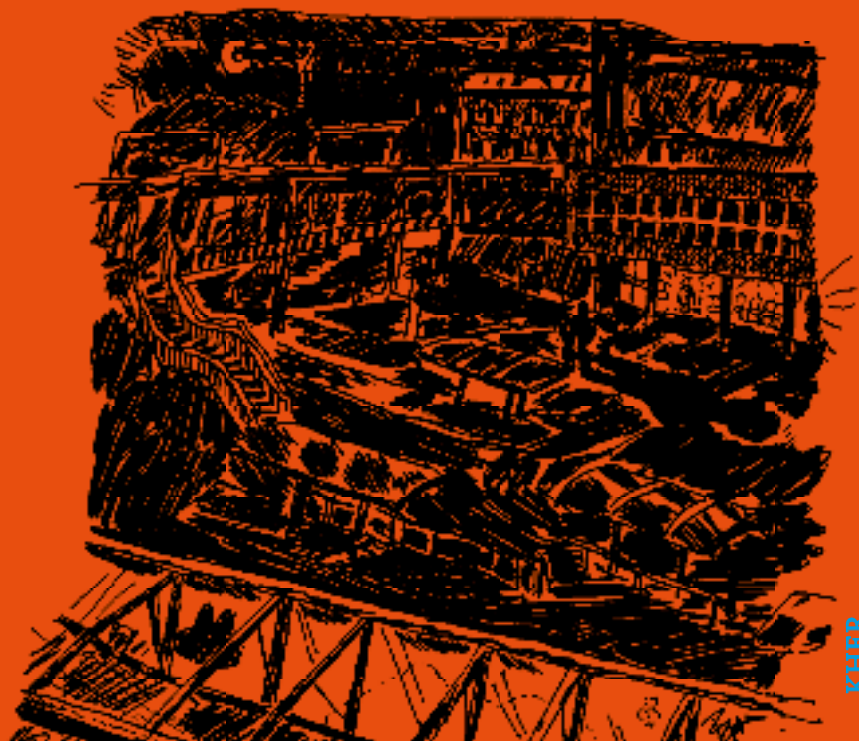


**THE TWENTIETH CENTURY  
IN THE STORIES OF  
CZECHOSLOVAK ROMA**

# **VELVET BLUES**



**KHER  
KAROLINUM PRESS**

# Velvet Blues

Edited by Karolína Ryvolová

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# INTRO- DUCTION



The volume in your hands is an anthology of contemporary short stories written mostly by Czech and several Slovak Roma from a region which was once Central European Czechoslovakia. It is a selection from two previous anthologies, *Všude samá krása* (Nothing but beauty everywhere, KHER 2021) and *Samet Blues* (Velvet blues, KHER 2021), which generated much interest upon their release and to this day rank among the publishing house's bestsellers.<sup>1</sup> The foundation of KHER, a press which caters exclusively for the needs of Romani writers, in 2012 was motivated by the belief that writers of Romani origin – due to their dramatic past linked especially but not exclusively to their merciless persecution during World War II, traditionally low social status and ongoing structural discrimination – enjoy a much harder position in the society to let their voices, stories, and grievances be heard.

The stories in the above-mentioned volumes are primarily dedicated to the writers' loved ones and their shared past in the pre-war ethnic settlements of Eastern Slovakia, their new homes in post-war Czech towns, and the surprising reality of post-1989 transition with its opportunities, but more importantly challenges and disillusionment. In the telling of these deeply personal stories these writers inadvertently convey a much more general picture of the Roma's twentieth century history.

