

LÓVE TE KEREN
ROMA ANTIQUE DEALERS

Most Roma antique dealers in Hungary are Vlach Roma, a group that has tended to preserve its customs and language and that makes up 15 per cent of the country's Roma population. The enterprising spirit and persistence of Roma antique dealers are legendary, but we have no precise data concerning their number. It is difficult even to make an estimate, but it does seem certain that few of the dealers work full-time in the trade.

Csaba Nagyházi, head of the National Art and Antique Dealers' Association of Hungary, is unsure how many antique dealers are working in Budapest. He thinks there may be more than a hundred. The actual number of Roma working in the "antiques business" may be several times higher than Nagyházi's estimate. Many Roma are involved in the antiques trade in some manner or other—from the "touts" in rural areas, to the Budapest market traders, to the managers of antique shops in the heart of the Hungary's capital city. They work in a highly segmented sector and according to a strict hierarchy: some buy items for resale to their commercial partners, while others sell antiques in their own shops or at markets. There are even some traders who stand outside city-center antique shops in the hope of "snatching" customers from the shop owners. Many of the Roma working in the antiques business operate as "touts"—they resell items at a mark-up to other dealers. The more successful antique dealers thus tend to be surrounded by networks of less profitable associates. People in this latter group supplement their incomes by reselling to the dealers whatever items they manage to collect together. Some of the Roma population in rural areas falls in this category. Just a small number of prestigious Roma fam-

ilies run their own antique shops in the centre of Budapest. Although the antiques trade provides livelihoods mainly to Vlach Roma, nevertheless some of the ordinary traders are Musician Roma: they supplement their incomes by selling Hungarian antiques on their trips abroad. As far as I know, the only Musician Roma family with its own antique shop in the heart of Budapest specializes in the purchase and sale of antique violins.

Expedient Practices

Most antique dealers try to “make money” (*lóve te keren*) in the grey area between legality and illegality. For this reason, many of them were stubbornly silent when I asked them about the business. In some cases, however, persistence on my part led them to talk—although they all insisted that I should not mention their names. The important thing for an antique dealer is, of course, to buy items at the lowest price and to resell them at the highest price with the greatest possible profit. “In business there is neither brotherly affection nor friendship,” they told me. Indeed, they generally show no hesitation about using methods that outsiders might regard as unethical.

Crucial to a trader’s success is the impression he makes on the person selling the antique. It is not wise to be pushy, because the vendor may realize that the trader is willing to pay any price in order to obtain the item. Exploiting the ignorance of some owners—for instance, that of a young couple who have just inherited some furniture from their grandparents—dealers will attempt to acquire the really valuable pieces, even if the owner has no intention of selling them. There are various methods of acquiring high-value antiques, and these methods are not just practiced by Roma. The basic objective in all such cases is to mislead the vendor.

A popular method is to buy an item for a relatively “large sum of money” and then persuade the unsuspecting vendor into

surrendering a “worthless tiny object” for a small sum or as a way of sealing the transaction. This is all done in such a way that the vendor has no inkling that the “little something” is in fact a valuable antique and that the purpose of the initial deal was simply to obtain the second object. In another trick, the antique dealer arranges for an associate to go ahead of him. This person offers the vendor an unrealistically low price for an item and no deal is made. Then, as if by chance, the second dealer arrives at the scene. Having been “psychologically prepared,” the vendor is more likely to accept this second dealer’s offer of a slightly higher price and relinquish the item. A third tactic is to offend or annoy the vendor. The dealer says something like: “What are you trying to sell? Do you want to trick someone into buying such an awful item?” The annoyed or dispirited vendor then agrees to a deal that otherwise, in a sober mind, he would have rejected. Another way of misleading someone is to claim that a valuable item is a forgery. This is a favored method in the case of paintings.

