

Kelderari Roma in Russia

Domanskii, Evgenii V. *Etnograficheskii Poezis: Tsygane-Keldarary*. Moscow: Filin, 2023, 250.

Interestingly, Russians and the Kelderari Roma are believed to have much more in common than it may seem at first - their songs are based on Russian melodies, and the ritual or cult side can be traced back to rural Russia of the 19th century. In many ways, they mirror the nation among whom they live. Their current perception of reality is shaped by patriarchy, USSR stamps, and mass culture clichés. Having been given the name ‘poeziis’, the book conveys the true world of the Romani people. The book not only provides a profound overview of the life and values of the Kelderari camping ground but also contains factual photographic material taken personally by the author. These photos are unique in that Yevgeny Domansky has established a trusting 40-year-long relationship with one of the closest Romani groups - Kotlyary. With a background in sociology, psychology, and education, the author has focused on research, culminating in a PhD dissertation on the role of reflection in learning, his recent interests extend to ethnography, particularly the study of the lifestyle of Kalderash Roma. In the book, therefore, occupations, traditions, handicrafts, national clothing, and many more elements of Roma culture are accurately illustrated.

It was the affinity for photography that provided Yevgeny Domansky a first common ground. Back then, in the year 1976, he took a photo of Ruslan, a very handsome Romani boy. Two years later, the first visit to the Romani camping ground, near the village of Apostolovo, where he was working as a teacher at the time, took place. Since then, the researcher has become a close friend of the Kelderari Roma. ‘Nowadays, there are many people who want to get to know the life and customs of the Roma – everyone takes pictures of them and writes about them - but back then, in the 80s, only a few were such enthusiasts,’ – admits the author.

The first chapter of the book *The Kelderari Roma: A Compassionate Perspective* pays a lot of attention to the free spirit of the Roma. This spiritual and non-material attitude to life became a reason they did not mind Yevgeny Domansky documenting, or, as they believed, eternalising the life through photos. He was even allowed to

photograph fortune telling. ‘He is one of us’, – reacted the Romani women to the photo shoot witnesses’ surprise.

In the 80s, the photographs also drew the attention of the police in the city of Nikolaev. They suspected him to be working for foreign agencies, exposing the unsightly reality of the Romani camping ground in the USSR. Some of the film was confiscated after the police raid in 1986.

Not only did Yevgeny Domansky take incredibly valuable photographs, but he also documented the terms that the Kelderari Roma characterise themselves, and other ethnic groups, within the second chapter of the book. One of these terms – ‘natsiya’ or ‘netsiya’ – serves to designate the largest internal divisions of the Kelderari ethnic group. The Roma themselves, when characterising another ‘netsiya,’ first of all noted their attitude toward tradition, then their property characteristics (rich – poor), occupation and its features. The Romani communities could have united members from other territorial Kelderari groups like Grákurá (Greek) or Moldováya (Moldavian). What a united ‘netsiya’ looks like, in many ways, depends on the leader. For instance, once Istrati Janos, a very strong Romani leader, passed away, the united Roma fell apart.

The next chapter of the book offers insight into another important concept for the Roma is the issue of ‘ritual defilement’ – ‘pekelimos’. The lower part of a married woman’s skirt (or any clothing that touches the ground) is considered impure or defiled. The book tells a remarkable story of how a major conflict between two Romani camps (the ‘Gagarincy’ and ‘Ivanovcy’) was prevented by the Romani women, who took skirts and threw them at the attackers, causing the men to scatter and soon leave. It proves that the Kelderari Roma are as superstitious as other nations; their traditions are deeply rooted in their cultural and spiritual beliefs. The Kris Romani, or so-called Romani Tribunal, is another one of the most important elements of Romani culture. By providing a historical overview of the term’s origin and referencing the caste system in India, the book highlights the main difference: the Kris focuses exclusively on restoring harmony within Romani society, whereas the secular court emphasises punishment or setting a precedent. There are key conditions for the functioning of the Kris. It requires a patriarchal community with high-status individuals present in the camp. Its decisions must be obligatory and accepted by all. The court’s rulings should not lead to destructive actions that disrupt community cohesion and harmony. There must be a strong belief in the inevitability of divine punishment. The Kris addresses both familial issues and economic disputes between different Romani groups. Unlike secular courts, it operates without pomp, allowing trials to take place anywhere and at any time. Additionally, supernatural measures, such as imposing a curse of punishment, may be applied.

In the section ‘Do the Roma Know God? Faith and Superstitions’, the book first explores different aspects of religion. Orthodox icons are believed to be present in

every Romani household. The book also describes how sincerely the Roma pray and how reverently they follow the traditions of child baptism, as well as the celebrations of Easter and Christmas. However, in one of the photographs of the author, a Romani boy is wearing a protective amulet called 'liliyako,' along with a cross necklace. This reflects how the Romani people are both religious and superstitious.