The rise in neo-Nazism, which swept through the former Eastern Bloc countries following the fall of the Iron Curtain with its street violence, pogroms, and deaths, resulted in mass migration of the Roma to the West, where they would become an invisible minority, safe from physical threats and open to the advantages of equal rights. It is impossible to ascertain how many Czech Roma have left the Czech Republic since 1997, when the first wave of Romani migration hit primarily the UK and Canada, but to a lesser extent also the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and others. What we do know from eyewitnesses and authority reports is that these families

<sup>1</sup> Alex Zucker's English translation of Patrik Banga's "Žižkovite" previously appeared in *The Book of Prague* (Comma Press, 2023). Mária Hušová's "Where to Now?" is published in this volume for the first time and did not appear in the original Czech-language anthologies.

have blended into their host countries with remarkable ease, adopting their language, joining the job market, and entering children into the local schools, where they go on to become brilliant students, proving the Czech education system with its badly concealed practice of segregation discriminatory and ultimately crippling.

This new generation of Western Roma have partly lost their Czech and Slovak, which have been replaced by the local majority languages, but have retained their Romani as the language of the home and community. The chief intention of the present collection is to provide these Roma with their own ethnic literature which has flourished in their homeland in their absence and thus help them cherish and sustain their cultural background. To this end, all stories written originally in the so-called Slovak Romani are printed in Romani with an accompanying translation in English. English as the lingua franca of the world has been chosen as the main language of this anthology to make the literature of the Roma most accessible to audiences around the world.

Mainstream populations across the globe are the second envisaged readership of this book. It aims to provide them with the fact of the very existence of Romani letters and aid the development of an understanding for, and a sensitivity to a people scattered around the world but bound by a common Indian origin.

*Velvet Blues* has been chosen as the volume's title despite the collected works speaking of a whole array of topics and periods. The editors felt that it best describes the Czechoslovak Roma's hope that their destiny is following a positive trajectory with a natural climax in the post-Velvet Revolution freedom of the new democratic country. That this has failed to happen is a tragic paradox and a source of ongoing sadness for the local Romani communities.

The selection of the seventeen stories is the result of a long chain of debates between KHER editors and the Czech-to-English translator Alex Zucker, whose job in this book stretched far beyond the usual transposition of

one language code to another. Not only did he offer his expertise as to what Western audiences might be interested in and able to relate to, he also tirelessly battled on, trying to capture culturally specific terms and situations pertaining to the Roma. For his devotion to the project and willingness to deliver at any cost, KHER editors would like to express their heartfelt thanks.

The afterword entitled “The Untold Stories of Czechoslovak Roma” provides the factual and historical background to the development of a minority literature in an oral language. It is a case study of how the Roma began to write in the Czech Republic but will suitably serve as an illustration of similar processes in other countries with a significant Romani minority around the world.

# **BRAVE ROMANI WOMEN**



**BY ZLATICA RUSOVÁ**



When I first started writing this war story, I wondered if it was the right thing to do. Should I or shouldn't I tell these Roma's stories? Shouldn't the suffering these people went through remain hidden away in the heart and memory of my mom? But then I found out that young Roma nowadays know hardly anything about World War II. I found it heart-wrenching, given how much the Roma suffered. Young people have no idea how many of us died in the concentration camps. Some were shot in front of their families, many were dragged away and never came home again, and no one even knows where they're buried.

What I want to write about now, though, is Romani women and children. I want to tell you about the people my mom grew up with. She started talking about them one day when two young people came to see me, wanting to know more about Romanes, the Romani language. As we got to talking, the conversation turned to World War II. And with tears in her eyes, my mom began telling the story I'm going to share with you now. It was the first time my sister and I ever heard it from her.

One night the mayor of the gadjo village woke them up: "Roma, as you know, there's a war on. The Germans are coming, you need to hide. Find yourselves a hiding place and don't come out until they're gone. Only God knows what will happen next."

"All right, but where? There's too many of us. I don't know any place where all of us would fit," replied the vajda, our Romani mayor.

"You'll have to find it yourselves. We can't hide you in the village. The farmers are saving the cellars for themselves," said the mayor, and with that he walked away. Everyone was anxious. They were very afraid for their children and families. Feverishly they pondered where they might hide.

