Tera Fabianová

How I went to school

My mother said to me: 'You must go to school, or they will lock up your father.' There were five of us children at home, four girls and one boy. The eldest was my sister, then me, one year behind her. But I was stronger than her. And naughtier. So my mother said: 'You will be the one who goes to school, because at home you only make trouble.' My sister was to stay at home with the little children. She carried them around on her back, washed their nappies, wiped their noses and their little bottoms, and swept and cleaned the house. Everything had to be done by the daughter who was at home, because mothers went into the village to work for the *gadjos*, and only came back home at night. That was what our mother did, too. Our father went to make bricks. If there was no work, he would work for the *gadjos* for some food.

In the morning, my mother woke me up: 'Get up, Little Bighead, go down to the stream and have a wash.' A little stream passed by about thirty metres from our house. That was where we went to wash, every morning and every night. At night, I would run down to the stream on both feet, but when I came back I hopped on one foot. I never had shoes, and so I wanted at least one of my feet to stay clean. In winter and summer we went barefoot. I only had one set of clothes, which my mother had begged from the *gadjos*. As for knickers and petticoats, we did not even know what they were.

I went to the stream and washed my feet and my face. My hair was full of feathers, because Romani beds were nothing but feathers and straw, which came out of the mattress and the dirty old quilt. I went to school. I had no bag, I had no readers, no pencil, no exercise book – nothing! I had never had anything of that kind.

I went through the village, and the village was still sleeping. There was no one outside, only two or three *gadjos* going to the fields with their horses. No one even looked at me, it was as though I were not there at all. I knew where the school was, because when I used to go into the village with my mother, she said to me: 'This is where you will go to school, so I will have some peace and quiet, Little Bighead!'

I pushed hard to open the heavy school gates. It was dark and cold, and I was half-naked and barefoot. No one was there at all. Only one old *gadjo*, who looked at me and said: 'What do you want here?'

'Well, I've come to school. I want to learn things.'

'You?' He started to laugh. 'Look at that skirt on her! Why haven't you washed? Why haven't you combed your hair? Where's your bag? You have nothing, you don't even have a bag! How will you study?'

'I will study! I will come to school, I will!'

The old man laughed, and he shoved me into a classroom. I sat in the front desk. I looked all around me. I was alone, all by my little self. The old *gadjo* started to sweep the floor. I just sat there, thinking to myself how I was going to be *somebody*! I would know everything. All knowledge would come into my head if I just sat in school – that was what I believed. But then I looked at my bare feet, and my heart sank within me. How could a poor Romani girl become *somebody*? I closed my eyes, and saw myself in a pink satin dress, embroidered with gold roses. Then I believed again that I would be that clever woman who would pave the way for other Roma. Already as a little girl, I knew that we Roma were the last of the last. No one said a kind word to us.

If I wanted to go out from the settlement, my mother said to me: 'Don't you dare go into the village! The other children will beat you up.' And so I only dared to go into the village when there were several of us, or when the older boys came with us, to stand up for us.

It was half past seven, and the bells rang in the church. One after another, the boys and girls filed into the class. Their mothers brought them. Two or three mothers came into the classroom, and seated their little girls in the front desk. They looked askance at me. But I stayed where I was, because I wanted to become clever. I was just waiting to become clever. More and more *gadjo* boys and girls kept coming in. They were finely dressed, everyone had a bag, and the little girls had ribbons in their hair.

At long last the teacher arrived. She saw me in the front desk. 'Who put you there?' She dragged me up, and sent me to sit at the back. 'That'll be your place.' In the first desk she sat the rich little *gadjo* girls. Then came the poorer ones, and the very back desk was for the Romani kids. 'The gypsy desk.' Next to the cracked window, separated from everyone else. I felt like an orphan. Why did I have to sit there all alone? It was hard for me, when there was not a single Romani child with me, and I was afraid. I would have felt stronger, if only someone had sat next to me. But I was alone, all by myself.

The first day in school went by. I learnt nothing. None of that knowledge went into my head, the only thing that forced its way into my mind was how poor I was. When I arrived home, no one asked me: 'so how was school?'