Another question discussed in the book is whether the Kelderari Roma still migrate in the 21st century. In 1956 the decree issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 'The Involvement of the Roma Engaged in Vagrancy in Work' on October 5, 1956, effectively undermined the foundation for the nomadic lifestyle of the Kelderari. Although many Romani people try not to give up the tradition of migrating, many cultural, educational, and financial factors affect the traditional nomadic way of life. The main reason, according to the book, is the better economic situation thanks to the education of those Romani people who settle down. In this part of the book, there is missed criticism towards the violent and coercive actions of the Soviet Union government in the forced assimilation of the Roma.

In the next chapter, 'From Craftsmanship to Production and Into the Unknown...' the Kalderash Roma's attitude toward work evolved in response to changes in the country is examined. Notably, in the 1990s, the communal approach to income distribution faded away, giving way to financial independence. Initially, their traditional income source was the production of large metal vats used in manufacturing — a craft that gave this group its name. They then transitioned to metal bartering and have now moved into constructing summer houses, especially in the Moscow region, where earnings are significantly higher than in the provinces. The construction skills acquired through frequent migrations turned out to be of use. During the off-season, they continue metal work involving engines, pipes, cables, electrical systems, etc.

One of the most intriguing chapters of the book is 'Fortune telling'. Yevgeny Domansky describes 'fortune-telling' as a sort of compromise between two 'contracting parties': one that is 'glad to be deceived' and the other that provides such a service, rightfully demanding compensation. The author notes that Romani women have always been highly skilled in hypnotic practices; however, now, with increasing financial prosperity, the tradition of fortune-telling is fading away.

In the 'Everyday Life and Traditions' chapter, the author describes the dramatic difference between two photos taken ten years apart: while the first photo (1986) focuses on a simply dressed family of eight, the second (1996) depicts a much smaller family, emphasising expensive alcohol and fashionable clothing. The life and values of the Kalderash Roma has been changing in response to economic and social changes in society.

The 'Romani Family Ark' revolves around weddings, marriage and family. The Roma people are known to have early marriages, which they celebrate in grand style, spending an enormous amount of money. The chastity of girls (it is hard to write

a 'woman', because brides are usually 13-15 years old), and how families ensure the virginity of the unmarried are especially emphasised in the book. Sometimes, Gadjo (a person who has no Romanipen, i.e. doesn't belong to the Roma) grooms are encouraged, as they are considered 'new blood'. Amusingly, it was a Belarus person married to a Romani girl who once became 'The record holder for childbirth'. This sphere of life has also been affected by common trends; marriages are weakening, and less and less couples see marriage as lifetime and sacred as it used to be. However, in the academic context, the material of the book could be more critically considered. The poesis could be written more cautiously, meaning the customs described only appear this way to an outsider.

The next stage of marginalization is the loss of language, and then the dissolution of the ethnicity within other people. In the times of the photo chronicle, the Roma in the camp would laugh at those who used Russian, inserting Russian words into their Romani speech. In today's times, this is the norm.

Unnoticed, the trends of modernity are influencing Romani children and teenagers, changing their usual way of living. Once, from an early age, working youths (mostly fortune-telling and housework for girls and carpentry for boys), now spend more and more time with gadgets – not unrelated to this, their everyday habits and occupational strategies are also undergoing change.

The chapter on children's education in the Kalderash Roma society provides a few remarkable stories on how, with the growing importance of education, there have been projects of The Roma education and integration. Such projects include the Project 'School of Peacemaking and Kindness' (in Gorino, Russia), where Romani students learn together with Russian speakers. The Romani ground camping in the village Tchudovo, Leningradsky region, for instance, organised its own primary school, which is financed by the government. Sadly, there is still a lot of segregation in the education system, and there are few inclusive classes, where the Roma students would share the desk with Russian peers. Another difficulty is early marriages.

The chapter 'Faces and appearances' highlights how massive resettlement of the Keldary Roma contributed to the difference in looks: in the 19th century after the slavery abolition many migrated from the Romanian part of Banat to other European countries, Russia, and America.

Describing the lifestyle of the Keldary Roma, Yevgeny Domansky often emphasises the affinity of the Roma for music. In the chapter about Goga Tomash, a famous Romani poet and composer, his thought-provoking songs appeal to human souls, and how his music touches hearts, is discussed. Further, in the appendix of the book, a large quantity of lyrics are provided by the author. In the globalised world, some of the pieces, amusingly, are a blend of Russian and Romanian culture. To illustrate this areso-called Pushkiniana, romances based on the Pushkin poems.

In his effort to prove the vitality of traditional authenticity, the author proposes an idea of an 'ethnopark,' where anyone interested in exploring the life of the Keldary Roma from the inside would be able to witness how, for example, the Roma court works, or what the households look like. Currently, the ethnopark is merely a project.

The book *Etnograficheskii poeziis: Tsygane-keldarary* is an invaluable source of the Keldarari Roma life described in retrospect: it observes the development of the values and traditions of the Roma in the USSR and Russia from the late 80s to the present day. Not only can it captivate an ordinary reader, thanks to its poetic, lively language, but also is of interest to researchers - above all, for its photographic and factual content.

ЕКАТЕРИНА ВYSTOROPETS