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Ida Blomerus

Risto Blomster and Raluca Bianca Roman

Born in Impilahti, Karelia, Ida Blomerus (June 16, 1890 – February 1953) was one of the central figures in the activities of the Finnish Gypsy Mission (*Suomen Mustalaislähetys*) in the first years of the 1910s. She was, among other things, the forewoman of the Roma Work-home established in Vyborg in 1913 and prominently involved in the performance and fundraising tours of 1912–1913 as a singer, speaker and reciter of her own poems. Among the other Roma who appeared with her included Tilda Ahlgren, Miss Lindberg, Ferdinand Nikkinen, Antti Palm and Aleksander Åkerlund.

While active in the Gypsy Mission, Blomerus awoke to the misery of the social and social status of Roma and later also became one of the key figures in the first hints of a Finnish Roma civil rights movement, in 1917. Blomerus had begun her independent career as a performing “Gypsy Singer” under the stage name Ida Cingardy-Ora in 1914 (also I. Cingardy; Cingardy comes from Romani language, meaning “quarrel-maker”). This led her, under the name of I. Cingardy Blomérus-Ora, into the circles of the two supposedly earliest institutions for Roma civil rights movement in Finland: *Suomen Romanien Sivistysseura* (Finnish Roma Civilisation Society), established in 1917 and *Suomen Mustalaisteatteri* (Finnish Gypsy Theatre), active in 1917 and 1919.

Perhaps due to her entrepreneurial heritage, and a folk college background, Ida Blomerus also established the registered business name *Office “Knowledge and Advice”*, in the spring of 1917. The Blomerus family history in Impilahti included her father’s entrepreneurship in the watch repairing industry, which was widely recognised even among non-Roma. According to newspaper reports, in the autumn of 1917, Blomerus’s company sold

and brokered residential shares and small firms in its business flat in central Helsinki. In Finland, at that time, women's entrepreneurship was not exactly exceptional. However, it was focused, unlike the Blomerus company, on "clothing, food and nurture" (Wuoksi, 1894, p. 2; Registeringstidning för varumärken, 1917, p. 1011; Vainio-Korhonen, 2002).

Ida Blomerus' short career moved into unfamiliarity. Despite of this, significant was the fact that the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society had in Ida Blomerus a female foreperson and chairperson – a fact that challenges the common notion that Roma women would have played a mostly passive role in the early stages of the Roma civil rights movement in Finland. Also, Blomerus' activities in the trade sector traditionally favoured by the Finnish Kaale on the terms of modern society show interestingly her quest for the construction of self-styled 'Gypsiness'. In that action, too, Ida Blomerus wanted to highlight her own background: according to the records of the trade register, Blomerus's registered business name *Office "Knowledge and advice"* was marked in the name of Ida Cingardy Blomérus-Ora – a name which Ida Blomerus had either chosen herself or had been given within circles where she was known as an artist and an advocate for Roma rights.

Ida Blomerus was born in Impilahti, in Karelia, on the northern shore of Lake Ladoga. It was only tens of miles from Impilahti to Sortavala, where Sofia Schwartz studied to become a teacher from 1907 to 1911 (see Schwartz's portrait, below). The distance to Vyborg – the city where the Gypsy Mission started its actions in 1911 – accrued some 200 kilometres. In the early 20th century, Impilahti had a large Roma population: based on a survey by the Finnish Senate of Gypsy population in the 1890s, out of 1500 Roma registered in Finland, Impilahti had 53 people enrolled. Under the name Blomerus, there were 33 people. (Karjalan Sanomat, 1912, p. 2; TA, K 9, 1895; Impilahti).

There is no information on how, and at what point, Blomerus got involved in the operation of the Gypsy Mission. She had attended the East Karelian Folk College in Impilahti. With certainty, however, it is known that she acted as a speaker of the Gypsy Mission, on several occasions in 1910. Along with the role of prominent speaker, other duties held by Blomerus in the Gypsy Mission included serving, in 1913, as the forewoman of a working home for men and women in Vyborg. As her working partner, she had the deacon Fabian Hintikainen and Helmi Johnsson, the wife of Oskari Jalkio, as the executive director (Harri Blomerus, personal communication, December 19, 2020; Kiertolainen, 1910, p. 6; Kiertolainen, 1913a, p. 16)

Like the time of Blomerus' accession to the Gypsy Mission, the time of her separation is also unclear. However, the beginning of her own appearance, first as reciter, then as singer without connections to the Gypsy Mission, is timed around 1914. Interestingly, in the same year her address information can be found in the Helsinki address and trade list, which lists her professional title as "music student". Blomerus, according to newspapers, had studied solo singing under the guidance of Finnish internationally renowned opera singer Aino Ackté (1876–1944) (Työmies, 1914, p. 2; Parikkalan Sanomat, 1915, p. 2; Helsingin ja ympäristön osote- ja ammattikalenteri, 1914, p. 64; Savolainen, 1916, p. 3).