Roma dealers rarely buy items at auctions, because of the high prices and their inability to influence price. Nevertheless, they do like to take part in such events as middlemen or observers, as a means of acquiring useful information from their colleagues. At such events, for instance, they may discuss potential vendors and customers. The antique dealers’ “muster” is the Győr market and the national Pécs market—both held monthly. Although traveling to the markets costs 30–40,000 *Forints* and the outcome is uncertain, nevertheless Roma antique dealers often participate in the event. They tend not to buy items abroad—due to the high tariffs. However, some of them do go to Romania for smaller items, which they then hide in their cars and import into Hungary without paying customs duties. The established dealers do not risk this.

Market Prospects

From time to time, grave predictions are made about the impending demise of the trade and the irrepressible advance of foreign buyers. So far, however, there has been little perceivable agony, and most traders are optimistic for the future.

Buying and selling antiques is more than just an occupation: for genuine dealers it is a life-style or even a passion. As well as providing a livelihood, the antiques business offers Roma two of the principal traditional values of their community—freedom and independence. They are not bound by place or time and they can thus avoid the limitations and possible humiliations of “normal” jobs. On the other hand, they must be prepared to be constantly on the move, to work hard, to update their knowledge, and to undertake risk.

R.J., a Roma antique dealer living in the Eleventh District of Budapest, thinks that the trade “is carried in his genes:” Vlach Roma—and especially Lovari Vlach Roma, who were originally horse-dealers—have been wheeling and dealing for centuries; the antiques trade is hardly alien to them. In his view, the smaller number of Musician Roma among the antique dealers can be explained by the fact that business has never been one of their traditional areas of work and most of them have been in paid employment. After Hungary’s political changes in the early 1990s, the men who during the Communist era had traded in horses and antiques alongside their official jobs at state companies, became entrepreneurs. They learnt the trade by studying books at public libraries and with the assistance of cultural historians.

R.J. is one of a few dealers who rarely go to areas outside Budapest. He sells his “bounty” in a small shop at Ecséri Market. Usually, he buys items from “touts” based in Budapest or directly from the vendors—paying more than his colleagues do in rural areas. In his view, Hungary’s “nouveaux riche” are competent buyers, who

usually purchase antiques as investments. (L.Z., however, thinks they are far from being competent buyers: he says most of them “pay through the nose” i.e. they pay more for an item than its real value.) R.J. thinks that fair transactions are the key to the success of a business: “If someone has invited me in and I’ve given him my business card, then I try to make the kind of deal that will allow me to return there in ten years time.”

Romani Gógyi or Ex-Communication

Antique dealers generally supplement their basic activities with other commercial ventures such as buying and selling vehicles, dealing in property, and trading in jewelry and clothes. Like non-Roma antique dealers, some of them are receivers of stolen goods. The price of stolen goods is a lot less than their market value—due to the risk of selling such goods. If a Vlach Roma antiques dealer is prosecuted for receiving stolen goods, he cannot reveal his source, because this would be treachery in the eyes of the community, leading to grave consequences. If a Roma court found a dealer guilty of treachery, this would result in his exclusion from the life of the community, his ex-communication. Dealers who are found to have dealt in stolen goods usually manage to think of some “clever excuse,” which they can use in their defense during a court case. They may claim to have bought the item from a stranger at Ecseri Market or from a relative who has since passed away.

As the arts magazine *Műértő* reported in April 1999, in the latter half of 1998 various forgeries of paintings by Rippl-Rónai appeared on the market. A Roma antiques dealer living in Kaposvár seemed to be involved. A report in *Napi Gazdaság* published on 5 March 1999 stated that D.F.—the suspect in the case—had sold nine paintings for a total sum of 27 million *Forints*. Having achieved notoriety throughout the country, the Roma antiques dealer applied the tactics of *romani gógyi* (Roma adroitness). He

claimed to have been ignorant of the fact that the paintings—which he had inherited from his father—were forgeries.

