has a child, she lives nicely, she needs no better. My son is also married, he finished one grade in school, he didn't go anymore. He has three daughters and one son.

Is it important to have a male child in a family?

– It is important, of course it is important, for whom are you going to working for – for sons – in – law? As it is you work for your son and if he wants it he will respect it and parents have to earn their children's respect. Because female child is someone else's house and man is his own house, only parent should also be good to their children so that children would appreciate the respect they can from their parents. My Šaca, if he wasn't good towards me and if he didn't appreciate me, respect me and be afraid of me, it would be very bad, but he is in Germany and he takes care of what I eat. I signed over the house to him – the one newly built, the top floor is his and the bottom one is Gordana's and he will take care of me till I die.

Do you believe in God?

– Of course, I do not go to bed and do not wash myself in the morning before I pray to him. I don't know if other people believe but I know I do. I didn't go to church regularly while my grandchildren were here, now when they are not here and I am not occupied with cooking I get dressed and I go to church. I take care when it is a patron saint's day not to do anything around the house. For example today is a red-letter day. I had to do laundry but I won't because I do not wash on Friday. I was fasting two, three years ago but then it came to my dream that I shouldn't because of my daughter's son, so I stopped, I got confused a couple of times and I saw it was no use because I was at the cooker more and then I had to taste the meal and I got confused so I said, "Gracious, children look what you made me do."

Why do we celebrate Christmas?

– Because Jesus Christ was born in the manger, Mary, god's mother gave birth to him and his father was God that is why Christmas is celebrated on straw for three days. First day of Christmas is Badjindan⁹¹, then you cook in the

⁹¹ See glossary at the end of the book.

evening – for example lean beans, prunes, fish chowder or fired fish. The straw is carried in around seven, eight o'clock it depends when you manage to do it. That straw is brought in by the host and he says, "Happy Badjindan, may you prosper in health!" and I also say to him, "Son, may you prosper in health, may God help you and your children" and then I throw corn, wheat and walnuts on him but first they gather around the table and I make three heaps: one for God, one for God's mother and one for Jesus Christ and then I give them from those heaps and throw in all corners of the house. Then the children peep and gaggle, they roll on the floor and it is good so that their arms and legs wouldn't hurt, I heard this from older women that this is very good. When the straw is brought in then we have dinner and icon lamp is lit, the host reads a prayer, we cross ourselves and then have dinner. During the night we prepare roast meat, stuffed cabbage and chesnitza⁹². For roast meat you prepare turkey cock and not female turkey and you stuff it with prunes, apples and pieces of bread and then you sew it up and roast it. When it cools down and when we are supposed to place it on the table at noon we decorate it with money. During night I make kolach⁹³ and chesnitza, in it I put three dinars because I had three grand daughters and each wanted to find a dinar so in three corners I would put a dinar so that they would find it and be happy. It is good to put that dinar from chesnitza under icon, it is good to give it when you are buying pigs or when you are buying a horse which is going to stay in the house or a calf, then it is good otherwise it isn't. When I am cutting chesnitza first I leave a piece for God, then for God's mother and Jesus Christ and I leave these pieces apart, until we have lunch chesnitza has to be broken it is good to do so because then trade is speedy and easy. I taught my children to do this, and I did it when their father was alive, then we take pieces according to seniority. On that morning Šaca goes to church, listen to prayers, kisses icons, lights the candles in front of God's mother and Saint Nikola⁹⁴, he prayers for family and its health. When he returns from church he brings communion bread and candle and say, "Merry Christmas", I say, "May you be healthy and prosperous" and he kisses my hand and I kiss him on the cheek, chesnitza is already on the table, the kolach, candle, roast meat, soup and stuffed cabbage, that has to be there, then we light the candle and read prayer and have lunch. On that day you do not go anywhere. For supper you do the same and the candle has to burn all day until we go to bed. The day after I cook fresh soup and we greet visitors. Šaca and the children go to visit godparents and I stay at home. For godfather you make a special separate kolach, it is made of three plaits of dough just like ordinary cake only this one has more raisins, eggs, sugar and ground walnuts. You also take him

92 See glossary at the end of the book.

93 See glossary at the end of the book.

94 See glossary at the end of the book.

some roast meat and a nice apple is put on the plate. We also put a wallet full of money on top because when you go to visit your godfather you cannot go with an empty wallet but when you take it to him he gives it back to you. The godfather does not have to come to visit you as soon as tomorrow he has time until little Christmas and then he brings a cake or pastry. On the second day of Christmas you go to visit relatives and godparents and the candle is burning all day. The third day is Saint Stevan's⁹⁵ day and you have to get up early around three or four o'clock in the morning and you clean Christmas straw with broom – it does not have to be a new broom but it has to be made of branches, with it you sweep first layer of straw from all rooms and you gather that straw and take it to the field. The straw which stood on the table is gathered and tied and it is placed against a fruit tree. It is also good for small children when they have a fit or when they have colic or for horses it is good to make a cross over it with your hand and then to throw it over, this is an old custom. I do not know for what other things it is good but it is good to keep it, it is from the table, the candle was burning there, the kolach was there ... and the straw that was down is thrown in the fields, still you do step over it, and by six o'clock all this has to be done, cleaned. When you are taking out the straw you say, "You found us in peace, leave us in peace, go your own way and bring us health and prosperity." You must not throw away the bones of the roast meat, everything that is eaten is placed on a big plate and on the third day you put it in a bag and take it on the attic. People say that if the head of the male turkey is thrown away the host of the house is going to die, so that is also kept, there at the attic I have so many bags, I don't know how many and later the rats come and take it away. From Christmas you keep the money from chesnitza and the head of the turkey until the next Christmas.

Why do we celebrate Easter?

– I do not know what happened, but I know that Good Friday lasts, then eggs are dyed, Saturday and Sunday. On Good Friday I fast and until two, three or five o'clock I do not do anything, I only make popcorns and cook fish chowder, if there is company. If there isn't then I eat just popcorns. Beside that I do not do anything, I do not even take a broom. After five o'clock I take eggs to dye them and paint them. When that is done, it can be as late as seven o'clock, maybe even half past seven or nine, then I take communion, I eat something fatty, anything, an egg. When my children were in the house I went to church but now I do not go, I am very disappointed because the children are not here. The day after I prepare some soup, cakes and everything I have and in the morning Easter Bunny brings eggs to children, it is from mother, father or grandmother really, but to the children you say, "Bunny brought you eggs, go see what else

⁹⁵ See glossary at the end of the book.

it brought.” And they run to the yard so, I get up at three, four o’clock in the morning because I know they get up early and they expect the bunny so I put on all three nests dresses or socks, anything new I bought for them. I do not tell them about it but put it in a basket and make a nest in the yard. If I put it inside, near their pillow they do not believe that the bunny get can inside but as it is in the yard on grass they believe me. My mother did not leave it for me because then poverty was great, there were people who put things for their children but my parents didn’t. When I married and had my children I put these things for them because it is great happiness for the children.

Who is your patron saint?

– My patron saint is Saint Nikola,⁹⁶ his day is on nineteenth of December, and I inherited that patron saint from my husband. Now my son celebrates it, this is passed over from one generation to another. For that day you prepare roast pigs, soup, stuffed cabbage and we call guests. You also prepare kolach, koljivo⁹⁷, and wine and you bring that to church to be blessed. An evening before the patron saint’s day we prepare koljivo, I put vanilla essence in it, raisins and then I prepare fish because the dinner has to be lean and you can drink wine or mineral water, you prepare cakes and pastries but you cannot eat that before the next day. I prepare kolach and then I take it together with koljivo and wine to evening mass in church to be blessed by the priest and then I take it home. We don’t invite anybody for dinner, only the day after. The day after when the relatives come to lunch, we light a candle and read a prayer and then we sit down and have lunch and after that people make merry and get drunk and maybe even get into a fight in the end.

Did you make a wedding for your son?

– I did, my daughter – in – law was from Bečej. I didn’t agree anything with her father for wedding because my daughter – in – law ran away with my Šaca and I prepared the wedding at home. I called them to come for pogacha but they didn’t want to come, they were angry since she run away but what did I have to do with it? She had a wedding dress and she didn’t get married in church but in municipal office. Best men and bride’s maid were Roms and everything was very nice. When the bride returned from the wedding ceremony I immediately put on my apron and greeted them with rice and sugar so that the daughter – in – law would be sweet to the mother – in – law, so that she would be prosperous. I give her this to eat and when they go inside we give them bread and salt to eat from each other’s knees.

How is that done?

⁹⁶ See glossary at the end of the book.

⁹⁷ See glossary at the end of the book.

– You put kolach on their knees, you put salt and sugar in that kolach, on his part as much as on hers, he takes from her knee and eats and she from his and this goes on until they eat everything, I didn't give them water. That is a custom and it means that they will get along for better and for worse, it means that they will have bitter and sweet things in their life and that they will have to live through that together. After twelve o'clock the bride and bridegroom went to sleep and in the morning we lit a fire and we threw ... and we showed the bed linen, the bride was a virgin and then bride's brother showed off so he paid music to play for him and he started to break things and I got very drunk, it was a wonder. If she hadn't been a virgin it wouldn't have been all the same to me but still it would have had to depend on how well they understood each other, I wouldn't have said anything to her because I would see that my son is quiet – that would mean that he liked it so if it doesn't bother him it doesn't bother me, because he is the one who will go through life with her not me. We keep that bed linen even today, we tried to wash it but it wouldn't come out so we packed it and left it. After the wedding we left wedding dress to stay and I wouldn't give it to anyone for anything, that is good for the children if they God forbid have a fit then you cover them with it and everything passes.

When did your husband die?

– I don't know exact year, it is twenty years now that he died in hospital in Novi Sad. When they brought him, we took him inside and his children cried. There in the hospital they put clothes on him, these can be old clothes or new clothes. In casket you put his old clothes but someone keeps that for remembrance. Then you put candies, some sends regards to the dead in such a way, all this is put in a bag and it is put in grave because people believe that he would take that as greeting to other dead but I do not believe in that.

Do you believe in life after death?

– I do not believe in that at all, I believe only in alive thing when I see them and in something dead I do not believe because those who are dead are covered by black soil, good bye to them.

What about the soul?

– I do not know where the soul is and whether there is heaven or hell, I go to church and light candles for the dead so that they would have light in that other world.

That means that you believe that they live there since you light candles for them?

– Well I have to light candles because everybody else does, I do as others do. When my husband died I was not afraid and he wasn't in my dreams, only children now after twenty years started to see him in their dreams.

That day after you buried him did you wash hands after you returned?

– Yes, you place a basin in the yard and a towel and people wash hands, those who do not want to come to the house from graveyard has basin and towel there to wash hands. People wash hands because when he was placed in grave everybody took a bit of soil and threw it in the grave so that soil would be easy for him and they dirtied their hands with that soil. When people came here from the graveyard we prepared *daca*. It is fatty the only time you prepare lean meal is before half a year expires. The cooks prepared cream soup with rice and roast pigs and I went with children to the graveyard. The day after we went to the funeral, early in the morning, and we brought meat, bread, brandy and wine and you put that on the grave and pour it over it because it is his *daca*, not ours, and you leave all this on the grave, some people say that he will come and eat but I do not believe that. Relatives can also come to the funeral but family must come. Then you go to the graveyard a week after, then after six weeks, after half a year and then after a year. You always commemorate this in advance: a year's time you observe a week in advance, half a year you observe three weeks in advance and six weeks you observe a week in advance. You do everything in advance because you overtake him, he doesn't take over you, you take his days before he will wait evenly for them. After the funeral it is a custom that people sit at the house of the deceased all night, in my house whoever wanted sat with us so that the children wouldn't be afraid. The children weren't afraid, they slept like lambs, and so I sat with people. *Spasoja* came, it was the time when watermelons were sold, I told him, "Don't do it *Spasoja*, dearest, I am not afraid, don't let anything happen to you so that you wouldn't say afterwards Ivan's funeral did this to me, if you feel that you can't come don't," but he always came to see how we were doing. I was afraid because during the day he was selling watermelons and during the night he slept under the truck. It is believed that if the dead man laughs he will take someone else with him as well but I do not believe that.

Did you hear, are there witches in *Žabalj*?

– I haven't heard about that, but I have heard that there were doctors in *Čurug* who overturned graves and broke crosses, now why they did that – I do not know. It was some sect.