It was also during these years, from 1914 to 1916, when Ida Blomerus became an active and known performing artist, as a “Gypsy singer”, using the artist name I. Cingardy-Ora after her marriage. Broadly put, Blomerus performed frequently, especially in Worker’s houses (i.e. houses of workers’ associations) in cities and parishes in eastern Finland. In her performances, Cingardy-Ora, emphasised internationalism in many ways. For example, her repertoire consisted of Roma songs from different countries, as well as small pieces by well-known Finnish and international composers and folk songs. The languages of the songs varied between Finnish, Swedish, Russian and Italian, as well as the Romani languages of different countries. Her most liked number was a song composed by Elemar Szenttirmay *Mustalainen* (Gypsy). According to the critical reviews published, Cingardy-Ora’s special purpose was also to draw the public attention “to her tribal Gypsies, to improve and elevate their status”. In the following prior notice published in *Savolainen* (1916, p. 3) many details on Cingardy-Ora’s artist character are stressed:

I. Cingardy-Ora’s Concert

Next Saturday will be a rare concert in the Casino ballroom, when the Gypsy singer, Mrs Cingardy-Ora, singing not only Finnish, Swedish and Russian language songs, but also Gypsy songs in various Gypsy dialects. The singer, who is one of the pupils of Mrs Aché, performs in Gypsy costume and has won the popularity of the public in the capital and elsewhere at her concerts and has received good reviews. We hope the audience will keep the concert in their minds and rush numerously to the Casino next Saturday to hear interesting and beautiful Gypsy songs. Mrs. Cingardy-Ora’s special purpose is also to draw the general public’s attention to her tribesmen, the Gypsies, to improve and uplift their status, for which the concert derives its quite peculiar purpose and charm. (*Savolainen*, 1916, p. 3).

In many ways, Ida Blomerus’ own artist-image as a Gypsy Singer, using the stage name I. Cingardy-Ora, brings to mind the activities of Aleksander Åkerlund and Ferdinand Nikkinen, described in above. Interestingly, for Åkerlund, it is also known that his first detachments from the Gypsy Mission are similarly linked, like those of Blomerus, to 1914. It is also known that the concrete connection between Blomerus and Åkerlund continued, after working in the Gypsy Mission, to be close during their acting in the Finnish Gypsy Theatre, in 1917 (for more on the theatre, see Åkerlund’s portrait). As mentioned above, the theatre performed a play, *Singoalla*, based on a book by Swedish writer Viktor Rydberg. In the play, Ida Blomerus and Aleksander Åkerlund played the adult children, Ciria and Assim, of the Gypsy King (Vapaus, 1914, p. 2).

However, while information remains limited, some important changes in the life of Ida Blomerus can be assumed: settling in Helsinki, starting a determined development of her own artistic career as a student of music, and speaking publicly about Roma rights. These points became intertwined in many ways with her work, especially during the year 1917. This is also connected to a little-known activity in the backdrop of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre: establishment of the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society in the early spring of

1917. It is worth mentioning a few words about this short-lived Society, and perhaps the first Roma/Gypsy organisations in Finland which was led by Ida Blomerus, a 27-year-old Finnish Roma woman.

According to the information compiled from newspapers and archives, the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society was founded in early 1917. So far, no information has been found on its registration. However, some facts can be deduced mainly based on the texts of Ida Blomerus (or I. Cingardy Blomérus-Ora, as she used to call herself at the time): the society had about 20 members who already had some experience in societal associations and a board of trustees and committees. Blomérus-Ora also announced that the idea for the creation of the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society and its rules were invented by herself (Työmies, 1917e, p. 6). The establishment of the Society, purposes, connections and forms of action can be found in an article published in *Työmies*, on May 13, 1917, just before the first tour of the Gypsy Theatre:

The Gypsies' enlightenment pursuits have been rekindled in recent times. For that purpose, the "Roma civilisation society" has been formed here in Helsinki, with the aim of making educational work free of religious purposes among Roma, s.o. Gypsies. A tour has been organised by this Society, which in the near future will be in the countryside to perform a stage adaptation of Viktor Rydberg's wonderful poetry narrative on *Singoalla*, which details the love between a Gypsy girl and a knight, the right of nature and the schematic the ambivalence between societal. It is presented by an entourage assembled from real Gypsies. *Singoalla* has been adapted for the stage by novelist Elvira Willman-Eloranta. The troupe performs Gypsy songs, violin playing and Gypsy dances in *Singoalla*'s prologue. The entourage plays primarily in the Worker's houses and the first performance takes place at Högfors, 15. this month. (Työmies, 1917c, p. 5).