'Mummy, the teacher said that I needed a reader, an exercise book and a pencil.' My mother slapped me. 'Run away! There isn't enough to buy bread, and you want a book from me! Just keep on going, so they don't take your father and lock him up.'

The next day, I washed my feet again and I combed my hair and put on my old clothes and went to school. And that's how I went to school every day. A month went by, and the teacher did not ask me anything, but just looked to see that I was there. She did not know that I was listening to all that she said. When she asked one of the other girls or boys, in my mind I said along with them what they were supposed to say. I liked doing maths. The seven-times table was my favourite. At night, I was unable to fall asleep because the seven-times table kept dancing in my head. I raised my hand, and the teacher called on me: 'Go on, count!' And I counted very well. Again, the teacher asked: 'What do they cultivate in Hungary?' I knew. Peppers, melons.

'You are not stupid,' said the teacher. 'If you had a reader and an exercise book and a pencil, you could learn something. Why doesn't your mother buy you a reader?'

'My mother has no money.'

'Why do you go around so dirty? You don't even have proper clothes!'

'There are many of us at home, and there is no work.'

Then, one day, I did not go to school. 'Where were you?' asked the teacher when I returned.

'You told me that my clothes were dirty, so my mother washed them for me.' The teacher's eyes popped out. 'I couldn't go out of the house until my clothes were dry.'

Then the teacher bought me an exercise book and started to give me little pencils, which the other children had thrown away. My fingers hurt from holding them, but I was glad to have them.

One day an order was given that all 'gypsy' children must go to school. That's what the village mayor said. Among the Roma there was great horror, great panic. They ran up and down, the women tore

their hair, what will they do with us? What will they do with us? The village guard came to the Romani settlement and began to drum, and the men ran out of their huts, half-naked, their hair full of feathers, and the women were screaming at the children: 'Go to school! They'll lock up your father if you don't go! Who'll support us?'

The children went. They all put on their 'very best' clothes – their mother's skirt, their father's trousers – and off they went to school. The village official went on his bicycle, and we chased after him. 'Go on, run, you gypsy rabble!'

He took us in to the headmaster. I had never seen the headmaster before. He was short, fat-bellied and bald. He had onion eyes and a big moustache, which jigged up and down above his lips when he spoke. He only had two teeth, and God knows where the other teeth had gone. When he looked at us, his big eyes bulged out. He started to tell us off for being lazy Roma, who did not want to learn anything, who did not want to become real people! He cursed us, but you could see that he was a good man. 'How will I divide you up? Filthy rabble! All the teachers are scared of you,' he said, kindly. So he started to count: one, two, three, four, five. There were fifteen of us. He said: 'You go there, you there, you there ' So he divided us up among the classes. My sister Beži, who was a year older than me, also had to go to school. My mother cursed and cried that there was no one to be with the children when she went out to work.

We went into the classroom, and the teacher was scared of us. 'Where will I put you!' At the back were three desks, and she sat us there. We were separated from the *gadjo* children so that we wouldn't fight with them. We couldn't study.

Once, I was very hungry. It was just when there was a fair in the village. The *gadjos* were baking and boiling – the Roma were hungry. The teacher asked each of us what we had eaten, including the

Romani children. Black Pot said: 'I haven't eaten anything since yesterday. We only eat when my mother gets home from the village.'

Bango said: 'We don't eat in the morning, either,' which was true. Our first meal used to be in the afternoon, when our mothers came back from the village and brought potatoes, cottage cheese and milk, which the *gadjo* women gave them if they chopped firewood, cleaned the manure out of the stables, or wiped down the stove.

The teacher said to me: 'What have you eaten?'

'Wow!' my eyes opened as wide as stars. 'If you could see what I ate! Biscuits with cottage cheese, soup, buns and cake ...!'

'How is it that you have eaten, while there was nothing for your sister to put in her mouth?' the teacher interrupted. 'Why are you lying? Stick your tongue out! You'll get something to make sure you don't lie next time!'