The elite commercial trades—dealing in antiques, automobiles or scrap metal—can provide the means for a decent lifestyle. Thus, for a small number of Roma, it is in this area that they have been able to realize their middle-class aspirations since the political changes of 1989–90. Paradoxically, however, Roma antique dealers are just as likely as Vlach Roma living in isolated rural communities to have preserved their traditional lifestyles and Roma value-systems.

Family Business

Like other traditional Roma activities, the antiques trade revolves around the family: knowledge of the trade is passed on from father to son, and the whole family takes part in it. Just as children grow up as natural participants in the family business, so it is also considered quite normal for a son aged 20–22 years to work independently of his father as his own boss. “My father took me along with him from the age of twelve,” said one dealer. “He wanted to teach me the trade, but I also did some of the minor jobs: labeling, wrapping, etc.”

Vlach Roma antique dealers treat their children as young adults from early adolescence. The children quickly learn the community modes of behavior as well as their roles within the family. The girls cook, clean and look after their younger siblings. The boys tend to learn the trades of their fathers, picking up skills in business life. Like other Vlach Roma, the antique dealers regard school merely as a place where young children may acquire the basic skills necessary for everyday life. Thus, rather than encourage or compel their children to do their homework, parents tend instead to prepare them for the practicalities of life in line with the norms of their community.

To increase efficiency, family members typically perform supplementary tasks associated with the business. The women distribute leaflets and advertising material, while the boys assist in transporting items. Only the most successful dealers gain the respect of the community. They can afford to keep some of the more valuable antiques in their homes and are not forced to sell them.

A small number of families (perhaps five in Budapest) make up the elite group of Roma antique dealers. This group includes some individuals who are unable to read or write. Success is based on their strong powers of observation, an irrepressible thirst for knowledge, and an excellent business sense. It is very difficult for outsiders to become a part of this group, since—as one might expect—all the families fight tooth and nail to preserve their positions. According to L.Z. (a 20-year-old trader), a special family connection or marriage are the only means of joining the group. An entrepreneur lacking such connections and capital has almost no chance of surviving in the antiques trade. The following example demonstrates the extent of the hierarchy within the trade. Traders operating at the same level on the hierarchy never sell to each other at inflated prices, but when an unknown dealer approaches one of the more successful dealers, the latter is fully entitled to fleece the stranger and demand five times the real value of the item.

For instance, in the early 1990s, F.E. peddled Italian kitchenware in rural Hungary. For two years during that period, he supplemented his income by buying and selling antiques. Owing to a lack of capital, he acquired antiques by bartering goods. He would supply cutlery in return for cheap pieces of “old-looking” furniture. He then resold the goods, purchased without any knowledge of the trade, to “real” dealers. Most of his customers were non-Roma, because—he claims—he found it difficult to make deals with Roma, as they wanted to pay “peanuts” for the goods. Without capital and without a network of agents or “touts” F.E. found it impossible to open a shop, although he does still occasionally buy or sell

an antique item. The dealers claim that people who are not members of the “clan” are offered just 10 per cent of the real value of items. The trade is, therefore, a difficult one to learn because experienced dealers will not pass on their knowledge to others—unless they are family members. Indeed, their main interest is to stubbornly defend their own market positions.

In comparison with F.E., L.Z. began his career as an antique dealer under far more favorable conditions. As a member of a family of antique dealers in the Zugló district of Budapest, he began learning the trade as a young child. As a young man, he is already a successful businessman. “Most Roma living in Zugló and in Kispest make a living out of the antiques trade,” says L.Z.—although this estimate seems somewhat exaggerated. He refuses to divulge his annual turnover, but he does tell me how he once made more than a million *Forints* on the sale of just one item. But this kind of profit is made just once in every one or two years, while his normal weekly earnings amount to between 50 and 200 thousand *Forints*, and sometimes there are periods when he makes just 5–10 thousand *Forints* per week. Although his apartment is furnished with antiques, he’s not a collector of valuable pieces.

