

Mária Csomma Lakatos: Our little adobe house

Translated from the Hungarian by Eszter Tarsoly

The author of the first text about traditional housing and adobe making is one of the long-term local contributors of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She lives in a street on the edge of the Roma neighbourhood, often referred to as the "Hungarian row", but it has both Roma and non-Roma households. She has two teenaged children. She has participated television interviews, in writing a Romani storybook, translating and authoring texts in local Romani, and in writing the volume summarising the outcome of our translanguaging project (Heltai, J. and Tarsoly, E. (eds.). 2023. Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities. Speaking Romani at School. Berlin: De Gruyter.)

First, they dug a big hole, but, of course, in the middle of a large field. The pit and the making of the adobe were close to where the house was going to be built. When they had dug out the soil, they put it back into the pit, mixed straw and water in it, and then, as many of them as there were, they all started to tread it. If there was not enough of the water or the straw, they added or poured more, until it was suitable for making adobe. When the mud was suitable to make the adobe, men carried it out of the pit in buckets. This was the men's job. Then the women started to shape and mould the mud. They had a form; they dipped it in water. Then they put the mud in, moulded it, levelled it on the top with wet hands, and slowly lifted the adobe brick out of the form. When it was all done, it was left to dry for a week, and then stacked up.

Next, they dug out the foundations of the house and poured concrete over it, and then they also left this to dry. But some houses had no concrete foundations. Some had concrete poured over the earth, but others had only plain earth floor. When the concrete foundation (if there was one) got dry, a few days after, they started building the adobe house. The same kind of mud was used between each row of adobe bricks as what the bricks were made of. Some people built only a single bedroom, others built a whole little house consisting of a bedroom, a kitchen, and a small porch. Once the walls were standing, they made the roof, which was made of beams and planks. Then there was the chimney, made of small bricks. But some people didn't even have a chimney; they just cut a hole in the wall, in the shape of a circle, and fitted in it the pipe of the stove, or whatever they used for heating. When the house and roof were ready, they started plastering on the inside. For plaster, some people used mud, the same as for the adobe. When it was finished, they brought a barrel into the house and heated the house with it so that the walls can dry. It was heated like this for at least a week.

When the wall was dry, they started to whitewash it. First with traditional white lime, but this was repeated several times. This was done repeatedly to prevent the mud from showing through the white paint. When the white colour was nice and clean, it was then painted with white lime, but some people added a tube of coloured paste paint and some used a patterned paint roller. My mother, when she painted, she would paint the walls white, and then she would add patters with a roller.

Each roller had a different pattern. Roller painting was done after the whitewashing, when the wall was dry. What was patterned painting like? There was the roller holder and a rolling head, which was made of something like rubber, it was patterned, and you could change the roller heads.

Preparing the paint the way my mom did: she cut the top off a plastic bottle, like a coke bottle, halfway and then poured in the paint, water, and a little flour. She mixed it, and if it was of the right consistency (because if it was too wet, it wasn't right), she poured it into the roller holder. This had a small handle. She put the roller head on and you could start roller painting.

As for the lights in the house, some people sorted this out by using their neighbour's electricity meter: they used a long extension cable to give each other electricity and they paid the bill together. But some had candle light. In the room where we slept there was a big double bed, and next to the window a foldable sofa-bed, a small glass-fronted chest of drawers and wardrobes, a coffee table, two armchairs, the stove, and a dresser with a three-winged mirror. This was the room. In the kitchen, there was an agha stove, a two-piece blue cupboard, a cot, a small table, and four wooden chairs.