I stuck my tongue out, and she hit me across it with a ruler. It hurt so much, I could not even speak. But when I came to myself again, I said to her: 'I was not lying! I was eating all night long! I dreamed of eating, I ate in my dream.'

The teacher went red, said nothing and walked away.

A year went by. Everyone said I was not stupid. I did not fail. They let me move into the second year. I received my school report. There wasn't a single C grade on it. And I was very proud!

I ran home, jumping up and down for joy, and shouting from far away: 'Mummy, I only have As and Bs.'

'I'll give you 'A's! Do you think we can live off your A grades? A grades, A grades – at home you do everything to avoid working! At home you couldn't care less about work!' That's how she cut me short. It was hard for me. The little *gadjos* got books, watches or money for

good school reports – but what was there for me? Cursing. There was no one I could pour my heart out to.

Three Romani boys went up with me into the second year. I became friends with those little boys, and the Roma said of me that I was stronger than a boy! Whatever the boys said, I said it too, and what they did, I did too. When they were beaten, I was beaten too.

One time the circus came to the village. I was mad about dancing. I knew how to put my leg around my neck. And so Šulo and Bango and Tarzan – those were the names of the three who went with me into the second year – said: 'Listen, you go to the circus – and whatever you see there, you can tell us about it afterwards!'

I said: 'How can I go, if we don't have any money?'

And they said: 'Don't worry, we'll get some money somehow. Come with us.'

We went over to the church. In front of the church was a statue of Saint John. In the morning, when the *gadjos* walked by the church, they threw money at it. And Šulo said: 'What does a statue need money for? You can keep guard, to make sure the priest or the verger doesn't come, and we'll collect the money.' They made some clay with slime and spit, and made a kind of sticky paste, which they put on the end of a stick, then they poked the stick through the grating towards Saint John. They wanted to raise the money from the dead. 'Bango, do a wee in the clay, wee in it, it will be better,' said Šulo. And sure enough, he caught a sixpence on the stick. But the priest was coming!

'The priest is coming!' I shouted. The boys stuck the sixpence in my mouth. 'Swallow it! Get it down!' I swallowed, and started to choke. I choked, retched, spat, turned red, and the boys were thumping me on the back.

'What are you doing here, you devils?' said the priest.

'We came to pray to Saint John – look, she almost choked,' lied Bango.

Of course, the priest did not know that I was choking on stolen money, and he said: 'Come here, let me give you a bit of holy water.' He poured some into my palm, and so I washed down the stolen money with holy water.

Bango said: 'We need to think of a way of getting the money.' But how? What? Where? I used to go to work for one *gadjo* who had chickens. 'Do you know what?' the boys said, 'You go into the hen-house, take the eggs from under the chickens' bottoms, and we can sell them to the Jew.'

I did not know what to do. 'Bango, you go!' I said.

'Alright,' the boys said. 'You go up the tree, up the pear-tree, and you can pick pears. Bango can go for the eggs.'

I climbed the pear tree – the dog didn't bark, because it knew me. The boys were in the hen-house, and the hens made no noise, because Šulo and Bango knew what to do. But who should be coming? The *gadjo*! And I was up the tree! He came straight for me. 'Is that how you thank me for giving you work?' He picked up a big stick, the kind you use to knock down nuts, and he went for me! I looked to see whether Bango and Šulo would run out of the hen-house. I saw them jump over the gate, and then they were gone. The *gadjo* saw nothing. Good, now I could come down from the tree. So I jumped, straight onto a nail. Luckily, it didn't go into my leg, but it tore my skirt at the back. I ran for it, and the torn skirt flew in the wind, while my naked bottom shone out like the moon.

The boys were waiting for me. They turned me round and round. 'We need a patch to sew it up!' said Bango. But where could we get a patch from?