He advertises his business using leaflets and in the newspapers. Apart from old paintings he also sells porcelain items and sculptures as well as bronze items, chandeliers, lace, and even painted china dolls. If necessary, he travels to areas outside of Budapest in his search for antiques. He then sells them at Ecséri Market, where he has a little shop and a rented market stall. His customers are foreigners and the nouveaux riche, but sometimes he sells items to other traders. Between 15 and 20 per cent of his trips outside Budapest do not yield anything, because the vendor offers sub-standard goods or demands too much money. If another trader has preceded him and has decided not to buy the item, then he too refrains from buying. In general, a vendor’s real intent can be ascertained in the course of a short telephone conversation.

He considers fair play to be the most important principle for a “good trader.” It is vital that a trader be honest with colleagues. Loans must be repaid on time, and if a dealer fails to do so, people soon find out and none of the Roma will be willing to do business with him or even talk to him in the future. The rules of ethics are less strict when it comes to customers. The young trader said that people often refuse to let them in. At such times, confidence and aptitude may help.

Time Is Money

Several Roma antique dealers told me they had been attacked by “vendors” who hoped they might be carrying large sums of money. For this reason, most of them now travel the country with some kind of self-defense weapon. Sometimes people think they are burglars or other intruders. Distrust is greater in the case of Roma antique dealers. Some people even back out of the deal when they see the trader is Roma.

József Sztojka, who lives in Felsőpakony in Pest County, has been making a living from antiques for more than 30 years. He learnt the trade from his father. He has no shop, but sells antiques at the second-hand goods market on Nagykörösi Street. Most of his customers are antique dealers or collectors. Since he has little capital, he’s forced to sell items quickly at little profit, so that he can then buy further items. “We don’t have any bright shops, because this would need time, and we cannot work with a 2–3 per cent profit margin like the dealers,” he claims. Sztojka will travel anywhere in the country for goods, but rarely buys from Roma because other traders usually get to them first. Roma living outside Budapest tend to sell the items they have collected together to non-Roma traders in the hope of getting a better deal. Another reason not to do business with Roma is that “they’re just as cunning as I am.” Customers are most easy to find in the following areas: silverware, Bieder-

meier furniture, and old decorative watches. But surprisingly he also deals in contemporary art.

The biggest profit Sztojka has ever made was on a clock. He made the sale some time in the 1980s and it earned him 150 thousand *Forints*. His annual turnover is confidential, but he thinks he is in the lower-income category. In his view, without a good circle of customers, antique dealers have little chance. It's certainly worth building relationships in the business sector or among the *nouveaux riches*.

Roma traders tend to be particularly experienced in peddling and in bargaining. In this area they're more effective than are their non-Roma fellows. The traders with the best future, in his view, are those that "do antiques" on a large scale: they have lots of money and go to auctions with internationally recognized foreign businessmen. "At the same time, however, Roma are never going to be traders at that level," says Sztojka.

At the Top of the Ladder

Like all other Roma groups, the antique traders place themselves at the top of the internal community hierarchy. A fundamental value is material wealth. To become rich, a person needs to be both lucky and clever. If a Roma lives by the work of his two hands rather than by "being clever," this means, to other Roma, that he lacks basic attributes (such as resourcefulness). And such attributes are indispensable for gaining their respect. Most Roma antique dealers look down upon Vlach Roma who have given up their freedom and work for "*gadzo*" employers. In their view, such Roma cannot live in the true Roma manner.