What were the key moments in your life?

– When my children left home and my grandchildren, also when I became mother for the first time and grandmother. The greatest thing is that my children have homes and take care of me. All my sufferings in life I forgot and have reached the level I wanted. My children give me financial help and I have never applied for humanitarian aid because what my children send is enough and I can live on that.

What was the worst moment in your life?

– The worst moment was when my children were left without their father, the house was a wreck, I didn't know where to go. That passed thank God. When I tore my house down I thought that I wouldn't be able to build a new one on my own but I was healthy and I fought, me and my son and so we built it.

What did you dream of when you were young girl?

– I dreamed of riding a bicycle and I learned that from ... of having tablecloth on the table. I was very poor and so I dreamed, "God will I ever have a chair to sit on, will I ever have a tablecloth on my table so that I could sit like other women sit?" All that came true, thank God and more than that.

What would you recommend to young Romani women?

– You should be honest in life and you will achieve everything. If the woman is not honest, if she steals, whores, cheats on her man and her children she will not have anything, that is sheer loss, but if she is honest she is fighting for her man and children, if she borrows she will return it in time, if he whores and drinks – let him be – you must keep everything in line! The house rests upon the woman and she must keep the family together because everything is tied to the woman: cooker and kitchen and children. The woman takes care of everything because the man cannot come and see what you are going to cook and what you have cooked and whether you have cleaned the stove or not. That is not it. Because everything depends upon a woman and she must take care of everything, the husband's duty is to earn money if he is employed or if he is not he should take care of cattle, he should clean the stable, he should clean the floor under pigs, sheep, and cows. He has his obligations, he should do more physical work.

When you were young, young people got married early, what would you recommend to young people?

– You know what, I wouldn't recommend to my granddaughter to marry young, she should marry into nice house for honest and handsome boy and his parents should be honest and all that. One should be very careful, smart, there is that obligation to get up, to work, to wash, to clean, you must have that obligation. When she marries if she is twenty-one, twenty-two or twenty – five, those are her best years, she did all those things at her mother's house, if her mother is a good housekeeper she taught her all those things. For example my granddaughter Gordana she is learning, her mother teaches her and I do, "Come on wash this, come iron this scarf, come iron this shirt," we say, so that she would learn this and my daughter Gordana learned to cook in various inns. Well, that means that when she marries when she is twenty two or three she will know

all those things and it wouldn't be difficult for her and she wouldn't be shy, she wouldn't have to say, "Oh my God, how will I hold an iron, will I burn this, or how will I iron this shirt or trousers?", she would think about all these things and she would have stage fright and she would have a row with her mother – in – law. Her mother – in – law could say, "What did you learn in your mother's house, what did she teach you, what is your mother, a cow or is she sloppy?" All this exactly would happen. Then it would mean that there is fight and hate and she would lose her will to take care of the house and that means that she is too young and she married young and doesn't know anything.

Is it true that if a girl marries young it would be easy for her mother – in – law to win her over to her house?

– I think that it is silly, because if a girl is honest and good there is nothing to be won over or straightened. Now if my Gordana married, what would she know, nothing and if she got good mother – in – law she would say, "Come dear do this do that.", so her mother – in – law shouldn't take her for her daughter – in – law but for her child and gradually she would learn everything. But when she comes as a twenty-five or twenty – six year old she knows everything. And I say again: you should always ask how to do something and whether something is good, because those who ask come a long way and when you do not ask but instead pretend to know, well, no mother – in – law likes that and that is not nice as well. My Vesna, Bojana's daughter – in – law, she is a nurse and she graduated at Bojana's faculty and not at her mother's. Bojana used to make coffee for her and to bring it to her while she was still in bed until she woke up. It is not easy to find such mother – in – law, and if she was a young fifteen or sixteen year old woman, her mother – in law would say, "Do you know this – you do, do you know this – you don't, God help you, why did you marry, do you need a man at all?" For example my Milica when she came to my house did not know how to light a fire but life was good for her because I was good, so I said to her, "Don't do it like that, do it like this.", I did the same with Žokika's wife. I used to put her between my knees and to take her hands and brush and teach her to white wash. You should find such a woman, if you love that child and you want her to stay in the house then you have to be a teacher, without yelling, without screaming, just like when you are cuddling a child. There are women who are smart and there are those who are saucy or they do not love their children, let alone someone else's. When my daughter – in – law came to my house I accepted her as if she were my child, I didn't make any difference. I take care of her even more than I cared for my child, I think I have never offended her. Young people should get married after they did military service and after school, then they are most serious and mature, otherwise a marriage can end as quick as a wink. In my time when I was young it happened often, even

today my neighbor married a young refugee and he lived with her for three or four weeks and then he left that woman and married some else.

Do Romani men have a tendency to cheat on their women?

– Yes they have, even today there are cases of that. I never cheated on my husband, but he cheated on me. I wasn't jealous and I taught my daughters –in – law not to be jealous.

Would you recommend to young people to go to school?

– The role of the school is great but it is not really worth anything because when you finish school you can't find a job. Someone's godchild or a friend gets a job but those who sweat and study even when they are hungry and thirsty, who come from school starving that person will have no skill or tool. That one will be left behind. In school they make a difference, we should all be equal just like we used to be, but that is no longer true. When our Tito died all our happiness died, everything died. Why weren't there any wars when Tito was alive? Because Tito took care of everything, now they even want to take him out of the ground, why does that bother them? He was such a wonderful man, he had good relationships with the whole world. We don't have peace even today.

Where were you during air strikes?

– In the cellar, me and my children, in my neighbor's house. One of my granddaughters threw up blood, the other had nosebleeds, they trembled all night long in that cold cellar until I went mad and said, "Let's go to our house and it will be God's will." We could see Novi Sad, high up there. When a bomb falls you think it is at the bottom of your garden.

When you were young did you celebrate holidays, May 1st and November 29th?

– I didn't even know when these holidays happened, I only take care when Easter and Christmas are.

Do you listen to Romani shows on radio and TV?

– TV is broken and I do not have a radio. I am not interested very much in that. I am very nervous, a lot of things happened to me, I need peace.

Do you have women friends?

– My children come to me and Zorica, I do not drink coffee so people do not come to visit me. I have high blood pressure, when I have money I buy medicines, when I don't I do not buy them, but I am not afraid of death: if I die now my children have their own place, I built my house. I would be very sorry if my children had been left out on the street, if they had not been taken care of.

Dragica, 59 years old (1941)

What was your childhood like?

– I was a war baby. I was born in December in 1941. My mother told me that there was a drummer in our village and he would alert people when the Krauts were coming. My family escaped to the forest with everybody else from our village. There was a big fight in Šimanovci, then in Mihaljevci near a bridge and they left me behind a bed, they just wrapped me in diapers and left me all alone. It was wintertime, I was only two and a half months old. After three days they returned from the forest after the fighting stopped, after things got calmer and then they took me. I was completely wet. My mother lit a fire, she brought some firewood in a cart and she boiled some water so they rubbed me and I gained consciousness. They were afraid to take me to the forest with them because they feared I would cry and that the Krauts would hear me so they left me alone. I cried alone in the house for who knows how long, I don't know. My childhood was miserable. I lived with my father and my mother, there were five of use children. Two brothers and three sisters. My father was with the partisans for four years. When he returned we already got older, I was four years then. When he wrote letters he would send greetings to Jelica and my sister, he forgot about me. Zoran and Ružica weren't born yet. Afterwards we got another brother and then a sister, that brother was ill, he was in Kamenica in hospital, he was fifteen when he died.

Did your parents tell you anything about the war?

– I don't remember the war, I only heard about it, my grandma told me that the Krauts hanged Gypsies and did all sorts of horrible things. I only had grandma, my grandpa died, after that my father died, I was already eighteen then, I was married for two years. My grandma told us that the Krauts used to hang people on lampposts, that they were beating people and they slaughtered a lot of them, that they did most terrible things to the Gypsies. We would gather around her and listen, she told us as it was. Two of my sisters and I went through the war, my mother was alone with us, my father was with the partisans for four years. My mother didn't have a job. She would get some goods, milk and that's how we survived. She went to work in other people's houses. Afterwards we went to school and my eldest sister attended some kind of course, my brother went to regular school just like me. I had a slate until the third grade, I wrote everything on it and nowadays there are books and notebooks and everything. Then we just had slates, in the third grade we got two notebooks, one with lines and one with squares. My mother was with us. My father came from the forest where he was with the partisans and he worked as a gravedigger. We would

gather food from the graves, people from our village gave us food and that's how we survived.

Were there any other Romani children who went to school with you?

– There was. Everybody had to go to school, it was obligatory. The children of my age went to school and there were also older children who went to a house, there was one room which teachers occupied and so older pupils attended a course there, they learned to write. They had blackboard and so they studied. We studied history, the war, nature, and math, just like children do now. Then it was easier. We learned about the war, now children study more. Then we didn't study that much. When I finished four grades I was thirteen. I didn't start school when I was seven, I did the first grade two times, so I was older than other kids.

My father took us to work in the fields. I started hoeing when I was nine, when I was twelve or thirteen I already worked as a day laborer and I also worked in our field and did everything else. That's why my father didn't allow me to continue school, I had to go and earn money for our dresses, sandals and other things because he couldn't afford them.

What happened when you married?

– My mother is from around here, from Pazova, so they brought me a guy, I didn't know him, my father made a deal and ... they came to ask for my hand. They didn't even ask me, I was sixteen. As my father said, it had to happen. They bought me. They paid some money for me, I don't know how much, not much, they prepared a small party and I came to Stara Pazova, it was in 1956. When they came to ask for my hand, my father started to bargain and he got some wine, one sheep, and some bread, I don't know what was going on really, nobody asked me anything. I just stood as a small child. ... I didn't like that boy. Not at all! But whether you liked it or not you had to keep quiet and so I did, I had to say what my father told me. I didn't dare do anything, I was scared of my father, I just kept quiet as if I was just a little kid. So they gave me to those people. Already during the first year of my marriage I had a baby. ... I came into a family which was much poorer than I was, in one room the ceiling fell off, we had to put cornhusks on the floor so that we could sleep on them, walls were dank. So my child got pneumonia and died. Afterwards we worked for two years, we did all sorts of jobs until we managed to make the house look better, then I had another child ... we suffered a lot in the beginning.

What was your life with your husband like in the beginning?

– We had all sorts of troubles, we suffered a lot. We went to work so that we could earn for lunch, we went to farms to hoe, I went to ladies' houses to do their laundry, people didn't have washing machines then, we had to hand

wash everything and so we earned money. We lived at my mother – in – law's house, my sister – in – law had two children, I had two children, there was my husband so you can say there were a lot of us in the house. My father – in – law had died already. We had to work just to earn for food, we couldn't save any money. After a couple of years, when I got a job, we managed to build a house. I worked in a store as a cleaner, I cleaned, I washed floors and wiped things, and so I worked for seventeen years. Afterwards I went to work for sanitary service and I also spent there twenty years cleaning. My life was very hard. I had all sorts of troubles. But now I'm in pension for the last three years, my pension is very small but somehow I make ends meet. I suffered a lot. My husband was very ill, his health was always fragile ... I had to deal with everything and to work and take care of our children.

What was it like when you delivered your children?

– I gave birth to all three of them at home and I was alone. Later a midwife came. Everybody left for work and I was alone. On that day, when I was supposed to go into labor, I had to go to work in the field, I can remember that as if it happened today. I had to go to pick corn and I felt pain but it wasn't strong, so instead of going to the field I stayed at home and I gave birth to a baby that day. My husband went to hoe and to pick corn.

My life with him was very hard, because he was always ill. He never went to work ... Sometimes he did, when he could, but most of the time he couldn't and he wasn't employed, he didn't work anywhere. Later he found a job as construction worker. Then we lived a bit better, because both of us worked.

What was your love life with him like?

– Well, it was the way it had to be. We fought for a while and hit each other, all sorts of things happened. But we stayed together even in our old age. It depended on circumstances: when we were poor we didn't have anything and so we argued and we fought. I didn't divorce him and I didn't marry anyone besides him. Sometimes I would go to my mother's house but later I would return to him. I would go away because I didn't have anything, but I also couldn't take anything from my mother since she didn't have anything to give me. If you go and work then you will have something, if you don't – you won't have anything.