'Do you know what,' said Bango, 'you walk in front of me, and I'll walk right behind you, and then no one will see your bottom.' So that is how we walked. My mother was watching from a distance. 'What on earth is that? Look! She's with a boy! Stuck right up against him! Does an honest girl walk like that?' (I was about seven or eight years old.) As I came nearer, my mother said: 'Is that how you go about, my girl?!' She beat me until I could not get up from the ground. My mother was wailing: 'You have one set of clothes! And you've torn them up! How can you go to school?' We never had cloth for a patch at home. My mother said to me, 'Wait, we'll do it somehow.' She took a kind of apron, which was supposed to be tied to my front, and she tied it behind me. My naked bottom could not be seen.

As soon as my mother had tied the apron to me, we went to sell the eggs. The Jew said: 'What kind of chickens do you have?' Their shells were very thin. 'You can see straight away that it's a Romani chicken.' The Jew would not buy the eggs from us.

Now what? How could we make money to go to the circus? I said: 'Oh! I am so disappointed! I'll never go anywhere. I'm going home.'

'Aha!' said the boys. 'So you swallowed the money and now you want to go home!' Šulo caught me by the ear. 'Have no fear. Wherever you try to go, we'll follow you, because that Saint-John sixpence is not just yours! It's ours, too.' But what use was the sixpence to us anyway, when the circus cost one crown twenty!

'Let's go and see what we can do,' said Tarzan. We went to the place where the circus was, and it was already full of circus wagons. Bango went to ask whether he could go and carry wood, or help in any way. What the circus manager said was: 'Yeah, I need nappies washing, and you can wash them if you want.' Bango ran for water, Šulo washed, and I just stood there as if I was their princess. Bango said to the circus manager: 'Let her go in! She can go and see the circus!'

The circus manager pushed me forward: 'Hop in! Run off, then!' I went inside, and the boys went on and on washing the nappies.

I was inside the circus! The acrobats swung on the bars, walked on the rope, and the clowns fell off bicycles – most of all, I liked the snake woman in the golden skirt, who did somersaults in the air and walked on her hands. In my mind, I did everything alongside her. I'd show the boys a thing or two!

I went home, glowing like a star. I was beaten by my mother for gadding about! I went to sleep in tears and hungry. As soon as I closed my eyes, I imagined myself as that circus lady, jumping through the air, walking on my hands, with the golden skirt shining on me like the sun.

It was not yet light when I got up secretly and disappeared off to the cemetery. There was a large lawn there, beautiful and soft, so that I would not break any bones. I did a crab. I could do that. I put my foot around my neck. I attempted a handspring. I fell crashing down on my back. No sooner had I recovered a little than I tried to do it again. I spun through the air. Good, now I could do a flip, as well. There was one thing I couldn't do – I could not walk on my hands. I fell and fell again. I was broken and bruised. Everything hurt.

The bells were ringing in the church, and I fled to school. My first lesson was catechism. The priest came into the classroom, saying: 'You were at the circus, weren't you?'

'Yes, I was.'

'You go to the circus, but you don't go to church!'

I said: 'The floor is cold in the church, and I don't have shoes.'

'Tell me how our great God was born.'

'I can't tell you how God was born, but if you want I can tell you how my little sister Ili was born.'

'Come out from behind your desk! You'll get your bottom smacked for having no manners!'

'Oh no! I can't have my bottom smacked!' I cried. The priest pulled me out of my desk, the apron flew open, and my naked bottom glowed like a full moon. The boys started to laugh. The priest sent me home. And finally my mother brought me some worn-out clothes from the village.

A week later, when I was not so bruised, I said to the boys, during a maths lesson: 'Come with me.' I put my hand up and said I needed to go to the toilet. The boys did the same thing, one after another. We had a modern school, with three flushing toilets and a corridor in front of them. In the corridor, I began to show them what the circus was like. The teacher started to wonder where the Romani boys were. Where had they gone? No one had come back from the toilet. The teacher came after us. And when she saw us, I was walking on my hands, spinning through the air and twisting my face like a clown.

'So that's what you're doing! You're teaching them circus acts. Wait here!' I was beaten again. How many times had I been beaten for one circus! And what had I gained from it? One swallowed sixpence. When it came out of me again, I hid it in the cemetery. It's buried there to this day.