Weddings costing several millions of *Forints* are organized mainly by the Vlach Roma commercial elite who deal in antiques or scrap metal. An extravagant wedding celebration—a golden wreath is placed on the head of the bride and men throw wads of

ten-thousand *Forint* notes onto the bride as they dance around her—is just as much a status symbol as a western car or jewelry with precious stones. A desire to impress may also explain why almost all the antique dealers have “girlfriends” in addition to their wives. Having a Vlach Roma lover, or “*romnyi*,” at his side, enhances a man’s status within the community. At the same time, it’s also true to say that Roma men give priority to their wives and families. A “girlfriend” will never be more than of secondary importance. But wives are expected to conform to a very strict morality, for a husband’s standing within the community will suffer if his wife is unfaithful. Moreover a Roma man who forgives his wife under such circumstances will lose the respect of the community. Thus, under Roma law, a husband may punish his unfaithful wife by cutting off her hair or by disfiguring her face.

Among Themselves

Both Vlach Roma and Hungarian Roma tend to marry within their own communities. According to surveys the ratio of marriages between Roma and non-Roma is higher than the ratio of marriages between the various sub-groups of Roma. Marriage customs are firmly fixed among all groups of Roma. And even among the larger groups it is difficult to break down the barriers existing between the various subgroups. The groups in question are still divided up according to trade or occupation and on the basis of material wealth and ethnic systems. For instance, members of the Lovari community will rarely marry Churar, even though both groups are Vlach Roma. Most Vlach Roma hold in contempt a “*romnyi*” (Vlach Roma woman) or a “*romesz*” (Vlach Roma man) who chooses a Hungarian Roma as spouse. In the community there is greater acceptance of marriage with a non-Roma. It is also difficult to imagine that a Musician Roma would marry a Vlach Roma girl. Most of the Roma antique dealers’ children choose their spouse

from among the Roma commercial elite. Since marriages are usually sealed based on financial wealth, it is rare for a son of an antique dealer to marry a Roma girl from a poor family.

Parents often decide whom their offspring shall marry while they are still children. The success of a marriage, it is thought, can be ensured if children “become used to one another” while they are still young. The period of courting is short, and a fundamental rule is that the two young people should never be left on their own. Arranging for the couple to be accompanied by a younger brother or sister whenever they go to the cinema or candy store can prevent elopement. Girls are expected to marry young. In a sense, this is a cultural requirement for a girl must be a virgin in order to marry, and she is more likely to be so, the younger she is. As a deterrent, stories are told concerning the fate of girls who are “impure” on marriage. An impure bride who stands before the altar (wearing a myrtle wreath symbolizing virginity) will be unlucky for the rest of her life. A sign of this could be that the wreath falls off the head of the bride or she falls ill during the service. If it transpires that a girl was not a virgin on her marriage to her husband, the boy’s parents may ask for a refund of the costs of the wedding celebration. If the two sets of parents are unable to come to an agreement, they may ask for the convening of the *romani kris* (Roma court).

Among some antique dealer families, young girls are offered for sale. Roma believe that “a girl will be a virgin just once, and that she’ll be worth less as soon as she loses her virginity.” Thus, grief money is payable to a girl’s family prior to her marriage. The amount ranges from several hundred thousand *Forints* to several million *Forints*. The wedding feast of a purchased girl will be smaller than that of a virgin girl. Vlach Roma think that if a husband is not required to pay anything for a girl, he will not value her, because “if something comes easily, it will go easily too.” Interestingly, although Roma parents generally insist on a church wedding even if their daughter is less than 14

years old, nevertheless even the most enlightened of families living in Budapest are unlikely to attach any importance to an official civil ceremony. (Evidently, in many cases this is because the bride is still a minor.) Divorced women are less likely than young girls to be asked to marry. Sometimes, however, they will be sought by divorced fathers with several children. A pretty divorced woman or one that “can earn her own living” will be quicker to find a partner.