That afternoon some young boys went to tell the vajda they had found a hiding place.

"Where?"

"In a cave. We used to go there to roast stolen hens, geese and ducks. We can hide there. There's plenty of room, the whole settlement can fit."

"All right, boys. Let's pack up everything we're going to need. People, take all the food from your house, duvets,

warm covers, and proper clothing. Make sure to bring warm layers for the children, they're going to need them. The cave is made of stone and we're in the middle of winter."

The women gathered up all the essentials and set out. The whole way they wept: "What's going to become of us? We'll freeze to death in this cold! And when the Germans find us, they'll shoot us!"

When they came to the cave, they were amazed at how big it was. Then the older Roma remembered they used to slake lime there. The vajda ordered the people: "Women and children to one side, men and young boys to the other. In the middle we'll make a firepit so we don't freeze to death here."

Winter that year was harsh, although it didn't snow. The Roma survived in the cave as best they could. The grown-ups ate as little as possible to leave enough for the children, and saved as much water as they could. They had hardly any, in the woods there was none. They would have had to fetch it from the village, but they couldn't go there. It was just as the mayor said, that same day the Germans arrived. Toward evening, the Roma spotted them by the woods, but the Germans didn't dare enter the forest—they were afraid. The Roma were lucky.

During the day, some women cooked and some women helped, they shared the work as best they could. It all had to be done without a word, and even the children knew they had to be quiet while they played. When evening came and it was clear the Germans weren't patrolling the woods anymore, the Roma traded stories about all they had been through and how the musicians used to play at weddings and dances. But they laughed only under their breath, the fear was stronger. When Maña told her story, though, they couldn't hold back anymore and howled with laughter.

Maña was a bit slow. Cracked in the head as folks used to say. Didn't have all her marbles. She didn't speak too well, granted, but she was very cleanly and loved children. She could easily play with them all day long, so children adored her. She was fairly chubby, but had a charming face and skin like porcelain. They had lots of fun with her, but she was also trouble, since even her own mother didn't

know how to explain to her that she wasn't allowed to leave the cave during the day.

One evening, once the children were asleep, the women were trying to figure out what to do, since they had a shortage of flour, potatoes and fat, and no bread left at all. The children were pleading for bread. But worst of all, they had run out of water. There was enough left for maybe two days. The men debated what to do: "Someone has to go down to the village and find out what's going on. Maybe there's a way to bring some water back." The vajda sent a few young men to scout it out. But it wasn't long before they were back.

"It won't work. There are soldiers everywhere, patrolling in pairs."

"If it won't work, it won't work. If only it would snow tonight. If it doesn't snow, I don't know what we'll do."

There was also one sickly little boy among the children. A Romani woman had taken him in from the orphanage in the hope that he would recover with her. But the cold cave and the hunger weren't doing him any good, in fact he was worse.

"What are we going to do with him if he dies?"

"We'll bury him somewhere around here, and after the war we can move him to the settlement."

The women pondered how to help the boy. They started cutting back on their food rations and giving him more of theirs. But with drinking water the situation was worse. They had run out and it still hadn't snowed. The children wanted to drink and there was nothing to give them. The women were at a loss. "What are we going to do?" they said. "The children won't make it without any water. They're going to die!" When the children went outside to pee during the day, by the next day it was frozen. Then the children broke the frozen pee into pieces with a spoon and ate it. They didn't realize where they had gone to pee, they thought they were just eating ice. Their parents didn't tell them what it was or the children wouldn't have had anything to drink. They knew it was the only way for the children to survive. The grown-ups went to a hole where their predecessors used to slake lime. There was frozen water on the surface and lime underneath. They divided it up so there was enough for everyone.

One evening some of the young boys came running into the cave and warned everyone to be quiet, they'd seen soldiers coming into the woods. "What kind of soldiers?" the vajda asked. Some said it was Germans, others said they'd heard Russian. So the vajda made a decision: "We're all going to lie down and no one say a word. Then we'll see what's going on."