A new teacher came. He was tall and young. He looked at us. 'Are those all the Romani children? Are there no more of you?'

'There are more of us, but the others don't come to school. If there were more of us, the teachers would be scared!'

'So I will take all the Romani children!' said the new teacher. 'But none of you will interrupt me or disturb me!'

The next day, what should we see but the new teacher, riding his bicycle into the middle of our settlement. He had come among the 'gypsies'. Not a single *gadjo* had ever visited us, apart from the village guard. The teacher called out: 'Every child who is supposed to be going to school, come outside!' He even said 'aven avri', 'come outside', in our own language!

We ran out of the shacks – the teacher had a stick in his hand. 'Get going, get going, run along to school!' When we got to the classroom, he asked: 'Hands up if you haven't combed your hair.' He didn't need to ask, he could see that none of us had combed our hair.

'Why haven't you combed your hair?'

'We don't have any combs.'

'Have you washed?'

'We don't have any towels.' One after another, we started to tell him everything that we did not have.

'Good. Tomorrow you can come to school one hour earlier! If not, I'll give you what-for!'

The next day, we really did come an hour early. The teacher was already waiting for us. He had brought towels, soap, a washbowl and combs.

'Who hasn't eaten anything?'

We all put our hands up. The teacher sent Bango for bread rolls. He bought a roll for each one of us. Then he said: 'Well, now we can start learning something! Today you can all stay in school for the afternoon, too.' At midday, he bought food for us again, bread and margarine. He asked us: 'What do you want to be when you are older?'

'I want to dance and sing!' I said.

He slapped me. 'You won't earn a living that way. You need to study, then you can dance and sing.' Then he grabbed the boys by the hair. 'What do you want to do?'

'Me – a blacksmith.'

'Good, you will be a blacksmith.'

'I want to be a musician like my dad.'

'That's all fine, but you must still know how to read and write.'

Then he gave us pencils and exercise books and we really did start to learn something.

There was a fair in the village. The teachers chose good pupils to recite poems. So our teacher said:

'Just wait and we'll show them what you can do!' He asked me: 'Do you know how to sing?'

'I do.'

'Sing, then!'

I sang a very amorous love song from a film. I must have been about eight years old.

'Who taught you that?' the teacher asked.

'My father sings that to my mother at night,' I said.

'Which of you can recite a poem?'

'Meeeeee!' I shouted. I recited a patriotic poem which I had heard from the *gadjo* children. My face was red and my eyes shone – he stared at me.

'Good,' he said, 'you can recite a poem, and then you can all sing and play music.'

The boys brought violins and basses and whatever they could from home. But we had nothing to wear, we had no smart clothes. The teacher said: 'Oh my God, if I was not so poor! How I could help you all! Look what beautiful hair you have! Would you like ribbons in your hair?'

'Wow! I'd love that.'

'Look, boys and girls, you have to study so that you won't be stupid! So that the *gadjos* can't do whatever they want with you. If you study, you will be cleverer than your parents. You will hold your heads up high, you will know how to find your own place among the other people. Study, and pay no attention if I shout at you, or if I box your ears. I cannot get angry with those who treat you in such a way, so I have to vent my anger on you. Oh God! When I see how the *gadjo* children eat so well and bring bread with dripping, and you eat your hunger, how the anger rises in me! How am I supposed to help you? Grow up good and honourable, so that the gentlemen see that your poverty is not your fault but theirs.'

And we took an oath that we would never again be naughty or bad, that we would not steal money from Saint John, and that we would study.

We went to the celebrations. No one expected the Romani children there. The *gadjo* children were there with their mothers and fathers. They put on a play about a princess and a cobbler.

Then our teacher stood up. He said: 'Now let me introduce my pupils to you.' The boys began to play. The old men started pulling at their moustaches big and small and started tapping their feet, it made them so keen to dance! Then I recited the poem. The *gadjos* were astonished. Then I took a plate, as my teacher had told me to, and

went to collect money. 'We want to study, too, but we don't have readers or exercise books.' Everyone gave some money.

