

Flamenco Lesson in Sacromonte Affirmations of a Romani Woman

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Diana Norma Szokolyai is a first-generation American writer of Hungarian Romani heritage. Her books include two collections of poetry, *Parallel Sparrows* and *Roses in the Snow*, as well as an edited volume, *CREDO: An Anthology of Manifestos & Sourcebook for Creative Writing*. Her poetry has been anthologized in *Other Countries: Contemporary Poets Rewiring History*. An earlier version of the following poem was originally published in German as “Flamenco-Stunde in Sacromonte” in a critically-acclaimed anthology *Die Morgendämmerung der Worte Moderner Poesie- Atlas der Roma und Sinti*. She is co-founder of Chagall Performance Art Collaborative and the Cambridge Writers' Workshop.



Flamenco Lesson in Sacromonte

I arrive, a half-blood Gypsy
at the singing hills of Granada,
the white caves of Sacromonte.

I've come to this famed flamenco school
with my body feeling for its Romani roots,
my arms reaching for the heavens of my ancestors.

Just beginning to understand,
I am not entirely graceful.
I want each strike of my feet

to dance on the oppressors of my people.
My teacher says, "Hold in your stomach,
pull, like a needle and thread

from your navel to the ground
from your navel to the stars.
You have to stand tall,

Elbows out,
chin out, proud,
like a photo."

"Claro," I say, seeking clarity still,
"Are you a Gitana?"
Her eyes brighten at the question about Romani roots.

"No se, but I think so."
She shows me a picture of her grandfather
"¡Mira!" she exclaims,

Side by side, we look at the photograph.
"Es un Gitano, although my abuela says 'no.'
¿Es un Gitano, no?!"

She smiles and points,
standing tall
Proud.

I smile back and nod. Affirming her,
I too am affirmed –
this Spaniard, who seeks *duende*,

who lifts her eyes up,
gaze sparking with everything
that makes flamenco whirl.

The Romani spirit flies in front of me
like a swarm of honeybees.
Their honey is what my arms gather from the air

my lesson in Sacromonte,
a gift that will stay with me
for years.

Affirmations of a Romani Woman

I am the seventh sister. In Sanskrit, there are at least seven names for the sun. There are one hundred eight actually, but the seventh is most magical. My people come from India, and my tongue is woven of Sanskrit sounds, ornamented by the languages of those many lands my ancestors crossed. Being the seventh born, I possess the magic that number thundered into me. If you hurt one of my loved ones, beware, for I have put protections on all of them.

Mashkar le gadjende leski Surrounded by the Gadje,
shib si le Romeski zor. the Rom's only defense is his tongue.

I am the Moon, and the only Gypsy in this solar system. I've called my earthly children to sing to me. Their voices trill with the vibrations of stardust. Their melodies carry with them my tears, which Mother Earth has collected into chalices called oceans. Though I can be full of wonder, many nights I am slivered with melancholy, and for a time each month, I must disappear.

O ushalin zhala sar o kam mangela. The shadow moves as the sun commands.

I am violet-blooded. I remember my late aunt's voice clearly, repeating again and again while laughing with a celebratory glass of wine in her hand: "Yes, your blood is purple!" A strange and beautiful phrase to loop. Her words were gifts and flowed through me like Bull's Blood, *Egri Bikavér*. In Hungary, it is said that Gypsies are dark-skinned because their blood is purple. My aunt made this into an affirmation, proudly crying: "Cigány vagy!" *You are a Gypsy.* "Azért vagy olyan szép és okos!" *That's why you're so beautiful and smart!*

"Shhh!" my Romani grandmother hushed her. "Quiet down, or the neighbors will hear."

Te avel angla tute, kodo khabe tai kado May this food be before you, and in
pimo tai mence pe sastimaste. your memory, and may it profit us in
good health and in good spirit.

I am collage and mosaic, not a fashion campaign. *Bohemian, Gypsy-chic, Boho-Chic.* White models posing "wild" and "free-spirited," as if you could bottle the Romani soul. Gadjé designers attempt to distill Romani mojo into perfume, sew it into threads, and infuse it into beverages (yes, there is a "Gypsy" brand tea!). *Romanipen* cannot be stolen! You cannot take a horse's hair and glue it to your head and say that you have a mane.

Te khalion tai te shingerdjon che gada, May your clothes rip and wear out, but may you
hai tu te trais sastimasa tai voyasa. live on in good health and in fulfillment.

I am not to be pitied. In my early twenties, as an international student, I came back to Paris after spending Easter in Budapest with my Romani grandmother and aunt. I approached my Hungarian friend in the hallway of the American student house at the Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris. She was studying international law and spoke several languages. And yet, when I told her “I am of Romani heritage,” her response was to put a hand on my shoulder and say, “That’s okay, my dear.” “*That’s okay*,” she said. Such deeply rooted bias echoed in my ears for a long time. It’s more than *okay*, I thought, it’s *wonderful*.

Te aves yertime mander tai te yertil tut o Del. I forgive you and may God forgive you as I do.

I am strong, like my grandmother, whom we called iron-boned. I am, like all Roma, resourceful. My great-grandmother holds a cure made from the blood of a hedgehog. My brother collects dandelion roots that commune with the roots of a thousand other weeds. Mother Earth gives us the keys to open her doors to nourishment and healing.

Nashti zhas vorta po drom o bango. You cannot walk straight when the road is bent.

I am the Black Train. *Fekete Vonat*. These trains transported migrant and seasonal workers hundreds of miles through Hungary, away from their families, to the only work they could find each week. Since the faces on the train were mainly of Romani people, faces darker in hue than the dominant population, the trains were nicknamed “The Black Trains.” There is a popular song called “Fekete Vonat” I once saw people dancing to, in a conga line at an outdoor concert one summer evening in a Hungarian town square. “Fekete Vonat” is also the name of a harrowing 1970 documentary by Pál Schiffer about the lifestyle of these Romani families in a society offering few opportunities to them. How strange it is to think of the melancholy faces of those migrant workers crouched in the trains juxtaposed with the gleeful faces of those dancing in that conga line, likely unaware, in their merriment, of the reference.

*Prohasar man opre pirende – sa muro Bury me standing – I’ve been
djiben semas opre chengende. on my knees all my life.*

I am not anything you want to categorize me as when you hear the word “Gypsy.” I am not your fortune teller, but I feel fortunate to tell you this:

I am a Romani woman.

I am a woman.

I am a person.

I am as I am.

Kai zhal o vurdon vurma mekela. Where the wagon goes a trail is left.