Did you ever have an abortion?

– I did, lots of times. Twelve times ... I had to do it. He forced me, he would slap me and beat me so I had to have sexual life with him. He would tell me he would kill me, that he would beat me up, he would hit me, he hit me so many times. It was terrible! I had to deal with it alone, I went to old women who were conjurers, I went where I could, I almost died five or six times, doctors

had to give me injections every half an hour in Belgrade. I went to grandma Desa, she died, she opened me with a needle, and then you couldn't give birth. I suffered a lot in my life. I can't even tell you about it all. And I didn't have money to buy medicines, I didn't have anything, I didn't have any sort of living conditions. I didn't want to divorce my husband for the sake of the children, I didn't want to separate my children, my two sons. They spent a lot of time in the street because I had to go and earn money, I had to earn for food. Everybody used to tease them and beat them, but what could I have done, I had to go and work, there wasn't anyone who could take care of my children. Other children used to beat them, but then when they started going to school things got a bit calmer.

How did you behave towards your sons when you were raising them?

– Well how could I behave when I wasn't at home, I didn't have time to be with them for long, to raise them, their father was at home with them. I have thirty-seven years of working experience, and I worked a lot not just at my job, I worked in two shifts in that store during those thirty-seven years.

My husband was sick, and even when he was there it was just as well. He just lay on bed like that, and our children went where they wanted to and they did all sorts of things, so I didn't have time to teach them anything, I had to bring them food. My older son finished primary school, he was a good pupil, then he apprenticed to a painter but later he had to go to the army, he was on Bosnian front and now he gets two hundred and forty dinars. He has a wife and a daughter and he gets two hundred and forty dinars. He fell into a coma and now he has that paper where it says he is a veteran of that war but what good is it when all he gets is two hundred and forty dinars, how is he supposed to live? My pension is too small, I can't help. My other son is not working, that other son Bora finished only three grades, he went to Antun skala.⁹⁸

Do you think he was in a special class because he really had difficulties or because he was a Romani child?

– I don't know really! He knew some things, but he didn't like going to school ... He loved being with his friends and he often got drunk, but other pupils didn't tolerate him, I don't know if that was because he is Rom and is that why he was in that class.

After that your sons married?

– Yes, they got married, we asked for one girl's hand and the other one eloped with my younger son. We prepared a wedding party. Now both of them have daughters, but they don't work, they don't have jobs ... I used to work before, I would get loans from a bank, we could live better, but now we can't do anything. Then I used to get loans and my husband, my son worked in "Novo

⁹⁸ Antun skala is a special class for children who have learning disabilities.

Doba” and we prepared a nice wedding party for him. We have nice daughter – in – law, thank God, but nobody in their family is employed. And the wife of my other son eloped. Still we had a party and spent a lot of money. When they came we had a party and a lot of people came, but both my sons are not healthy.

Do you think it's your husband's fault?

– Mostly it's my husband's fault, because I couldn't have stayed at home with children and he was ill, but he can't be blamed for being ill. I had to go and earn money, I had to bring things in our house, and this older son went to war and then he fell into a coma and now he doesn't have to serve in the army anymore. He served in Lošinj, Kula, Skopje, Štip and he has done his service. And what does he have now? Two hundred and forty dinars and my pension is twelve hundred dinars and I get it in two parts. All of us live on that. My husband now has a small cart and a horse, sometimes he earns some money but mostly he doesn't earn anything. I have a house. We built that house and now for the last five years we have been building a house for my younger son and we can't finish it. There are no bank loans, anything and you can't earn money ...

Did you solve any problems with your husband?

– Mostly I dealt with things alone, because he was ill, now we solve problems together with children, but earlier I always had to do everything alone. My husband didn't mind. He saw himself that he wasn't up to it, that he was no good at doing things, sometimes he would object, but not much. All he could do was beat me up, and he did, he would hit me and maltreat me. He would hit me if I was right and he wasn't or if I earned something or got some things for us, he was even jealous. When I brought something to our house, he would say, “Where did you get that?” And I earned money, I had to work. I would finish one job and then go to the other, I would finish in the state firm and then run to get in time for work for a private owner so I couldn't stay with my children for long, I couldn't take care of them. I would do our laundry at night, I would cook at night and clean our house, because during the day I didn't have time for that, I was always running from one job to the other and now I feel I can't earn any more. I also work in our garden but I can't do any of those things any more ...

What did you do for weekends, vacations, state holidays?

– We worked on Saturday, and on Sunday we would rest a little, but still we had some housework to do, only we didn't iron or wash ... I had vacation but I never went anywhere, ever. When I was on vacation I would gather children and we would go to a farm to weed sugar beet and earn some money ...

Could you tell me something about Romani customs related to Christmas and Easter?

– Let me tell you first about Christmas. For Christmas you have to roast meat and prepare everything you have, and we always managed to have food on that day, even if we had to borrow and then later in spring we would work and pay it back. For Christmas people who knew us gave us food, we would work in vineyards and fields, we would hoe and do all sorts of jobs and then we would get a pig and whatever else we needed for the holiday. Then we would prepare it, we had to have a candle and kolach⁹⁹, we roasted pig, we tried very hard to prepare everything for that day, and we could starve the day after it. It was the same for Easter. So we would borrow from one family on Christmas and from another for Easter and in spring we would all go and work for them, we were always honest and then we were able to borrow next time too and that's how it was.

Have you ever visited any Romani family for their patron saint's day?

– Yes, we always went. We went to my family on Djurdjevdan¹⁰⁰, that was their patron saint, and ours is Saint Nikola¹⁰¹. Saint Petka¹⁰² is my mother's patron saint and so we would visit each other. We always had a feast but the way it was before Before all we had was a pot or a bucket and one cup, there weren't any glasses or porcelain plates, all we had was one tin cup. Everybody would dip that cup in a bucket and drink wine, everybody drank from that one cup, both hosts and guests. Now patron saint's day is celebrated at a table, before everybody would sit on the floor, when it was warm, we would stoke the furnace and sit on the floor.

As a woman, did you have time for yourself?

– Never, I never had time for myself, only now I feel that I never had time for myself, I didn't take care of myself, I would just get up in the morning, get ready and go to work. I had to be clean for work. But I never went out, I would hurry home and take care of my home, I would wash, iron, clean and cook for my children. And I never took care of myself, I would receive my salary and I never bought anything for myself, instead I would buy something for the house. I never had any kind of fun, never ever. Now I regret it, I could have had a different, better life, I should have gone to Austria or Germany.

Did you take care of your health?

– I took some medicine from pharmacy for rheumatism, my arms and legs ache, I didn't have time to go and see a doctor. On New Year's Eve I became pensioner and then I had ulcer in my stomach which burst. How I got that ulcer

99 See the glossary at the end of the book.

100 See the glossary at the end of the book.

101 See the glossary at the end of the book.

102 See the glossary at the end of the book.

I don't know, I went to that female doctor and it was just before New Year's eve, it was thirty first of December, so she gave me Buscopan for my stomach but I kept throwing up for two more days, I thought, "Dear God, what's wrong with me?" but it was that ulcer. A doctor came and he told me, "You have perforated ulcer and you must go to hospital immediately." ... New Year's eve and I was in hospital, they admitted me, operated on me, I didn't even know I had ulcer, I felt that when I eat something spicy that it bothered me but I didn't want to pay any attention to that, I thought it would go away. I was retired for ten days, I worked for thirty-seven years and ten days, on New Year's Eve they operated on me and thank God I stayed alive.

Could you tell us anything about Romani customs, culture and tradition?

– What kind of tradition are you talking about? We didn't have anything like that before, we ate meat, I mean I didn't, but all our Romani people, they would bring a swine, cow – when it died they would bring it and eat it, they didn't mind at all, and now they mind when they eat a hen or anything else. They would just fry that meat of the carcass and everybody ate, sometimes one family had some meat and sometimes somebody else, you couldn't buy it.

And customs? My grandmothers used to tell me fairy tales, they sang Romani songs, they told me there were fairies, elves and witches. They also told me that during the war there was a battle in a ditch near Mihaljevci and Šimanovci and there was one coach, really light one, it passed each night at midnight, on it there was a man without his head, each night they would see him pass. People stood and told us, "Come on children, go inside!" We didn't want to go inside and we would peek through the window, mostly older people remained outside, now they are all dead, each night at midnight they would watch it ... it was some kind of a vision ... something ... it was terrible. It was something! You believe in higher force, witches disappeared now, but before they were here, before there were fairies for sure. When you see a fairy, you immediately have tears in your eye, when I saw a fairy, I saw two or three of them, my eye started to tear, it teared for a long time and I saw everything in white. But now not everyone can see them. I tried to show them to my mother – in – law, "Look, there they are!", but she said, "I don't see anything." And I saw them, there was an elderberry bush, it was huge. Fairies are tall, tall, thin, beautiful, but I had tears in one eye for three years afterwards. ... They didn't say anything to me, they just danced ... How come I saw them, I don't know. But I don't know about witches.

Did you ever tell fortune?

– Sometimes I told fortune to women, to the young women, I would look into coffee drags or cards, I couldn't tell much. One woman would give me

something, another one something else, it wasn't much, only what they could give me. Even nowadays women come to me and ask me to look into their coffee cup and read their future. I believe that Gypsies have some kind of power to tell fortune, there is something about us ... I even look into cards for myself to see what would happen to me, all women from around here turn their coffee cup over so that they could read future. As a card falls so you tell them what will happen. ...

I know to look into cards a bit but I don't know how to break a spell. I used to work magic for women, I used to give them a piece of iron so that they would be strong, to be powerful, I would give them something from a spot where fairies were, I knew where that place was. ... Fairies come and gather under a tree and then that tree becomes powerful. I know which tree that is and you take leaves from that tree, you take a twig from that tree and put it in your wallet, there is some power there.

Can you tell us something about your public life?

– I didn't have time to go out, to do things, I know everything, but I don't want to, I wouldn't talk about that. In those days, when Tito was alive everybody could get credits, after the war there was a short period when we lived well, things got stabilized and we could live well, we could get bank loans and other things, what happened afterwards I can't tell, the country fell apart, that's what it was – and no more, I don't have anything else to tell you.

I am of Serbian nationality, of Orthodox, Gypsy, Romani religion. I used to go to church, I went even now on our patron saint's day. I go to church on patron saint's days and on Sundays, I don't go regularly but I go from time to time. I believe in God, if there is some truth, some power, there is something. God is one, he has everything, these Jehovah's people and those other people and some other, there are churches now all over, but it's one God. Serbian church and Slovakian church they have theirs and we have ours. And Slovakian priest gives packages, alright, he gave me some because he knows me, because I cleaned there, so he gave me packages twice already, but our priests doesn't give us anything. That Slovakian priests is better, and God is one.

I don't read the Bible that much, sometimes I go to church for a while and I enter and so, I pray to God and that sort of things. Jesus said that Gypsies shouldn't work, Roms, and that they should always have something. And a Gypsy stole that nail so that's why Jesus Christ blessed him, he blessed that Gypsy because he stole that nail so that it wouldn't be hammered into his head, they nailed his feet and hands but that one which they wanted to hammer into his head that Gypsy stole and that's why they couldn't use it. In a way God cursed Gypsies, because they don't work, they don't like to work and people don't respect them, nobody appreciates them, if school is concerned, or job or

anything Roms, Gypsies are not respected at all.

Did anyone at work ever tell you that you are Gypsy, did you experience any sort of discrimination?

– There were a few of us Gypsies and we felt it, we are not that stupid, we felt that we are not appreciated as others. You can work and do everything right, but still you are not appreciated as others are. We saw that a long time ago and I guess God cursed us Gypsies, who knows.

What important changes occurred in your life since 1989?

– A lot of things changed. First, my son was at the front, all we did was watch the news. I hardly managed to bear that, I barely survived. After he spent some two or three months there at the front he fell into a coma, he was in hospital in Novi Sad and then he came home, we didn't even know where he was before. After all that happened my younger son got divorced, his wife left him and took their child to Germany. They got scared, she went to her mother in Germany, and he is still at my place, he started to drink ... big changes, big changes! So now what can I do, such a large family, such nice life, such a lot of things we had, now we don't even have peace. I can't live. Now I'm retired but I don't have peace, I don't have a life at all, I suffered so much, I had miserable youth, and now when I am old, now he is ill again, he doesn't have salary, he can't work, he gets two hundred and forty dinars as some kind of aid because he is a veteran, but even that he doesn't get regularly, he can't live on that. And he has a daughter, he has a wife, we have to take care of all of them, so many worries – I'm sixty and I still have to take care of them.

