

Foreword to Nicolae Gheorghe's Article: *The Romani People: From Enslaved People to Citizens*

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Nicoleta Bițu is a pioneering voice in Romani feminism and Roma rights, with over 35 years of activism in Europe. She has shaped Romani feminist discourse by linking gender, ethnicity, and social justice. She co-founded Romani CRISS, a Roma-led organisation that was the leader in defending Roma rights for 30 years. She served as an expert and consultant for the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Open Society Foundations. She was a key figure in establishing ERIAC, where she later served on the board. Additionally, she was chair and academic adviser for RomArchive.

Nicoleta Bițu's constant actions, like a silver lining, have been mentoring new generations of Romani activists, both women and men, as well as maintaining a lasting connection with the realities of her people from local Romani communities. Nicoleta Bitu was Nicolae Gheorghe's life partner and supported him in his intellectual work and activism from 1991 until his passing in 2013.



Critical
Romani Studies

The text by Nico (Nicolae Gheorghe) predates the year it was published. I first read it in the 1990s as a typewritten manuscript before we transcribed it to a computer. At the time, I knew little about the enslavement of Roma, so this text provided not only information but also a unique perspective – one that was difficult to find elsewhere. Even now, rereading, I discover new layers I did not grasp the first time.

Nico was deeply preoccupied with the fate of Romani people and was one of a few intellectuals who connected the realities of Romani life with our history. One of the key aspects of his work was deconstructing the myth that we, Roma, were already “slaves” upon arriving in Moldavia and that we remained enslaved because we were incapable of living freely. This text serves as proof of that deconstruction. Those of us who had the privilege of working with him understood this deeply.

For Nico, the history of slavery was essential to understanding not only the collective mindset of Roma but also the historical evolution of relationships between Roma and non-Roma in what is now Romania.

At one point in the text, he highlights how enslaved Romani people resisted oppression – primarily through escape. This theme recurs in his work, challenging the idea that Roma were passive victims who simply accepted their fate. Instead, he presents a history of the resilience of a people who opposed and fought against their oppression.

He also draws a clear connection between the term *țigan* and the legal status of enslaved Roma, an argument he later reiterated in 1997 when we had to fight for the recognition of the name *Roma* as the Romanian government issued an internal decision on the matter.

For Nico, achieving full and equal citizenship for Roma was a lifelong mission, and this text is one of the earliest pieces that clearly reflects his dedication to that cause. Although it is a study on Romani slavery, it also reveals – between the lines – the motivations behind his choices in the Romani movement.

Ultimately, the history of slavery in Romanian territories is not just about Roma; it is also about reconciliation within the Romanian nation. Unfortunately, recovering and honouring the histories of our ancestors has not been a priority for the Romani movement. We have had to focus on daily struggles and, in the early 1990s, on a series of violent attacks. However, reclaiming our history is crucial to ensure that the world does not forget the injustices of the past.

From my perspective, the abolition of Romani slavery was not driven by love or compassion for Roma. Perhaps some Romanian intellectuals, having studied in Paris, were more humanistic than others. But in reality, the abolition primarily was motivated by a desire to advance Romanian society and align with the direction that Western European countries were heading.

One piece of evidence lies in historical records that show compensation was paid to the *boieri* (noble landowners) for the loss of Romani people they kept as slaves.

The true celebration of emancipation will come when the Romanian Academy, the Romanian Presidency, the Romanian Government, and the Romanian people commemorate this history alongside us. It should

be a shared Romanian–Romani celebration, not just a Romani one. Until that day, each year, I remind myself and others that, despite our limited resources – material, energy, and time – we have achieved much and will continue to do so.

Moreover, in today’s political climate, this historical act should serve as an example for current politicians. As in so many areas of Romani mobilisation, we owe the beginning of this critical discourse to Nico – and the path he paved for us to follow.

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