After three hours, they heard someone outside speaking Russian. Then came the deafening sound of gunfire. The Russians had set up a Katyusha rocket launcher on top of the cave. Whoever had pillows and duvets covered their heads with them, to keep from going deaf. The soldiers were firing down on the village of Šivetice. As soon as they realized the shooting had stopped, the women wiped soot on the young girls' cheeks, to make them unattractive, and wrapped their heads in rags, for fear the soldiers might take them away and rape them. Everyone knew the Russians did that. Then the women and young girls hid. They even rubbed Maňa's cheeks with soot and hid her. After about an hour, someone lifted up the rug hiding the entrance to the cave and a Russian soldier walked in. He announced something in Russian and after a moment it dawned on them what he had said: "The Germans are gone, don't be afraid, they ran away."

Then some other Russian soldiers came in and started looking for something. When they found the girls hidden beneath the blankets, they took them away, soot-faced and all. As the mothers wept, the soldiers tried to reassure them, gesturing to indicate they were only taking the girls to help them peel potatoes. They took Maňa, too. Her mother tried to communicate that Maňa was sick, that she wasn't right in the head. But it didn't do any good. They took almost all the girls, leaving only the little ones.

When the Roma came out of the cave, they saw dead soldiers, wounded horses and discarded rifles. The women sat down on the cold ground and started weeping. So much sorrow and suffering, so many dead young people!

"Come on, folks, let's see what's going on with our girls!"

The whole way no one said a word. They were all afraid what they might find. What they saw horrified them. The girls were in shocking condition. They had been raped, every last one. Maňa was worse off than any of them.



When she heard the people from the settlement coming back to the village, she crawled out of her hiding place and wailed at the top of her lungs: "Mommy, mommy, they gave me a boo-boo!" Her mother collapsed on the ground beside her, hugged her to her chest, and burst into tears. All of the Romani people wept, they had never seen something so awful.

The first one to come to his senses was the vajda. "All right, Roma, time to stop moaning! We need to do something about it, we can't just leave them like this! Men, we'll divide up the work. Some of you go back to the cave, there are wounded horses there, the rest of you go find wood. We need to heat some water and give the girls a bath, then we can clean up too. But first we've got to fix them up." He walked away with tears in his eyes.

The women, weeping, attended to the girls, doing what had to be done. Only afterwards did they see to their own needs. What had happened could never be forgotten. The girls stripped off their clothes and the women burned them. They were so ridden with lice that when you put your hand down their bosom, you came out with a fistful of lice.

Once they had cleaned themselves up, they sat down to a meal the women had cooked for them. Their plates were piled high, but even though everyone was famished, the food stuck in their throat.

It took a long time for the girls to get well again. Some of them became pregnant. They not very nicely nicknamed the children "Russkies." You can still sometimes hear Roma say it to this day. But Maña had it worst of all. Three months later, she died in great pain.

The story I told you today is one that actually happened. I intentionally left out the name of the village. Why? Because some of those women are still alive. My hope is that this might move some of you young people to think about what Romani women suffered through during World War II for the sake of their children and families.

# ROMANE ROMŇA



**ZLATICA RUSOVÁ**

Kanak kezdiŋdom te írinen pal akala Roma,  
gondolinkerás, či kerav láche. Gondolinkerás, sjom  
te írinen, vaj na sjom te írinen pal akala Roma?  
Gondoliŋdom mange, n'élas akale Romengero pháripén,  
so préko džidíle, te áchen míra dajorake čak andre  
lakero jílo te godí? Pandik ájom pr'odá, hoj o terne  
manuša románe na džanen pal o dúto máriben, majna  
ništa. Olestar mange jumind'a andro pháripén o jílo.  
Mer o Roma báre but préko ligene. Hoj but lendar múle  
andro lágri, but lendar múle khére angil o fajti, mer sle  
livinkerde, hoj buten ligene, u frima lendar ále khére, vaj  
na džanen, kaj hine párunde.