My younger son didn't get married again, he drinks a lot, he won't marry, he only waits for his wife, he has a daughter. What will happen, how will all that end, who knows?

How did you manage to survive during this bombing of our country?

– Bombing? Well, we didn't go anywhere. People started going to basements but we stayed out mostly, we were in our garden, we sat there each night, all night long. We had to go to work during day, but during night we watched it all, we didn't sleep and so, it's a good thing we stayed alive.

What do you think, what was worse: the Second World War or this what happened now?

– It was worse during the Second World War, grown ups left and we children stayed at home, and now what happened, you didn't know where the bomb would fall, you could only watch, you couldn't sleep, you didn't know where to go, what would happen, all we could do was sit at home, you couldn't go anywhere. In the beginning we went to the cellar but afterwards we didn't, we didn't dare go to our cellar, because we saw that bombs fell even in people's

cellars and if a bomb fell on a house it fell on everything, where could I go? Mostly we sat in our garden. When we had coffee we drank it, when we didn't have it we didn't drink it, we just sat there, we had water besides us, we were quiet and we prayed to God. You cross yourself and say, "May God help us." But what is God's will worth, it's according to what you deserved, it depends on what each man deserves, I don't know.

What influenced your life most?

– I wanted more than anything that my children go to school, I wanted them to have clothes, to have food, but I couldn't afford all that. When they went to school, Bora finished three grades and after that they transferred him to Antun skala, because he was naughty, but he was a good pupil. He was merry, maybe because he was Gypsy, Rom ... why they transferred him ... I don't know. My Pera was also always good in school, alright, he finished school and apprenticeship, but it was hard, very hard. It was hard for me because I couldn't myself ... it was hard for me because I gave them things, what they needed everyday and food for snack and for lunch, I gave them everything, I bought them books and notebooks and it was very hard for me. It killed me, I wanted them to be dressed, to be educated, and it was difficult for me ... we couldn't live like other people, we didn't have possibilities, I saw how other people lived, what I did, but I wasn't able to do what I wanted, but what I had to do, the way we could afford it financially, it was all financial, but we didn't have possibility.

What is the happiest period in your life?

– That's having two sons. And when I got my first grandchild and it was a girl. I got two granddaughters, but I had sons, I loved daughters.

And what was the worst period in your life?

– The worst was not marrying the man I wanted.

Did you perhaps have a boy friend?

– I did, but my father gave my hand, so I had to be quiet, but I had a boyfriend and it remained forever ... I didn't take him ... but alright, I sort of had something with him.

Did you cheat on your husband afterwards?

– I didn't cheat on him.

But you saw that boyfriend of yours?

– I saw him.

Do you still see him?

– Yes, now too, but that's an affair.

So you had an affair and how is it now when you meet?

– It's all over now, I became old, there's nothing now. That was the happiest period of my life when I got my two granddaughters, and everybody is happy when they have a son. Alright I had sons and still I am so happy now. I have two granddaughters, one is seventeen years old and the one who is sixteen left for Germany, and the other one is here with me, thank God, only ... she can't go to school anymore.

What did you want to achieve when you were a girl, and what became true?

– Nothing, whatever I wanted nothing came true. The only thing that came true is that I worked, I had a nice job, I worked in a supermarket – as a charwoman, I wiped shop windows, I moved things, I cleaned, I worked and I was always in a hurry, but otherwise nothing came true. First of all, my children finished school but they don't have a job, now my granddaughter can't go to school anymore, she finished only primary school, we can't send her to school because we don't have any money. That was what made me really unhappy, the fact that she can't go to school anymore, it was wartime ... we wanted her to go and become a hairdresser, she had to travel to Indija but we wouldn't let her, we were afraid because they were bombing us. And how can I send her now, now it's all ruined, two years have passed, and she was a good pupil, alright she flunked one subject but she made it up later and she did well. So you have to watch over her, you don't want to let her go to school, because it is Romani custom, a girl has to be watched over, and I've respected that even to this day. And then we are afraid of this situation, that's why we were afraid, because the war was on. Now we can't send her to attend some course for five or six months, to become seamstress or hairdresser, I don't know what we'll do.

Today when you see yourself as a woman after past fifty years what would you recommend to your daughters and grandchildren?

– I would recommend them not to wander around, because if with God's help they get married until people come to ask for their hand and to give them presents, they have to be chaste, and that's why we watch over our granddaughter, so that she wouldn't wander but get married. There are in –laws who want to send the girl back, she is not a virgin so, God forbid, they send her back. Or what they do is put a glass with a hole in front of their in – laws and pour wine or beer and it leaks. Why? Because their daughter wasn't a virgin. There was that case, I saw it, they gave him a glass with a hole and he started to drink and it was so embarrassing, all Gypsies were ashamed. So we take care of her and we don't allow her to go to school in Indija, there you are, and if there were a school here, because she wanted that, we would allow her to become a hairdresser, but as it is she isn't going anywhere.

Is that the custom from the old days, was it the same before?

– It was even worse. As your father gave you, as he made the deal so you had to do. You weren't supposed to argue. Take me for an example. I didn't say to me father yes, I want that or no, I don't want that. As he said that's how it had to be! And even if I had a boyfriend, you weren't allowed to say anything. My father didn't know anything about him, the two of us just spoke a little, we saw each other for a couple of times, and that was it. I got married, I married. That was the law among us: if the father said something, if he took the money, he took what was needed, you mustn't run away, he wouldn't have means to give all those things back. Now it's the same, that tradition is not lost, that honesty of our girls. On the one hand that is good, on the other it is not, but I think that if the girl is smart, if she has a boyfriend, she won't make a mistake. I think that it is good if she is chaste when she gets married, that if she is a virgin afterwards her whole married life will be peaceful. Otherwise her father – in –law or her mother – in – law can chase her away, then her husband throughout life ...

Could you tell us something about Romani dishes?

– Yes, Romani people didn't have ovens to roast things so they would quickly make, how do you call that, fritters, something like fritters or they would make rolls, they would roll the dough and then they would put that on the cooker, they would fry it on oil or lard, or just on a ring, corn bread used to be baked on rings. But mostly we made dough, then we would put it in a saucepan and bake it on the cooker. I make stuffed cabbage and stew and everything else other people prepare. Before we used to bake bread in a saucepan. That was when we made pogacha¹⁰³, we didn't have money to make bread, so we made dough, and we had a cast iron plate, you would stoke fire underneath, it stood on three legs, it had a lid on top, so you would put firewood under it, or horse dung and it would burn so we would bake pogacha and bread on top or something else you had and you would bake it.

Have you ever gone to Italy?

– I went to Turkey, Italy, Romani, Leipzig, Munich, I went everywhere. I worked but for weekends – Friday and Saturday I would go, I would start on Friday. I would buy some goods for us, for the children, I would sell some and so I managed somehow. Mostly I brought what people ordered: large tablecloths, skirts, dresses, blouses, all sorts of things. People who worked in the firm “Centrosrem” would order things, I had a lot of orders. For a couple of times in Italy I would go with some man behind a corner to change money and he took all my money and ran away. And in Romania people wanted to snatch your bag, or your money and you couldn't yell or anything. Or a man would pass in plain clothes and look at your goods and then just take out a card and it

¹⁰³ See the glossary at then end of the book.

would turn out he was a policeman and he would take your jeans ... you would take little something to sell and to buy something else for that money but he would take all you had and then you wouldn't have money to buy anything.

Did you have any friends?

– I had friends, I had. I have them now, I have more friends who are Serbian than Gypsy. I have friends who used to work with me and when they see me they say, "Come and visit!" When I go to visit them they welcome me, it's very nice and they also see me off. We talked about the way they are, about our jobs and what we used to do at work. But that's when we have time, but nowadays people don't have time for anything so I rarely go anywhere. I have Mira. I visit her more than anybody else, just now her children came to visit me, her husband is in jail, she and her children came to visit me, they spent the night here, they watched TV. Mostly I watch the news, I watch things I'm interested in, I'm interested in peace, whether peace will come and when, that's all I want, just peace. We also watched *Casandra, Lovisna*.¹⁰⁴

Have you read any books?

– I have, but that was before, now I don't read now because my eyes are weak.

Do you have any favorite books?

– Well, no, I just read, I read the books which my children brought from the library, books they had to read for school, but I didn't ... And now I don't read much, I can't see.

What is your life like now?

– I live with my husband, but nobody earns any money. I work for Smuđ, I sweep with broom and clean, I go and dig in the graveyard, I do all sorts of things, I have to manage somehow because my pension is small ... and that's how it is, I am so tired, I'm exhausted, I'm not healthy, I'm old.

What else would you like to tell us about your life which you didn't mention before?

– Well when I was at my daughter – in – law in Leipzig thirteen years ago, in Leipzig thirty kilometers behind Munich. I was on vacation and I got month and a half as unpaid relief so I left. When I arrived I spent there January and February so I arrived just when there were those fashion parties, I worked from eight o'clock in the morning till two or three in a butcher shop, I had an apron, it was a big slaughterhouse, I washed everything: those dishes, walls, and then when I got home I also worked for the same owner but it was his son's shop, and that other job I had in a slaughterhouse was for his mother and his other

¹⁰⁴ Two Mexican soap operas which are very popular in Yugoslavia.

son. I also worked in an inn, I would start at five in the evening and work till five in the morning, or sometimes till two or three in the morning, it depended on business, there I worked as a dishwasher, they had a big machine. I washed dishes in huge sinks and they had big bar and the inn was big. The things I saw there! During those two months I spent there I saw more things than I saw in my whole life. But I worked a lot, really. I couldn't speak but I understood everything, I even talked with my boss. They really respected me, and on each Saturday they would give me salary, down to each pfennig. I worked here for thirty-seven years and still they didn't appreciate me as much as I was appreciated and respected in Germany during those two and a half months. After those two and a half months they saw me off, they asked me whether I was going to take the train, how would I travel, and all that, and when others heard that I was going home each of the waitresses and the boss they took me to their homes and packed all sorts of things for me to take, they loved me so much because I worked hard and my boss even gave me extra money. I earned a lot. When I came home, I fixed our bathroom and I fixed some other things and I sent money home and when it was Slada's birthday, on the second of February I sent around five or six hundred marks. And that Kraut wanted to arrange papers for me, I could invite my husband and sons to come. But I didn't want to because I had to work for two more years and then I retired. And if I had stayed there to work for five more years that would have been great, I would have had larger pension than I have now.

I saw there how they prepare parties and beauty contests. Just like we do here. Krauts, women even if they are older, dance, sing, they have fun and then I would stand behind the bar and watch what they were doing, and whoever came they would bring me cakes to eat and then later I would take those cakes to my in-laws, to their children. I can't describe all the things I saw there and that's what I had from life, that time I spent there and nowhere else, but I worked, I worked a lot and earned money. For one day and night I would earn two hundred Deutch marks, and on each Saturday we were paid, when I didn't work in the slaughterhouse I worked in the inn. There were cookers in two rows like this, I would scrub one side first, then I scrubbed floor boards and then one row and the other row, cooker and ovens were all yellow, so I scrubbed everything. When a Kraut woman came, when she saw what I did, they kissed my hands, I was respected so during those two and a half months, while here I worked for thirty seven years and when I retired they gave me stone watch, I retired on New years eve, and they organized a party on Women's Day and they didn't even send me anything. Well that's because we are not appreciated, we are not respected and there for two and a half months I can't describe that, they respected me so much ... and when I went home everybody saw me off, they put me and all my things in a van, everything I wanted to take to Yugoslavia.

Is there anything else about your life which you didn't tell us?

– Well alright, I can tell you something about that affair I had. I worked in a store, I worked there and I was young, I was always in a hurry and I worked and I had a friend. Well I enjoyed him and he enjoyed me but he died soon afterwards.

He was my colleague, a Serb, he was a boss there. He would only ask, "Where is my Gypsy girl?" he loved me a lot, what is really important he helped me when I was building the house and got all those credits. I worked in his house, his wife was there, his mother, father ... they were all very good. His wife was very pretty, they were married for one year more and then he got killed in an accident. I wasn't insulted when he called me a Gypsy girl. When we went to wedding parties and birthday parties, that was really special time for me. We always first went to a hairdresser, then they would bring me to their home, they would take me to a wedding party with them, when one girl got married there, I was respected, appreciated, afterwards I stopped going out with him.