Based on what they wear and on their appearance, Roma antique dealers only partially adhere to the unwritten rules of the traditional outlook on life: even older members of the community tend to dress in elegant western clothes. The Budapest Roma businessman is well-groomed, makes regular visits to the sauna and the manicurist, wears little jewelry, and dresses in fashionable clothes. He will rarely wear a hat—unlike his Vlach Roma fellows living outside the city. The womenfolk, on the other hand, wear their hair long and dress in garments reaching to their ankles. In rural areas, Vlach Roma women are forbidden from dyeing their hair or putting on make-up, yet many of the women in Budapest dye their hair red and wear thick make-up. (They do so even though a majority of Vlach Roma think that women who dye their hair red are trying to look like non-Roma—and this is regarded as the custom of Hungarian Roma.) Roma businessmen living in rural areas have better preserved traditions of clothing, and the women tend to wear scarves with flowery patterns and colorful skirts. All of them (even those in Budapest) speak the Lovari dialect of Romani.

It is widely known that traditional Roma communities are reluctant to reveal the internal workings of their communities to outsiders. This is especially true if the inquisitive outsider is non-Roma. In rare instances, a “*gadzo*”—i.e. a non-Roma—has been accepted into a Roma community. For instance, József Újvári, a non-Roma merchant living in the Fourteenth District of Budapest, became acquainted with Roma antique dealers by way of a childhood friend—who had been placed in the same children’s home—

and his wife. Making good use of the new contacts, Újvári has become a self-taught antique dealer. His business, which is now seven years old, specializes in collecting artworks. “The Roma accepted me in, because I know and respect their traditions. Cohesion within these families—and indeed within the whole community—is still strong. People help each other out; and it is this type of mentality that is dying out among Hungarians.”

Kris and Pativ

Order is maintained within Vlach Roma communities—and among the antique dealers—by the Roma court, or *romani kris*. The communities tend to resolve their internal conflicts on their own and seek to avoid decisions being made by the public judicial system. Strict rules govern the peculiar judicial process—which Roma consider to be a court. Comprising male community elders, the body is convened at the request of a damaged party. Women, as well as those with a grudge to bear—but not relatives, are excluded from the body. The purpose of the court is the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It usually examines matters associated with women or business disputes. Judgments usually comprise fines payable by offenders in the form of damages. Once both parties have made statements to the *kris*, the court arranges for the taking of oaths in a church. The parties are made to swear that unless they tell the truth they will be placed under the greatest possible curse. If the ceremony takes place in a private apartment, an image of the Virgin Mary is placed on the floor. The person taking an oath has a black shawl placed on his shoulder. With his most beloved child in his lap, he kneels down in front of the image. Then, placing his index and middle fingers on to the picture while pointing them at the text of the oath, he says simply: Amen. Judgments of the *kris* cannot be appealed, and members of the community who fail to adhere to them are ostracized.

A Roma court body in Újpalota recently deliberated in the case of a business dispute between two Roma antique dealers. József Abházi, a member of the local council and also head of the organization Rom Som, said the following about the “court case”: two antique dealers were working together and “did deals” together. On one of their journeys, they tried to purchase a valuable painting, but no deal was made. One of the antique dealers left his visiting card with the owner of the painting. He told the potential vendor to phone him if he should change his mind. Several months later, the second antique dealer found out by chance that his partner had subsequently bought the painting without his knowledge. As an aggrieved party, he demanded half of the profit from the subsequent sale of the painting in line with the rules of the community based on *pativ* (honesty). His argument was that, on their business journeys, the two men did everything together—from the initial bargaining to the final sale. This was the way they covered their costs, and any profits were divided into two parts. By circumventing him during the purchase of the painting, his partner had acted dishonestly. Under the rules of the system, the Roma court ordered the dealer who had caused the damages to state under oath the sum of the profits stemming from the sale of the painting. Oaths are considered sacred. A basic rule is that a person making an oath must be believed even if he is clearly lying. A false oath would imply that the person taking the oath considered his reputation before the court to be more important than the fate of his children and brothers. Roma believe that curses placed on a person making a false oath will be fulfilled at some time in the future. A sad consequence of this belief is that innocent people are forced to suffer for the transgressions of others.