I did not go to school for long. The war began, and Roma were not allowed to go into the village. They did not allow us to go to school. I did three years of school.

Tera Fabionová

All my joy

All my joy comes
Through my children's little hands.
We go hungry
Dare I hope for more?
I have given God his due
What can I owe the Devil?
The clouds pass high above
And I, like a twisted tree, am bound to the earth...
Even a twisted tree gives shade.

I won't get in the way of your life

I shall leave quietly

What good would it do me?

Nothing but grief and need

I'm leaving, so you can find another woman,

Be happy with her

Don't ask what will happen to me

I shan't die for you

I shall shut my sad heart

That only loved you

So it can dream that one day spring will come again

(transl. David Vaughn)

Erika Oláhová: The Child

She had been married for five years – and still nothing. Her relatives felt pity and compassion for her; it was not usual for women to be barren in her large family, where children had always abounded. Every woman on her side and her husband's side of the family had children. Lots of children! Big-eyed curly-haired boys and girls, in all sizes; they called her auntie, and it made her feel sick. She did not feel any hatred towards them; rather, it was the comments and reproaches of her husband and mother-in-law that had turned her into a taciturn and hardworking woman. She had no interest in chatting with the others on the doorstep. Rózka was big, strong, but nevertheless beautiful. Her hair was fairer than the rest of her kin, her skin was not as dark and her eyes sparkled with gold. This already set her apart from the others.

Rózka was healthy, so she devoted herself to her work, labouring in the fields and in the household until dark. Her husband had not yet come to terms with her not giving him a child, and drank all the more, until his tanned face stopped smiling. They lived in one room with his mother and father, and she would return there from the fields or from the cattle when dusk was falling.

Once when she came home, her mother-in-law and her husband weren't in and her father-in-law lay drunk on the bed. She asked where the others were – he only muttered unintelligibly to the effect that her husband had taken his mother to town to his sister. Apparently she wasn't well. Rózka ate her supper and went to lie down.

She was woken by his alcoholic breath and he was crushing her completely with the weight of his body. She couldn't resist in any way, not even by

screaming. He had covered her mouth with his huge hand and helplessly she looked into his crimson face ... When he had finished he stood over her and told her she mustn't tell anyone – anyway, they wouldn't believe her. He slammed the door shut and she could only hear the clock clanging in time with the beating of her frightened heart.

Her husband came home about an hour later, didn't even turn the light on, lay down next to her, turned over and soon fell asleep. He did not embrace her or even touch her, as if she were not there at all. She wanted to tell him everything, but had no strength left in her, and she spent the rest of the night staring into the dark; her thoughts, fear and humiliation mingled with the tears that streamed down her cheeks.

The old man continued to ignore her just as he had before, but her mother-in-law looked on with a smile as she threw up in the mornings and as her curves grew nicely. The smile returned to her husband's dark face and he was kinder and more generous to her. The neighbours finally had something to talk about, while Rózka and her mother-in-law prepared the baby's outfits and discussed what name to give it.

One month before the birth was due she had a dream. In it she saw her father-in-law and a child that resembled him. In the dream they were very evil and hurting her. When she woke up in terror, she could still hear their fearful laughter. She broke out in a cold sweat; she already knew that she didn't want the child, that it would bring her damnation all her living days.

She gave birth to a son; they named him Karči, after the father-in-law. Rózka suppressed the strange repulsion she felt towards the baby and took it into her arms. Her son looked at her just like an adult and smirked malignantly as he narrowed his eyes. She quickly laid him back in his crib and shied away. Nobody noticed and everybody milled around and smiled at him; it was only she who saw that he was different from the other newborn babies, and that he was watching her with his coal-black, squinting eyes.