Musaj te phenav, hoj akána kamav te írinen pal o romane  
romňa, ta pal o romane čhavóre. Kamav tumenge akána  
te vakeren pal o Roma, maškar save ávri barija míri daj.  
Kanak vakerlas pal akala Roma, avka čak vaš odá, hoj ále  
ke ma dúj terne manuša, so kamle te džanen buter pal  
amári romaŋi čhib. Sar vakerahas, avka peja lav pal o dúto  
máriben. U avka kezdiŋd'a míri daj te vakeren, jasvenca  
andro jákha, pal akadá, so tumenge kamav te vakeren. Adá  
šund'am míra pheňaha angutno.

Jekfar rataha len uštaďa o starosta andal o gav: „Romale,  
džanen, hoj hin máriben. Kampel pe te garuven, aven  
k'amáro gav o Ňemci. Rakhen tumenge than kaj tumen  
garuvena. U na sikaven tumen, kím adaj éna. So éla  
dureder, odá džanel čak o Del.“

„Láche, čak kaj? Sjam báre but. Na džanav, kaj amen sjam  
te garuven, na džanav ase thanestar, kaj rest'amas savóre,“  
phend'a amáro vajda.

„Odá tumenge musaj te rakhen korkóre. Andro gav  
tumen na sjam, kaj te garuven. O pinci pumenge o chulaja  
mukenkeren vaš pumenge.“ Odá phend'a u geja het.  
Pharone lenge sja, i dar sja bári vaš o čhavóre te vaš o fajto.  
O Roma savóre gondolinkernas, kaj pumen garuvna.

Pal o dílo ále o terne čháve pal o vajda, hoj rakhle than,  
kaj pumen savóre garuvena.

„Kaj?“

„Andro barlango. Phírahas odoj le kachňen, le papiňen,  
te le kačken te pekenkeren, so čorahas. Odoj amen  
garuvaha. Hin odá báro, resaha odoj savóre Roma.“

„Láche, čhavale, javas amenge te keden, so amenge

kampola. Romale, keden upre savóro: o cháben, so hin tumen khére, keden tumenge o duchni, o pokróci táte, te o táte gada. Keden upre le čhavórenge o táte gada, mer odá lenge kampola, o barlango hin baruno, u hin jevend.“

O Romňa kene upre savóro so kampija, u mukle pumen pro drom. O Romňa cele dromeha rovenas: „So amenca éla? Andr'akaso jevend fađinaha! U te amen o Němci rakhena, livinkerna amen!“

Sar ále ko barlango, amulinde, savo hin odá barlango báro. Akor ále pr'odá o phúre Roma, hoj jon odoj valekana téle čhorkernas o vapno. O vajda phenda le Romenge: „O romňa le čhavórenca džana pro jek ódalo, o murša le terne chávenca pro áver ódalo. Maškare le barlangoske, keraha jag, te na adaj fađinas.“

Odá berš sja o jevend báro. Čak o jiv na sja. Avkake o Roma dživenas andro barlango, sar pe delas. Chanas so jekfrimeder, čak le čhavóren t'ovel buter, te le páňiha cidenas te ikrel so jekdureder. Mer te o páňi sja len frima u andro veš páňi na sja. Musaj te gelehas andro gav, u odoj naštik džanas. O starosta sar phenda, avka sja, mek odá đives ále andro gav o Němci, mer kijaráti dikhle le Němcen pašal o veš. Andro veš andre n'ále, mer daranas. Adá sja le romengeri bach.