You went out with him?

– Well, no, I didn't, we went to that wedding party, or some other party, but we didn't really go out.

Did his wife know?

– I worked there, I worked there, his wife, his mother and father, they were all good to me.

Did they know?

– No they didn't, only Mile said, "Here is your Gypsy girl, here she is." He sort of enjoyed to have me in his house, they were very rich, and when he got killed, his father met me and he hugged me so closely, I had my uniform on and he put here in this pocket I don't know how much money, I can't remember, I think three thousand dinars and that was a huge amount then, my salary was around hundred and twenty dinars and he gave me three thousand, he said, "So that you would have, so that you would have money", his father told me and his father died recently. He, when we made housewarming party he brought me furniture set from a store, we could fit one whole room, but that was just like that, I worked in their house and all that. Also we went together to a wedding party when that girl Zuska got married, we went to that party together. Girls from the store would marry and we went together to their parties, we went to Slavica's party and to Boško's housewarming party, everybody knows that. It was like I was their girl and nobody could say anything.

Anything else you want to tell us about your life?

– I want to say something I forgot, what happened to me when I came first to my husband's house, it was two or three years after I married. We didn't have

our house, we were at my mother –in – law’s house, so I made adobe bricks, I made them myself and mixed clay, I didn’t even have a job yet. We had a house: little room, a kitchen, so my husband and I gathered some real bricks and we put some in foundations and the rest we built with adobe bricks, I did it and he and there was also one man who helped us, we built it alone, we made a roof. When I whitewashed our house I bought drinks for everybody, that was good ...We did it all by ourselves! A year afterwards I got my job. Later we sold that house and then we built this other one when we got credits and everything else I told you about.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

– Gypsies in the old days, I heard that from my grandpa and older people, didn’t have houses, they had wagons, they had some sort of a tent on them, so they had a cart and a little horse and they lived in fields. That’s how it was before, before the war, they didn’t have houses at all, they had kares¹⁰⁵ and wagons. And those kares were actually like tents now, so they would make that and the had corn husks and all sorts of things, it was also very warm in those kares, in those wagons, they slept there, they didn’t even have beds – they didn’t have anything, they slept like that. Just like today: a month in one field and next month on another one, they went from one village to another, that’s how they lived, they stole fruit, they ate, drank, went to trade, but mostly they were stealing things, even food for horses, corn and vegetables, they provided for themselves. And Gypsies didn’t steal anything large, they didn’t, they just stole so that they would have something to eat, to have something to eat today and the day after, but they never stole anything big, women gave birth there, they all lived there and they were healthier than we are now. That’s what old people used to say, our grandma told us all that. She lived like that, she told us. We didn’t. And she told us about their life under kares, in wagons, and they were warm and they were healthy, they lived for ninety years. There was one grandma who was hundred years old, there was another who also that old, they lived for a long time, all old people lived long, but these young people don’t anymore.

105 “Tent” in Romani.

Djurdjevka, 55 years old, (1946)

Would you like to tell me something about your life?

– Well, my life was not filled with adventures exactly. Some good and bad things happened to me, just like they happen to everyone else. I was born on April 18th, 1946 in Dobanovci, near Belgrade. I remember the day when I first started school, as every other child who remembers its childhood, things that stay engraved in one's mind.

I went to school. I also graduated from junior college, so I have not remained illiterate. My brother and sister went to school too. Our house was not among Romani houses, so I started going to school along with my friends although I was Romani girl. I also wanted to go to school when I was six. I had regular education, I had excellent marks in the elementary school. When I finished elementary school I wanted to continue education, although my father said that I was a girl, that we were Romani people and that all that was not going to come out right. But I was stubborn, and I was even sassy, I threatened them with suicide, I told them I would kill myself if they did not let me continue education, although I didn't mean it really. But it was just a trick to force my parents somehow to let me go to school. I can't complain about my parents, really. I was their eldest child, their first born, so to speak (my mother had a son from her first marriage), so they let me do whatever I wanted. They trusted me. So, they let me go to school. I can remember well my father's words before I got enrolled. I shall never forget those words, I'm sure. He said, "I am sending you in the right direction, but if you go astray, just look where the Danube and the Sava join and choose the spot which is deepest!" These words are impressed in my memory, I've always remembered them, and all my life I took care what I was doing. I have always had respect and consideration for the elderly. Although my parents are not alive any more, I owe them gratitude for my whole life. For everything I have got now I can be grateful to them, because they set me on the right track.

What kind of education have you got?

– I graduated from the Administrative School in Belgrade and I also finished two years at the Law School. I couldn't find a job here, though. All my jobs were temporary. I worked in Zemun, in the police station at the reception desk, but all those were odd jobs. They didn't last for long, all were only temporary, and then I got the chance to leave Yugoslavia.

As a young girl, were you going out with friends, or were you being kept in the house like other Romani children?

– I have never being kept closed in the house. I was going out, I enjoyed my life. I only didn't have much time to go to Romani celebrations, Romani feasts. We were going out to take a walk to Kalemegdan, Terazije, or we would go to cinema, theatre, we met young men at various places. Today I feel sorry because I didn't have any Romani boyfriends, all my boyfriends were of other nationality. I get along with them well. When one is young and in love, you do not have to worry whether you would get along with each other.

I understand perfectly how it is, because I am myself a Romani woman in a small society.

– Well it wasn't like that for me, because everybody around me accepted me for who I was. I didn't feel any kind of difference, any kind of discrimination.

You got married then?

– There's not much to be said about my marriage. I simply met a young man, he was not Romani. Love at first sight! We decided to live together. I was twenty years old. It lasted for about a year and then we realized that we weren't for each other, so we broke up. We were young and we didn't want to have children and get tied to each other. We lived together but we didn't get married. There was no violence whatsoever as long as our love lasted, until we got to know each other better. When we realized we were not for each other, we parted with a friendly handshake and we have remained friends ever since.

Did he propose to you?

– He proposed in a very modern way at the time. It all happened very fast. I eloped with him. His parents were nice people. His mother was employed and his father was a musician. They were really nice, but the two of us couldn't find common language, so each of us went in search of one's own happiness. My parents were not very satisfied with this, but they showed understanding for me. They said, "If you can get along with him, it's fine with us." Afterwards we had a little argument. My father once objected, "You see? Why didn't you listen to me?" I kept silent, I only said to him, "Haven't you made at least one mistake when you were young?" He forgave me everything. Normally, parents are always those who forgive, now I am a parent and I forgive my children everything.

You married someone else afterwards?

– I met my present husband, with whom I have been married for 30 years now, with whom I have children and grand children. I can't say my husband is bad. He is a very good man, hard working, he has his own good sides and bad sides. As it is common in all our villages, especially among us Romani people, man is not taken for a real man unless he gets drunk from time to time. We

have always managed to find our common language in work, we really didn't have a lot of time for each other. So, we had no time to quarrel or maltreat each other. When we met he wasn't a young man anymore. He was married before and he had a child from that first marriage. As I got a child a year after, our son and his daughter were simply growing together. I have no daughter, so I accepted the little girl as if she were my own.

Did your parents accept him?

– It wasn't that simple really. I didn't have children and there I was marrying a man with a child. But I explained things to them, we sat down and had a talk, we cleared the air and they said to me, "You are not a child any more, keep your eyes open, watch what you are doing." To be honest with you, I wasn't really in love with my second husband, it wasn't that what attracted me to him, instead I had plans to go abroad, I wanted to make my place in the world. So really when you think of it, he was something of a launch pad for me. I can't say I married him out of interest, for he didn't have fortune. He simply had a job and a small flat which his firm gave to him. I was young, I yearned for adventures, I wanted to see foreign countries, foreign people. That's what I had in mind. Since I was a girl my parents would never let me go, and as it was I thought I could do it with him. He lived in Vienna with his family, with his mother and sister, his father was killed in 1945 in concentration camp in Jasenovac.

Did your parents ever talk to you about war?

– My father was on forced labor in Berlin for four years. He told me a lot about what he experienced there and how he survived, and my mother also told me how she lived during the war here in Yugoslavia, how they had to flee in panic and how each person had to fend for oneself. My parents told me a very interesting story. While he was in prison in Berlin, my father, along with other prisoners, was permitted to write letters to his family. Although he wrote one, he couldn't send it, because there were a lot of Germans in our village, it was a regular German village. The mayor was a German, he censored the letters and he would read each one. We had a neighbor, uncle Aleksa was his name, he was a Russian, I remember him well. Since my father couldn't write what he wanted he would write something like this, "When uncle Aleksa comes to visit us, we just get in a car and go the other way." My mother understood he was really talking about Russians, that they were bombing Berlin and that it had nothing to do with our uncle Aleksa. My father would also write some words in Romani language, so the mayor wouldn't understand.

My mother stayed at home, she had a child before she had me, a son who was born in 1940. Our neighbors were Slovaks, both were quislings in the German army. One day, while they were sawing woods in the shed, they were talking in Slovakian about a certain notorious man called Beli who would come

to kill people in Dobanovci. Luckily, my mother, who speaks Slovakian perfectly, could understand them, so they fled on time. When they arrived, they found nobody at home, thanks to the fact that my mother could understand those young lads speaking Slovakian.

We got along really well with the Slovaks, at least according to what mother said. The old lady came several times during one day and she said, "Jaj, mila, jaj mila, kak je ze deci mila, pridi u nas..."¹⁰⁶ but my mother knew why she said this. She could not tell her openly, but they left their house when the village was freed.

Did you stay in Yugoslavia after you got married?

– I immediately left for Vienna on February 11th in 1968, and I started working on February 16th. It was different then, workers from Yugoslavia were very respected and you could find a job easily, while today it is very hard to find a job abroad.

We got married, worked, we struggled for a while until we made some money and then we started living comfortably. We had good times and those which we will never forget. At first I worked in hospital kitchen. The kitchen was downstairs and we lived with my mother in law, my husband's sister and myself. We all lived in one room, we had bathroom and WC. We were content. I was working there for four years. I was not satisfied with that job, I knew I could contribute more. I was looking for a better job and higher salary. I got an idea in 1987, I wanted to open credit bureau for granting loans and try to help our people and that proved to be an opportunity for good profit. I opened the bureau, but I wasn't an official owner. As an 'auslender'¹⁰⁷ I could not be the owner, because I didn't have Austrian citizenship. So, I opened the bureau with a colleague, and he was official owner. But I shouldered the responsibility. All sorts of people were coming, regardless of their nationality. Nobody complained if they were Serbs, Gypsies, Croatians, Kosovars... Everybody was equally served. I didn't lend them my own money, I was just the mediator between the bank and the clients. When we opened the bureau we had no money even for advertising, until we became stronger and we managed to establish connections with seven banks. We were doing so well that in three months time, we could grant loans up to 15.000 DM. But we had to work really hard. Later we developed business and we made a lot of money. We paid advertisements in magazines like "Ilustrovana politika", "Arena", while it was published. We used to arrange concerts as part of our advertising campaign. Everything was going swimmingly, we were earning a lot. Thanks to that job, today I have all this. I would often invite my bank partners to dinner in restaurants with Yugoslav cui-

106 "Oh my dear, oh my dear, how are your children, come to our house." in Slovakian.

107 "Foreigner" in German.

sine and we always had great fun. They only knew one Yugoslav song 'Marijana, slatka mala Marijana'¹⁰⁸ Music was extraordinary, it really touched my Gypsy soul. I would let the musicians play a few songs, then I would invite a musician to sit next to me and I would say, "Now you'll play just for your aunt Ljubica." When the lad would start playing, I would give 1,000 shillings to each of them. When the Austrians saw this, each of them gave 1.000 shillings, too, so the lads always earned 34.000 shillings just for that one evening, therefore everyone was happy.

Were you partial when you had to grant loans to Romani people?

– When you had an interview with someone, you could see if someone could be trusted or not. Most important things for granting a bank loan were: work permit, visa, working experience, previous debts, wages, number of children. All those elements were taken into account when you were granting a loan.