In the night, when everybody was asleep, a noise woke her. She sat up in bed and looked around: she discovered with shock that the boy was standing next to her bed with an eerie sneer on his face. She was surprised to find that he had teeth. He gave a sinister snigger and scampered back to his crib. She screamed until everybody woke up in alarm; they sleepily lit a lamp and asked her what had happened. She told them tearfully what she had seen. Her husband suspected that she had dreamed it, and her mother-in-law rushed to have a look at the baby, who was sleeping innocently. As it started to whimper and then cry, the old woman took it into her arms and comforted it. Then she came over to Rózka and scolded her for not loving her own child and ordered her to breastfeed him – the boy was surely hungry. Rózka was completely confused but took the child and offered her breast. The boy started sucking immediately. Suddenly she felt a sharp pain: the little one had bit her nipple to the flesh, and blood gushed out. She pushed him away onto the blanket at the foot of the bed and complained in tears that the child had bitten her. The mother-in-law picked up the baby and passed her finger over its toothless gums. Her daughter-in-law must be wrong. She chided her and everybody came to the conclusion that Rózka had cut herself on purpose so as not to have to breastfeed. The old woman decided that she would feed the baby cows' milk and told the young mother that she would look after her grandson herself since his mother had rejected him. The grandmother took the child to bed with her and her husband; and so that night came to a close.

Nobody spoke to Rózka in the morning. The young woman felt miserable. She didn't know what to do, how to tell them everything that had happened and that the baby was actually a sin about which she had kept silent; that he was actually the devil's little helper in a child's disguise.

Barely a week later they found the old woman dead. She lay in bed with her eyes open wide, and the child giggled next to her waving its arms and legs in the air. Rózka knew that it had killed her mother-in-law, and that it would continue to kill. Nobody listened to her; they thought she had gone crazy and was talking nonsense. They assumed the death of the old woman had been caused by a heart attack.

During the following night Rózka decided to stay awake and keep an eye on the child. When it thought everybody was asleep it slowly climbed out of the crib and scuttled over to her husband's bedside. She pretended she was sleeping but watched the creature through her eyelashes to see what would happen. The child pulled the pillow from under the man's head and pushed it down on his face. It had such strength that even when the man was kicking and trying to pull the pillow off, it still held him down and the man gradually became weaker. Rózka jumped up and tried to tear the pillow out of the baby's hands. Its strength was tremendous: it pushed her over and continued to smother her husband. She picked up a chair and hit the baby on the head. It started to squeak and made noises like a goblin.

Suddenly a light came on and the old man and his half-dead son beheld an awful sight. Rózka was on the ground covered in blood: the small child, with bulging eyes and twisted face, was tossing her around and punching her face with its puny fists. Both men rushed to the young woman's assistance. The goblin attacked them too. The younger man caught it by the legs and smashed it against the wall. It fell to the ground, quickly picked itself up and darted to the door, squealing. It turned around one last time before escaping into the darkness with a blood-chilling screech.

The young man took Rózka into his arms and wiped her face with a cloth. His hands were shaking and he was crying. The woman was barely breathing. The door creaked open and closed and she looked through it apprehensively into the dark night as though she expected the devilish child to return.

Ilona Ferková

The Rolling Pin

(story from 1960ies) Fragments

Now listen," said the second woman in a sweet voice, "you know the child would be better off in a children's home. Don't be afraid, they'll look after him properly there, better than you can."

That was the last straw for Julka. "So you've come to steal my Julecek? Get out of my flat!" She marched over and opened the door. She was still holding the rolling pin that she'd been using to roll out the pastry when the gadzo [non-Roma] had come in. Pointing with the rolling pin she showed them where to go. The gadzo ran out at full speed, without even stopping to shut the door, and Julka slammed it behind them.

She picked up her little boy from the floor. "Don't cry, sweetheart, I won't let anyone take you!" And she kissed his tiny eyes, hands and feet.

When Feri came home she told him what had happened.

"You should have hit them with the rolling pin!" Feri said angrily. "Just as well you didn't. They'd have had you locked up..."

A week later they got an official letter, summoning Julka to the police station. The world went dark and her head began to swim.

Feri sighed. "You'll see, they'll make us move on again!"

When the police started at her, Julka's eyes flashed with fury. They say I wanted to hit the gadzo with a rolling pin: Assault on a public officer.

(trans. David Vaughan)