Préko đives o Romňa tavenas, valesave šegitinenas, ulavkernas sar pe delas. Musaj te sle bilaveskero, u džanenas odá, te o čhavóre kanak pumenge khelenas, te na len šundol. Kijaráti kanak džanenas, hoj paš o veš náne o lukeste, pumenge o Roma vakerenas, so préko džidile, kanak phírnas te bašavkeren, o bijava, o bále. No t'avka hasanas polóke, mer i dar sja bareder. No kanak vakereleas i Maňa, odá ávri na ikrenas o Roma, u hasanas avka, hoj o ódala len dukhanas.

I Maňa, odá sja terňi čhaj, so sja nasváji. Avka, sar pe phenel romane, nasváji sja pro šéro. Na sja lake andro šéro savóro avka, sar élas t'oven. Na džanelas láche te vakeren, so pe musaj te phenen, sja báre žúži, u kamlas báre le čhavóren. Le čhavórenca peske khelelas te celo đives. U o čhavóre la báre kamenas. Sja báre thúji, no o muj la sja báre šukár. O tešto sja la parno sar porceláno. Avkake préko laha džidile but hasaviben, no te bríga, kanak lake i daj na džanlas te den andri godi, hoj ávri naštik džal préko đives.

Jekfar kijaráti, o čhavóre má sovenas, u o romňa pumenge vakerenas, so te keren, má sja frima járo, krumpji, žíro u so na sja, avka máro. U odá mangel o čhavóre. Ále te pr'odá, hoj frima hin o páni. Šaj ovel, hoj hin pre dúje dīvesende. So te keren, vakernas pumenge o murša: „Élas te džan valeko andro gav. Élas te džan te dikhen, so pe odoj kerel. Šaj ovel, hoj pe delas te páni te anen.“ O vajda bičhaďa le terne čháven andro gav, či te del te anel páni. No báre sik ále pale.

„Na del pe, o lukeste hine vígik, phíren po dúj džéne.“

„Te pe na del, ávka pe na del. Lošalo újomas, te aja rat pejas jiv. Te na perla, na džanav, so keraha.“

Maškar o čhavóre sja jek cikno čhavóro, so sja nasválo. Lija peske le jek romňi andal o lelenco. Lija peske le, hoj paš late pe dela pro than. No o barlango leske láčhipen na kerlas, aňi i bok. U sja pr'odá na láche.

„So leha keraha, te merla?“

„Párunaha le valeka adaj, te éla pal o máriben, thovaha le préko andro gav,“ phend'a o vajda.

O romňa gondolinkernas, sar te šegitinen le nasvále čhavóreske. Kezdinde pumenge te devkeren frimeder cháben. U devkernas le nasvále čhavóreske. No goreder odá sja le pániha. Má o páni na sja. O jiv na peja. O čhavóre mangelas páni u páni má na sja. Má na džanenas, so te keren. So keraha, phenenas pumenge o romňa, bijo páni o čhavóre ávri na ikrena. Merna! O čhavóre, so ávri mutrenas préko dīves, odá fadīnlas, u o áver dīves le rojenca phagernas u chanas o fadīndo muter. O čhavóre na džanenas, kaj mutrenas, gondolinenas, hoj chan jégo. O daja te o dada le čhavórenge na phenenas, so chan, čak te na mangel páni. U džanenas, hoj čak avka šaj préko dživen. O romňa te o murša phírenas andri chev, kaj o phúre Roma čhorkernas o vapno. Upral sja o fadīndo páni, u telal sja o vapno. Chanas avka, te áchel sakoneske.