At that time I was already living with my family: husband, son, daughter – in – law and grandson. My husband worked in a company, while my son and daughter – in – law worked with me, they didn't enjoy any privileges, though. My son got a degree as a hotel manager, but he didn't do that for long, I persuaded him to come to the bureau, where he could earn more than with his degree.

Afterwards my son got married in Yugoslavia! We found daughter - in - law from this place, Vojka. The engagement party was very simple, we didn't buy her. It happened all of a sudden. We just asked her if she wanted to get married and if she liked our son, we had no objections. Maybe my son fell in love with her. Both engagement and wedding party were arranged in one week. It happened very quickly. They had a modest wedding party. We gave presents according to the custom, an apple with ducats, necklace, ring, and watch plus the usual things.

We took her to Austria with us, she got a visa, soon afterwards she gave birth to a child. She stayed at home with the child. Someone had to stay with the child. She was looking after the child and later on she started working in the bureau. They have a son and he is grandma's darling. The boy is in the fifth grade now. He started school here, since I returned early. He is doing well in school. Maybe one day he will grow to be somebody.

Do you know any Romani customs: baptism, Easter, Christmas Eve...?

– I can't tell you much about those things because I really don't know how people used to celebrate those holidays, but we celebrate them and we celebrated while we were abroad, according to our possibilities. We have always

¹⁰⁸ "Marijana, sweet little Marijana" in Serbian.

celebrated our patron saint's day, also Easter, although in Austria we celebrated both Catholic and Orthodox Easter because of the children. When my grandson was a little boy he asked, "Is this our Easter or theirs?", so I had to dye eggs for him. When Christmas came it was the same thing, I prepared for him everything other children in Austria had. So we had two Christmases, two Easters, but we had little time for the Orthodox holidays. We couldn't go to church and we couldn't make kolach¹⁰⁹ and break it. Usually, when I got home from work, we prepared dinner, invited guests, friends and celebrated that day.

We celebrated some other holidays as well. We celebrated March 8th by going out to a restaurant to listen to music, as husband and wife should do.

Did your husband treat you well?

– I have always got flowers for my birthdays, but I remember one particular birthday, it was my twenty sixth birthday. My husband went out one night with his son – in – law and my brother and they stayed out until tomorrow morning. It was my birthday and my husband brought me twenty-eight plastic tulips instead of twenty-six. And flowers were all plastic, artificial. When he came to hand them over to me and to wish me a happy birthday, I threw the flowers away and I said to him that he was early because plastic flowers are taken to the graveyards.

I love flowers. I work in my little garden. I am not employed, I just wait for my pension and work in my garden, I have my roses, lawn ... I have all sorts of flowers. I just adore flowers.

You mentioned that you arranged concerts in Vienna as part of advertising campaign.

– When concerts are concerned they were part of our business, we used them for advertising, to emphasize our reputation and our business. Those concerts weren't cheap at all. Šaban Šaulić took 7.000 DM for a night. Dragana Mirković took nine thousand, Keba five, Zorica Brunclik, Kemiš Mirko, Ana Bekuta, Haris Džinović, and Minimaks also came ... Divna Karleuša hosted the shows. It all cost a lot. Airplane tickets to Vienna and back, hotel rooms, dinners were also very expensive, but we had chosen that kind of promotion.

We arranged concerts in the spring and fall they were called "Singing Spring" and "Singing Fall". There was a big advertisement in "Sabor". The response among our people was great. It was fine, a lot of people came to the concerts, and many had great time, although times were hard, war was going on in Bosnia and Croatia in 1992 and 1993. When I welcomed the guests wishing them a nice evening I always said, "Let us forget about all the problems." and I had in mind the war in Yugoslavia.

How did you decide to come to Yugoslavia in these times?

¹⁰⁹ See the glossary at the end of the book.

– We built a house, we decided to settle down. It was hard for me to leave all this and move abroad, when one can live here as well. Those who know how, who work hard can live decently. I am content with the life over here. We don't have that much money as used to have, it's true, but we can manage. My husband has a pension, I don't have any at the moment, but I expect it will be approved before December. I expect my pension to be four thousand DM, with that we will be able to live decently enough. Our son doesn't work at the moment, he just runs a pub. He can manage, although the guests do not have so much money as they used to have, they do not consume drinks so much, don't order dinners and all that. It's a sort of a folk music club. Mostly young people gather there and have fun, dance or sing. There are all sorts of beauty contests, always something new to attract the attention of public. Both Roms and Serbs visit the pub. There are not so many Romani people around, so Serbs are in majority, lads and girls. They have fun, there is live music. You must have very good vocal singer, she has to be only attractive, but with nice voice as well. The pub is also rented for birthday parties, wedding parties, and all sorts of family celebrations, with complete equipment. There are quite a lot of such events, wedding parties, parties after a child has been baptized, so we can earn some money that way.

I don't work much any more. I don't get up early, there is no need for that. I usually get up about 8:30, drink my coffee, water my garden, weed my roses, cook lunch, and watch TV. There are always good films on TV, there are good books as well, so time passes quickly, I am not bored. I like reading serious novels and detective books. I would point out Opel Bake "The Women's Skyscraper". I read Remarque's "The Triumphal Arch". Remarque is a German novelist, who wrote against Germany and I like his books very much. When I don't have a lot of time, I read paperbacks. I like good books so I have a big library. For example, "The Women's Skyscraper" is about an elderly Japanese woman, who is very beautiful and allows her husband to have a concubine, a young woman. She withdraws, giving her place to the concubine, whom she had found personally in order to let her husband have fun.

Those are books. Do you know any Romani song, fairy tale or story?

– Well, not really. An old Romani man used to live next to us when we were children and he would come over in the winter evenings. He knew a lot of stories and he told them to us. We would gather around him and listen, and afterwards we would be afraid to go to bed, because he told us about witches, vampires and people who rose from their graves and so on.

Do you think Romani people have the ability to tell fortune?

– I don't believe that Romani have that power to foresee things. Every one of us can sometimes tell our future, but Romani people were forced to make

their living somehow, they weren't recognized as a separate nation, they had no jobs, so they had to earn for living somehow and so they used to tell fortune to other people in order to get a piece of bread. I don't believe in all that magic, take for example newspapers today with ads of all sorts of agencies which offer you to have your fortune told, they do not belong to Romani people. There are exceptions, of course, people are gifted, but usually most of them have a giro account in the bank, so you have to pay first and then have your fortune told.

I remember when Vanda visited Austria I went to see her. She couldn't tell me anything during our talk. I left her my address and phone number. By chance I met her brother who is interested in people who went to see her and it always turned out that what she told was based on gossip. Just take a look at the horoscope, you look at a person, if he or she is young you will tell them something about love, and I don't know some events that may interest them as young people, if you have a middle aged person you will tell her something about family, children so you are bound to guess at least something, out of ten words at least three will hit the target.

You see, my cards are here with me even now. I often open cards for myself and especially when I have company, we have coffee together and I do it for fun. I never told fortune to anybody who is not a Romani man for money. It was just fun.

You have recently organized a Romani ball here.

– It was quite a sensation, beauty queens were chosen, awards were handed over, it was just like any other similar celebration. There were many guests, all Romani people, because I stressed clearly “whites are not welcome.” not because of some racist segregation or discrimination, but because there were quite a number of beautiful young Gypsy girls accompanied by their brothers or fathers, some of white young man could tease them and I wanted to avoid clashes because I was responsible. The most beautiful Romani girl got a golden ducat, another one got a necklace, and the third one got a watch. Those were the prizes.

I heard that you wanted to write Romani poems.

– Well, I wrote in Vuk's alphabet¹¹⁰, because we don't have ours. I heard a Romani primer has been published so I wonder whether we will have to learn letters because we have to have all those dashes and accents because we have hard sounds in our language and then it would be easier for us to read in Romani language.

I heard from older people that when a daughter - in - law was purchased they used to sing a song. We, Gypsies have dark complexion, we are dark but we

¹¹⁰ Vuk Karadzic (1787 – 1864) reformed the Cyrillic alphabet by adapting it to the sound system of the Serbian language and thus created simple and logical spelling system.

like our daughters – in – law to be light, “Kome treba bela snaja, kas trubul bori parni, kas trubul bori parni, trubul banka zurali.”¹¹¹ Since it is usually our custom to buy daughters – in – law, it means the man who wants to have a white daughter – in – law has to have lots of money. It’s a pity all this dies out with the young and with this new way of life. Our tradition is slowly disappearing. Today most children have at least high school, they go to the university, find a job and a lot of them forget. I know some Romani houses, where people don’t talk with their children in Romani language. It’s a pity and sad that children are not learning their mother tongue. While I was living in Austria, I always spoke with my son and grandson in Romani language because I didn’t want us to forget it and so that this Romani language wouldn’t disappear. Few of our words survived, and they also became twisted. It’s much easier for me to speak Serbian. If I met some Romani people, who spoke pure Romani language, I think I wouldn’t be able to understand half of what they said.

You asked for some songs of ours. Well, I know some. For example, there is an old Romani song, it goes like this:

So cerava kana me merava?¹¹²

What will I do when I die? It’s a bit funny, isn’t it, how can you do anything when you die?

Ali so ceravaa kana me merava, ko man zalila?¹¹³

Who will cry over me, who will weep for me?

Aj Rromnjije putar e avlija, mekhav tuce vo cher ve avlija!¹¹⁴

My dear wife, open the gate, I’m leaving you the whole estate.

When you come to my grave, don’t cry

Dig a well, by my head

Place a bench by my feet,

Who is old he can sit

And the thirsty can drink.

The most interesting part of the song is where the man makes his wife swear that she won’t get married again:

Aj Rromnjije rrom te na les

My wife, don’t get married again.

She answers him, “I’ll marry the tenth man who comes, but I’ll never get over your death.”

So cerava kana me merava, ko man zalila?

111 “Who needs a white daughter – in – law?” in Serbian and Romani.

112 The more accurate translation of the sentence in Romani would be: “What am I going to do, I feel like I’m going to die.”

113 “When I die, who will mourn for me?” in Romani.

114 “Oh, my wife, I’m leaving you the house and the yard.”

Zalila me mungri therni Rromnji,
Ajde angali laci ckni chori.
Aj, Rromnjije, putar e kapija, mekhav tuce vo cher ve avlija.
Aj, Rromnjije kana me merava Rrom te na les! Des lava, al' tut ci bistrava!
Najes tuce!¹¹⁵

Do you know any more songs?

– There is one which is very interesting. People usually call us Cigan mala, even today people use that word. Everyone had a mistress or lover in the village and there is a lovely song about that.

Amendar o trito vher si jekh Rromnji thaj chej e bari.
E Rromnjasa hav thaj pijav, pale cha me pirav.

There is a woman who lives in the third house from ours,
She has a beautiful daughter.
With the woman I eat and drink,
With the daughter I flirt.

There are a lot of songs, but now I can't remember any that are real nice. But there are nice stories about vampires:

There was a man, whose wife died. Well, what could he do, he had small children, he had to get married again. So, he and his friends set off one evening to find a wife for him, but one of them was a real trickster so he took a sheet, climbed on some crutches and hid in a ditch. When other men reached that ditch, he showed up. When that man who wanted to get married saw him, he thought it was a vampire and that it wanted to get him, that it was his wife's ghost, so he never got married again. It's a story often told by Romani people. They have a lot of stories with vampires but that one about a man who wanted to get married and whose friend disguised as a vampire scared him so that he didn't get married to this day is especially popular.

I can't remember any fairy tales, though. Fairy tales are not just Romani stories, they are widely known, but also told in Romani language. It can be, let's say a tale about a beneficent fair or fairy tale like "Sleeping Beauty" or stories by Grimm brothers, these stories are told in other languages as well. I didn't have much time for children, so I didn't tell them stories very often. I also didn't have time for singing lullabies to my son, I know no lullabies. I was always in a hurry,

115 "When I die, who will mourn for me? My young wife will mourn for me and our young child in her lap. Oh, my wife, I'm leaving you the house and the yard. Oh, my wife, when I'm dead, don't get married again. She answers: I'll take ten men after you, but I'll never forget you. Thank you."

I had to finish my work, earn money, make a carrier. That's why I had no more children. I regret not having more children. When my son was little, I had to take him to a nursery, it's called Kinderkipl in German, when he was five days old. That means that he went to that nursery right away from the hospital, and we paid for that. Afterwards he was at a kindergarten. So, I didn't have much time for children.

It can be said that you have succeeded in life. What have you got?

– What do I have now? I have a lot of time. Only that. As far as success in life is concerned, we've earned enough for living, nothing special, but we got what we need. My motto in life has been, "What I have is sufficient for me, I don't need anything else." Thank God I have enough: a car, three houses, vacant lots, an inn, we are leading a normal life, we have saved for old age, until we get our pensions. I wouldn't like to go back, I couldn't work any more. We Gypsies don't like to work, instead we like to have fun. My husband gets pension, helps our son in the inn, so we don't think about going abroad any more.

When I went to Austria, I knew some German. I improved it there, but I don't need languages here. I understand a little bit of English, our Romani language and Serbian. Sloveski vjem rosporavam, al spjevam.¹¹⁶ There's one good joke about Slovakian. A Slovak woman went to the market to buy some corn for the chicken "Pojdem do placa, kupim kukurica za kukurence."¹¹⁷

People usually say, "Look at him, he is as shrewd as a Gypsy." Gypsies usually trade with horses, sell them and brag about them.

Once, when a Gypsy took his horse to the market place, gendarme came, there weren't any policemen before but gendarmes, so they came and asked him, "Whose horse is this?" "It's mine.", he answered. They asked what his name was, and he answered Jovanovic Vezir. Vezir was the horse's name. Who knows if it is a joke or not. In Vojka there are a lot of jokes about chitterlings and people are often angry because of it. Old people used to get a paper bag with chitterlings. Because of such jokes there were huge quarrels, even fights.

What are your family relations like?

– Well of course I can't say now that I am good mother – in – law. My daughter - in - law can say if I am or not. I think I am very good and that my daughter - in - law has in me a second mother. That's what she always says. My grandson is my darling. When he was born, I was with my daughter - in - law in hospital in Vienna. We are very fond of each other. I don't think anybody in the world could stand between us. My daughter - in - law was very young when she got married. She only finished elementary school. We thought she would continue school in Vienna, but after a month and a half she got pregnant, so she

116 "I do not speak Slovakian but I can sing in it." in Slovakian

117 "I go to the market to buy some corn for the chickens." in Slovakian.

had to stay with the child.

I am doing homework with my grandson, even mathematics. Babushka has to help, she has to go to school and talk with teachers, she has to draw, paint, everything. His father is busy, mother finished just elementary education. I can't say she is not clever, but she is busy. So, my grandson is with me most of the time. My husband has his own company, everybody counts on me.

I like to work in the kitchen. We like to eat well, we are gourmands. I like to prepare special dishes, French, Mexican, our Balkan cuisine. It is easy nowadays to cook, there are cookbooks and recipes in newspapers, so there is no secret about it. Everyone has different taste. If you and I cooked the same dish exactly the same way, it would still taste differently. Thus, it depends who cooks, which ingredients one adds. We don't like sweets that much, we aren't fond of cakes, but we are great meat eaters. I prepare Vienna stakes with rice, minute steak, venison stew, beefsteak, steak with vegetables as broccoli as strongsl I don't know how it's called here..

In Vienna I cooked with a chef. I remember how funny it was once, just when I started working. The first day at a fine restaurant, it was called "Old England", and in the kitchen there was the chef with two cleaning ladies and a man, who looked as if he was the chef. I thought he was the chef or his assistant or someone important. They arrived before me, so I thought I would have to wash up the dishes. I approached the sink, but the cook called me "Jovanovic, you will cook with me and Mr. Hag will wash up the dishes." I laughed and looked at him, surprised, because he didn't look like someone who washes the dishes. When I asked him, however, to boil 30 eggs for me, he asked me in German, "If five minutes are needed for one egg to boil, how long do I need to cook 30?" I yelled at him that very first day, "You won't boil eggs one by one, put all thirty in a saucepan!" Then I realized why he was doing the dishes, although he looked very sophisticated. And I, although an auslender, I cooked with the chef. I learned a lot: special grilled dishes, all sorts of dishes and I met all sorts of guests. Some foreign guests came in when the president of the USA visited Austria. They came from Mozambique, and so they couldn't speak with the waiters. They didn't understand what the guests wanted. "Come, Jovanovic", they said "and see what they want!" Since I didn't know English well and they didn't speak any German, I started speaking to them in Gypsy. We understood each other. They were content with the dish I prepared. They gave me a 500-shilling as tip. It was news and was retold as a joke, how I can speak Mozambique language.

I have had all sorts of adventures over these 30 years, all sorts of things happened. I worked in a hospital as a nurse's aid. I got a degree in nursing 'flejgerina' it was called. I worked as a nurse in shifts. In the beginning, I was, of course, assigned night shifts. I can remember well one night shift. I was work-

ing with a colleague of mine, who was due to arrive at 10. I started to work at seven and meanwhile one patient died. I couldn't do take care of her alone, so I called a nurse from another department, who helped me wrap up the patient into a sheet and we took her to the bathroom. I got to our room to fill in the entries, when I heard someone shout "Schwester!"¹¹⁸ I thought I locked someone up in the bathroom with the dead woman and I rushed with the keys to open the door, when I saw the dead woman sitting on her bed. I screamed and fell. I got frightened; it was my first encounter with clinical death. The doctor checked her and everything, but it still happened. The doctor checked me first, gave me an injection, and only after they approach that woman came back from the dead.

All sorts of things happened to me. When I worked with banks, there was a boy working there, his name was Kirk and he was two or three years older than my son, he worked on loans. He would always say, "Jovanovic, I can always hear you all the way from the entrance, up the stairs, followed by eight people. You are just like a duck." They were those who were scheduled to get money that day. "All right, Kirk," I said, "if you think I am a duck, it's OK." It was around Easter, so I bought him a duck for present, followed by eight ducklings. He told me he had kept them in his cabinet ever since.

We joked a lot. The bank was in a street without traffic near Stefan Turm (Saint Stephen's Church). There were a lot of tourists and ice cream stand. I would persuade the man selling ice cream to go into the bank and give everyone an ice cream. I made all sorts of jokes, had crazy ideas, I was younger, of course. Or another story. I was at the bank, when the car arrived with money. Two policemen were standing inside and two at the door. I went in with my hand in pocket and I stuck out my finger and said: 'Money or life!' The policemen didn't know me, but the employees did, so they laughed.

Did you work in other people's homes?

– No, I didn't. I didn't have time for that, I've always had permanent jobs and I didn't get in touch with ladies who sought housework help. I earned pretty well, I worked for the Zepter Company, for Norris, until I started my own credit bureau. I also worked at many other places beside this job. I even had to pay a maid who cleaned my house.

My life was a rush between the flat, bureau and the bank. I didn't have time even for lunch. I was sometimes sick of hunger, and I didn't have time to eat, for I worked to earn as much as possible. I made a point for myself, an objective, which I had to reach. If I didn't do it, I might have never succeeded in life. I would give advice to all young people, everyone who works has to set an objective and has to know how to achieve it. Good will and a lot of work, that's

118 "Sister", also short for "Krankenschwester" which means nurse in German.

everything. I don't know what else I could say to them, because I know how I started how I went to Vienna and how I got back. I arrived to Vienna with a suitcase and returned with two houses, two building sites and capital.

Was your boss Yugoslav?

– I never had a boss who was from Yugoslavia, and I never worked in any company where there were with a lot of Yugoslavs. There was usually just one Yugoslav woman, maybe two, or just me. Then there are no gossips, people don't chat in Serbian, we had to improve our German through practice. You know, school is school but practice is always better than school.

One of my colleagues was a German a real one, his name was Heinz. I was lucky to work with young people and everybody called me Mom. It pleased me, I felt like a mother to them.

What does Vienna look like?

– Well what can I tell you about Vienna? Vienna is an old city. Everybody knows the most significant places are Schonbrun, Maria Theresa's Palace, large Zoo and Prater. There is a saying: "If you haven't seen Schonbrun and haven't been to Prater, you haven't been to Vienna." Prater is a very interesting place. You can bring along a sack of money and come back hungry and thirsty. A shilling here, two or five there, you just don't realize how much money you have spent. I remember well when I visited Prater for the first time, everything was interesting for me. Although I was pregnant, I wanted to sit in the "scary train". Everybody warned me that I shouldn't do it, that I would tremble with fear and that I would go into labor in that train but it was obvious to me that all those figures are fake, automatic and that nothing there was real. But still I was very interested in it. I gave birth to a normal baby, thank God. Many of our Yugoslavs, Romani people work at Prater. That's due to good seasonal wages and jobs are easy. There are quite a lot of Romani in Vienna. There is even a Romani Club, Romani Center. They have music competitions. There was a congress at which Romani people from the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Bulgaria were present and it was very interesting. They have contests in story telling, and playing music. Some were wonderful indeed. Romani people from Srem, and Ruma played really nicely. The conference was opened with the hymn "Đelem, delem".¹¹⁹

Did you go to the Opera in Vienna?

– No, I didn't, I wasn't interested in opera. I went to theatres, cinemas and restaurants. I have never been fond of operas, although people always say "It's because you don't understand it."

I can remember an event from the very beginning of our stay in Vienna. My husband and I got a flat. We worked and redecorated the flat, and in our

¹¹⁹ "I was going, going" in Romani.

street there was a big building which was being built, suddenly a couple of German women gathered in the corridor and started to shout “rate, rate, rate!” I had no idea what rate could be. I rushed out to see what was going on: a rat went into the corridor. They were terribly frightened. Well what was I to do, I took a broom and killed it. We had sort of celebration afterwards, they talked about my courage, my feat of killing the rat, it was as though I killed a giant, not a rat.

I must say that the Germans used to be different. They used to believe us completely, one could live with them and work. Now they’ve learned our Yugoslav, especially Romani ways of doing things. The Germans are interested in your knowledge, your skills. Degrees and diplomas don’t mean a lot to them.

One could talk about Vienna three days and three nights. But Vienna should be seen, then you can feel it and experience it. I recorded Schonbrunn on tape, its flowerbeds. I’ve tried to make a similar garden here in my garden. I hope I’ll have a part of Schonbrunn here in my garden in two years time.

They have all sorts of plants, they have tropical plants in greenhouses, where people, who have been recommended tropical climate, sit it’s like having therapy.

It’s nice to listen about Vienna.

– A lot could be said about Vienna. If you spend thirty years in Vienna that’s not little, there is a lot to be told. It is an old town, many of our writers lived there, there is Dositej Obradović’s house and also the house in which Vuk Karadzic lived. The Stefan Turm is a famous church of theirs, and there is a nice story about it. When the church tower was being constructed, God and the devil made a contract which stated that the tower must be erected by an innocent soul and the condition was that during seven days while the tower was being erected nobody could mention name of any saint. A young lad, however, had a sweetheart whose name was Maria. He erected the tower, not uttering a word, not calling anyone by name or saying a saint’s name. On the last day, when he had to turn the tower toward the Sun, his sweetheart passed by, he turned around, fell and died. The cross on the tower is still a little slant. It is an interesting church, really lovely, with a lot of visitors, as a tourist center. The other nice sight is Ketten Strasse. There is a big tree with thousands of nails hammered into it. There is a lock in the tree under glass to prevent anyone to take it. And the story says that the person who makes a key to unlock it will become the richest man in the world. Nobody has made one yet.

Have you been elsewhere?

– I have been in Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary and also in Italy. These were only short visits, lasting for a few days, a week or

two the most. But in Austria I stayed for thirty years. There were the holidays, but you know, we Yugoslavs can't just enjoy our holiday, we have to keep our business going on, at least smuggle something across the border. These were just little things, nothing against the law, just small things.

I am interested in Romani holidays and celebrations. Were you present at any of them?

– Well there weren't many celebrations for Romani in Vienna, there were, though, some parties for Yugoslavs. Especially when a famous singer would come to sing at a restaurant. There was the famous Muja's place, Romani people went there mostly and there Vida Pavlovic usually sang.

Now, since I've been back home and I live near Stara Pazova, I go to the church dedicated to Saint Ilija¹²⁰, I light a candle, take a walk with my grandson and return home. I don't celebrate any special religious holidays.

How are you getting along with other Romani people in your village?