Jekfar kijaráti našle o terne čháve andro barlango, hoj t'ovas bilavengero, mer dikhle, hoj andro veš aven o lukeste. O vajda phučja: „Save lukeste?“ Jek phende, hoj dikhle Němcen, ávera, hoj šunde te vakeren Rusika. Vaš odá phend'a o vajda: „Savóre amenge džaha te pašjon u ovaha bilaveskero. Dikhaha, so pe kerla.“

Pal o trin ori šunde te vakeren Rusika. Pandik báro

livišágo. Pro barlango o Rusi thode i Katuša. Savóre amenge thod'am keril o šére o perñici, o duchni, kas so sja čak t'ovel amenge o šéro andreučardo. Te na ovas kašuke. O lukeste livinkernas téle pro šivetovo. Sar o romña dikhle, hoj o lukeste má na livinkeren, kormoha lenge andre kerde o muja, t'oven džungale. Devkerde lenge pro šére kendova, mer daranas, te na len keden o lukeste, mer odá kerenas. Le terne čhajen, romñen téle chudkernas. Te la Maña andre kerde kormoha u garude. Vaj pali jek óra valeko vazdña o pokróco, so sja andreučardo o barlango, andre ája jek Rusiko lukesto. Valeso vakerlas u pandik ájam pr'odá, hoj phenda: „Má o Němci adaj náne, ma daran, ništa.“

Pandik ále te ávera Rusika lukeste, u kezdinde valeso te roden. Te rakhle le čhajen, rakhle tel o duchni, te melalen len kene. O daja rovenas, sar dikhle o lukeste, hoj roven, sikavkernas, hoj džan te kušen o krumpji. Lile te la Maña. I daj sikavkerlas, hoj hin nasváji, sikavkerlas hoj hiñi diliñi. No na šegitind'a. Lile majna savóre čhajen. Mukle čak ole ciknen.

O Roma, kanak ávri ále andal o barlango, dikhle le bute múle lukesten, livinde grasten, dikhle but puški. O romña bešte pri šudri phuv u kezdinde te roven. Aci bríga, aci pháripena, aci múle terne manuša.

„Romale, javas te dikhen, so hin amáre čhajenca!“

Savóre cele dromeha khére džanas bilaveskero. Daranas, so dikhena khére. So dikhle, sja valeso báro. Le čhajen rakhle báre erđavone. Savóre sle téle chudkerde. I Maña sja pr'odá jekgoreder. Sar šund'a, hoj o Roma aven khére, cidlas pe pal i phuv andal o khér ávri. Rovlas pro celo kirlo: „Mamo, mamo, kerde mange bibi!“ Lakeri daj peske bešta ke late pri phuv, ciña peske la pro kojín u kezdind'a te joj te roven. Savóre Roma rovenas, asi bríga mek na dikhle.

Angutno ája ke peste o vajda. „Romale, ma roven má! Kampel lenca te keren valeso, naštik avka oven! Muršale, ulavas amenge i búfi. Valesave džana ko barlango, odoj sle livinde grasta, ávera džana kaštenge. Kampel te tatárkeren páña, kampel le čhajen te nandárkeren, te amen musaj te nandúvas. Angutno kampel te den le čhajen pro than.“ Jasvenca andro jákha geja het.

O romňa rovibnaha dine le čhajan pro than, kerde keril lende, so kampija. Pandik kerde keril pumende. Sja odá valeso aso, so pe na dela te biskeren šoha. O gada, so téle hajinde pal pumende, labarkerde. Sja andre lende aci džuva, hoj kanak denas o vast pal i brek, lenas ávri džuva.

Sar pumen žužarde, bešte ko cháben, so o romňa táde. Savórenge sja keno, no o cháben na kamlas téle te džan le kirloha, u ája sako bokhalo.

Žibut pumen o čhaja sastarnas. Valesave áchile khabne. Lengere čhavóren džungalone vičinenas „Ruso“. Te akána maškar o Roma šundol, hoj valesave manuša pumen vičinen Ruso. No jekgoreder sja pr'odá i Maňa. I Maňa pro trinto čhon báre dukhende múja.

Akadá, so tumenge akána gend'om, vaj írind'om, hin čáčo. O gav na kamav te írinen naveha. Soske? Mer valesave romňa mek dživen. Vaš odá tumen terne manuša gondolinkeren, so sle o romane romňa andro dúto máríben vaš o čhavóre te vaš o fajto.