– We really get along nicely. I don't live in cigan mala. The Romani settlement is at the opposite end of the village. There are no Romani people living near us, but I don't think it is good to avoid my people, although one should accept other nations, too. You should always remain with your people, it doesn't matter if they have good and bad sides. I get along fine with non - Romani people. They will always help at a moment's notice. I also return favors. Maybe I'll help them more than they helped me but it doesn't matter, these things should never be put on scale.

Is there anything you would like to tell me and which you didn't mention so far?

– In the end I want to say that I am a Romani woman, I feel as a woman, a strong woman, you know people say that it is Romani custom to let the husband boss his wife around, people say that wife must obey her husband, women have always been downtrodden and abused, they always had to listen to orders, daughter – in – law had to wash her father – in – law's feet. Luckily I didn't have a father – in – law but even if I did I would never wash his feet. I always found that funny, I always asked why that was a custom, did their feet stink, why weren't they able to wash their feet on their own? I would never allow my husband to give orders to me and make me live according to his will. Life has its own rhythm of course, normal problems occur but then we can solve them together, if there are things to be done we will do them together, we will share. While I worked I didn't allow my boss even to order me to do something let alone my husband. You should respect your family, if you have a father – in – law you should respect him and that's all fine. But you mustn't let anyone

120 See the glossary at the end of the book.

manipulate you, that you should never do. I would never let that happen to me. You must stick to one motto, but it should be to put yourself before anyone else. We all make mistakes in life. I made mistakes, not just one, but if I made one mistake I corrected it. Maybe I will make another mistake, a different one, but you must see that you made a mistake, you must see where you went wrong and then you can stop doing that. But you shouldn't accept orders from other people who say, "You made a mistake, you didn't do this correctly."

I may be stubborn, but I am Aries in the horoscope and Aries ... well, they just want to go through the wall headfirst. I've never ever let anyone manipulate me in my way of living. I've always felt strong and wanted my word to be the final one, although I don't think it's always good or nice. You should behave like that always but I am stubborn, as I said. Especially those young girls should behave a little bit better, show respect. Young people today are horrible sometimes, I really have troubles with them, I have my son and daughter – in-law and I worked with young people there in our inn, girls and boys came there, it doesn't matter if they are Serbs or Romani, nowadays girls are the ones who sort of attack the boys. It was different when I was young. We also had feelings, we were in love, but we waited for the boy to approach us, I couldn't as a girl approach a man. When I was young, I was devilish. Sometimes I would set up dates with three boys at the same time and I would stay at home and study. It was very amusing to me but now I can see that it wasn't nice. You know young people can do a lot of foolish things. And we should forgive young people and everybody else if they make some mistakes, we should point those mistakes out nicely, we shouldn't argue, I never liked to argue, I never liked fights and violence I always wanted to talk thing over, diplomatically, show to that person that maybe he or she isn't right. You should simply lead the person who made the mistake on the right track, so that he himself can see his mistake. In my life I had freedom to do things my way. I did things the way I saw fit and I managed to succeed. I had a goal. If you do not have a goal and if you can't see the way to achieve it, then you have nothing. Then you will be lost like a black sheep among white sheep.

I saw a dog in the house. Is it yours?

– It's our pet, did you see how big he is? He is a sheepdog, he is there years old. I got him when he was three weeks old, I was feeding him from a bottle. He is very good, he wouldn't let anyone in, and especially protects me. I'm not particularly fond of animals, except this pet. I don't care for pigs or cows. I don't even know how to keep them, I don't like that and I don't like their smell. I prefer the scent of roses to the smell of pigs.

Glossary

Badnjak: oak log or branches which are brought into the house on Christmas Eve. The host spreads some honey over it and pours wine on it before it is lit on the fireplace where it burns all night.

Chesnitza: special pastry made on Christmas day which consists of layers of filo pastry with filling of ground walnuts, raisins and castor sugar.

Daca: meal at the house of the deceased prepared for the people who come to the deceased person's house after the funeral.

Djurdjevdan: the day when Saint George is honored as patron saint of the family. It is celebrated on the sixth of May. Some people do not even call that saint by his first name but call him Djurdjevdan as well. A lot of Romany people celebrate this saint as their patron.

Domobran: Member of the regular army of the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. Unlike ustasas who volunteered domobrans were drafted.

Goli otok: a desert island in the Adriatic Sea which served as a prison camp during the communist regime where political prisoners were sent especially during 1948 and 1949 when Yugoslavia had severed diplomatic relations with Stalin's regime.

Kolach: pastry prepared for Christmas, Easter and family's saint patron's day. The dough is made of flour, milk, yeast, eggs, sugar and lemon zest. After the dough is kneaded, it is divided in three parts and these are then rolled into rolls which are braided into a plait. This plait is placed into a deep saucepan and after it rises, it is baked. The kolach is ornamented with a cross made of dough.

Koljivo: boiled and mashed wheat mixed with walnuts, raisins, sugar and spices.

Korindjash: a person, usually a child, who goes from door to door on the day before Christmas, recites songs created for that occasion and asks for treats.

Partisan: Member of a guerrilla force led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia during World War II against the Axis powers, their Yugoslav collaborators, and a rival resistance force, the royalist Chetniks.

Pogacha: is a flat, round bread made of flour and yeast. It plays a special role not only in religious holidays but also in wedding and funeral ceremonies.

Pogachares: The closest members of the bride's family. According to the custom in some parts of Yugoslavia the bridegroom's family comes before the wedding ceremony to the bride's family to take the bride with them. After the ceremony the bride's family continues their celebration apart from the bride-

groom's ceremony. After midnight the bride's closest family go with pogacha to the bridegroom's house to make sure that the bride is accepted by the family and that she proved to be chaste.

Poloznik: the first person to visit somebody's household on Christmas morning, who is supposed to bring health and happiness to the host family. People believe that if that person is male and dark he will bring health and happiness to the household.

Saint Ilija: Saint Elias. Saint Ilija's day is celebrated on the second of August. It is believed that he rides in heavenly chariot whose wheels create thunder. People fear him because he is supposed to be whimsical and his symbols are lightning and fire.

Saint Mihajlo: Saint Michael, also called Archangel Michael. His day is celebrated on the twenty first of November. Saint Michael is highly respected among all people in Serbia not just Romany people. On icons he is represented as a warrior who is holding a flaming sword in one hand and scales in the other with which he weighs souls of people after they die.

Saint Nikola: Saint Nicholas whose day is celebrated on the nineteenth of December. He is considered to be patron of seamen and tradesmen. Apart from Saint Michael he is one of the most revered saints.

Saint Petka: Female saint who lived on the Balkans, her day is celebrated on the twenty eighth of October. She is thought to be a patron of women especially and of Romany people.

Saint Stevan: Saint Stephen, third day of Christmas is dedicated to this saint, when people clean their houses.

Tamburitza: a small string instrument of lute family.

Tucindan: the fifth of January, two days before Christmas. It is believed that spanking children on this day brings bad luck.

Ustasa: Member of Croatian fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. To make their state more purely Croatian, the ustasas set about exterminating its Serb, Jewish, and Gypsy inhabitants. They also fought resistant movements.

The names of the places are given in their original form therefore pronunciation of Serbian letters which appear in them is provided:

ž pronounced as **s** in English words pleasure and vision

č pronounced as **ch** in English words chalk and chair

š pronounced as **sh** in English words should and shoe

ć pronounced as soft **č**

dž pronounced as **j** in English words jump and jam

đ pronounced as soft **dž**

Biographies of the participants in the project: “Young Romani Women for Elderly Romani Women”

Marija Aleksandrović (born on September 3, 1972 in Zabalj) finished high school for agricultural laborers in Zrenjanin in 1991. Upon finishing high school she got married, gave birth to a son and got divorced. In the meantime she had various jobs in order to be able to raise her son. After three years she enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, and now she is a senior student at the Department of Serbian literature and world literature. She took all courses and got excellent marks. She is interested in Romani literature and she wrote seminar paper about fairy tales in the Romani culture. She graduated from Women Studies and Research “Mileva Marić Ajnštajn” in Novi Sad. Her graduation paper (written in cooperation with Jelena Jovanović) about oral histories of elderly Romani women was presented in Women Studies and Research.

During her education in Women Studies and Research she worked on research project as a journalist at Radio 021 (for six months) which was concerned with the Romani issues. Second project included work with children of Romani refugees from Kosovo in settlement “Bangladeš” (part of Novi Sad where Romani settlement is situated).

During the previous two years Marija Aleksandrović received theoretical and practical education at a number of conferences, courses and workshops in Yugoslavia and countries of ex-Yugoslavia. The topics included Romani language and culture, possibilities of teaching Romani language in schools, functioning of nongovernmental sector, women activism, and women issues. She attended several seminars for journalists who speak Romani language and are interested in Romani culture (in Sarajevo and Belgrade).

In 1999, she has founded, together with other Romani women, the association “Young Romani researchers” which is situated in Stara Pazova - she was the association’s secretary. She also founded the association’s branch in Zabalj and in cooperation with her associates she realized program for education of Romani children.

She speaks Romani and Serbian and has passive knowledge of Russian. She became computer literate during the work on this project. Address: 22 [ajka]ka street, Zabalj 21230

Stanka Dimitrov (born on July 30, 1978 in Kovilj) is a senior student at the medical school in Novi Sad. Together with Marija Aleksandrović and Jelena Jovanović she founded “Young Romani Researches” situated in Stara Pazova.

This association has the following objectives: protection of health of the young Romani men and women, creation of educational and employment opportunities for them, and preservation of Romani culture and tradition. She is a vice president of this association. She gave lectures on health issues to young Romani women in @abalj and Stara Pazova.

She participated in seminars organized to educate children in Romani language, especially children in primary school. She also took part in seminars which provided support to nongovernmental organizations.

She speaks Romani, Serbian, English, German and Russian. She became computer literate during the work on this project. Address: 40 Branka Bajića Street, Kovilj 21243, tel: ++ 381 21 888 380

Jelena Jovanović (born on April 25, 1980 in Stara Pazova) graduated from high school for workers in textile industry. In 1998 she enrolled at the college for managers in Novi Sad and now she is a senior student. She graduated from Women Studies and Research "Mileva Marić Ajnštajn" and she wrote the graduation paper in cooperation with Marija Aleksandrović on oral histories of elderly Romani women. Her first project in Women Studies and Research was registration of association "Young Romani Researchers". She is the president of this association. Her second project involved organisation of additional lessons in mathematics and Serbian language for Romani children who attend primary school.

During the previous two years she took active part in several seminars on Romani language and culture, activism in the civil society and women issues.

She speaks Romani and Serbian language. She became computer literate during the work on this project. Address: 35 Masarikova Street, Stara Pazova 22 300, tel: ++ 381 22 313 121

SVENKA SAVIĆ (Born June 16, 1940, in Gospodjinci)

Graduated at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad; attained Ph.D. at the Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade. She works as professor of psycholinguistics at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad and teaches courses on: discourse analysis, psycholinguistics and introduction to linguistics. She received Fulbright Fellowship and did postdoctoral studies at the University of California at Berkeley in 1969/70.

She is coordinator of a project Psycholinguistics Studies (1980-2000) funded by the

Ministry of Science and a number of projects on usage of Serbian language in Yugoslavia.

She published 10 books and numerous articles, most important being: How Twins Learn to

Talk; Models of Syntax in Child Language, Developmental psycholinguistics, Spoken Serbian Language, Inter culturalism as a Form of Education of Migrant Children, Children Narratives, Discourses in Jokes, Discourses in Curses, Discourses in Telephone Conversation, Feminist Theology, Romani women, and Women in Vojvodina.

As a professional classic ballet dancer at Srpsko Narodno Pozorište (Serbian National Theatre) in Novi Sad (1960-1968), she wrote a book Ballet (1996), and has been reviewing ballet performance in daily newspapers during the last 30 years. She is interested in semiotics links between dance and language.

She is coordinator and one of the founders of Women Studies and Research "Mileva Marić Einstein" in Novi Sad and the coordinator of research projects: Sexism in Mass Media; Feminist Theology; Young Romani Women for Elderly Romani Women, Oral histories: Women from Vojvodina, Romani Women and Women from Minority Groups.

She is a founder of the network of women groups in Vojvodina, and the network of Women Studies in Yugoslavia.

She speaks English, German and Russian. She has two daughters. Address: 107 Bulevar Vojvode Stepe Stepanovića, Novi Sad 21000 tel/fax ++ 381 21 397 469; email: svenka@eunet.yu