The article raises two points of interest concerning the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society: the affiliation with leftist and emancipatory actors and the Society's distancing from 'religious purposes'. Both the Society and the Theatre were linked in many ways with labour associations and the people involved in them. For example, Elvira Wilman-Eloranta, who was responsible for the script and dramatisation of *Singoalla*, was a well-known left-wing writer and a feminist with connections to the Touring Theatre of Labour People (*Työväen Kiertueteatteri*). Similarly, the Society's two fundraising evenings, organised in the spring 1917, were held at the premises of labour associations: the Railwaymen's Union (*Rautatieläisten liitto*) and the Swedish-speaking Labour association Friends of Work (*Arbetets Vännern*) (Työmies, 1917a, p. 3; Työmies, 1917b, p. 2; Hyttinen, 2012, p. 120).

Also crucial is the fact that the Society publicly remained disconnected from religiously-justified activities. This theme became the subject of an interesting debate published in *Työmies*, which opens up the context of Ida Cingardy Blomérus-Ora's and the *Society's* activities. The debate had two parties: the *Society's* chairwoman Blomérus-Ora, representing the non-religious and active line, and the group of Roma as a board of the directors of the Society, representing the religious and conservative line. A reply to the original

writing arrived in *Työmies* on 20 May 1917, where the group appearing as the Board of Directors decided that the Society would hereby be disconnected from the activities of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre.

Gypsies' enlightenment Hobbies

In the writing of *Työmies* no 127, we ask for a little clarification. The inscription showed that a travelling theatre, called *Gypsy Theatre*, the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society founded in Helsinki and its purpose goodbye, would have been set up by the director Helina Svensson-Timari.

Consequently, it is announced by the Board of Trustees of Finnish Roma Civilisation Society, that no theatre tour has been sent by our Society and that Finnish Roma Civilisation Society is not in connections with the so-called Gypsy Theatre Tour. Yes, our Society has an amusement committee, but it works locally here in Helsinki. In addition, we granted permission to our Acting Secretary Antti Palm of Vyborg to increase our amusement committee and to operate as a local Society in Vyborg.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of Finnish Roma Civilisation Society. (*Työmies*, 1917d, p. 9).

Chairwoman Blomérus-Ora's response was published just two days later, on May 22, 1917. She accused this "family group that represented the Christian-conservative line in the Society" of being unwilling to promote the Society's explicit and enshrined purposes. Blomérus-Ora's partly ironic response may also reveal something about the author's personal character, a hint as to why she had the artist name "Cingardy" (i.e. quarrel-maker):

Gypsies' Enlightenment Hobbies

To explain the descriptive account published in Sunday's *Työmies*, representing the personal intrigues of the former Secretary of the *Finnish Roma Civilisation Society* and his relative council, is hereby informed as follows:

Primo: the purpose in accordance with the rules of the said civilisation society includes, as an essential part, the establishment of the Gypsy Theatre and the objectives of its activities; the theatre must be regarded as being sent by the said society (since the home stayed members of the society did not have the functionality and willingness required for mobilisation), the chairperson of the society is the publisher and actor of the theatre, on whose initiative and measure also the society and its rules are born; the society whose current secretary has been in theatre rehearsals travelling from Vyborg (although he could not be used in the planned role); the society, which substantial part of the membership body (1/3), constitutes the staff of the said theatre tour; who, at the same time, reportedly have all attended organisational activities in labour associations.

So that this family, representing the Christian-conservativeness in the society, would have done more wisely, in my opinion, than representing the "enlightenment pursuits" of our Gypsies, when representing their soapy solution for the treatment of gout, naturopathy and quackery – in the paid notification section of the journal.

I. Cingardy-Ora.

The chairperson of the S. R. S. (Finnish Roma Civilisation Society). (*Työmies*, 1917e, p. 6).

Two points in this reply by Ida Cingardy Blomérus-Ora still demand their own comment in this context: the relations between Roma families and the ‘Christian-conservativeness’ of the action. Presumably, both points were intended to influence the activities of the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society, on the one hand, as a motivating factor for its activities and, on the other, as a dispersing factor. Inter-family relations, or as Blomérus-Ora writes, “personal intrigues of the former secretary of the Finnish Roma Civilisation Society and his kinsmen” may refer to the form of blood feuding in the Finnish context, which is most commonly manifested today in a principle of avoiding encounters between families in conflict (Grönfors, 1977; Mohamed-Salih, 1985; Markkanen, 2003; Viljanen, 2012). So, it may be inevitable that there was at least a certain level of questioning of the so-called cultural reasons behind the dispersal of the board’s opinions.

In terms of the ‘Christian-conservativeness’ that Ida Cingardy Blomérus-Ora pretends, the gaze eventually turns to the Gypsy Mission. We can also bring up here another archival source signed by Blomérus-Ora that illuminates the context from this point of view. According to Blomérus-Ora’s and Helinä Svensson’s writings, when asking the Senate for free tickets for the use of the Finnish Gypsy Theatre (with no success), the disparity to the Gypsy Mission was similarly noticeable. The request published below was addressed to the Finance Department of the Senate of the Grand Duchy of Finland:

We, the undersigned, who have set up a summer tour called “Gypsy Theatre” to assist Finnish Gypsies in their studies, beg – referring to the civically neglected status of our Gypsies, as well as the fact that the government assisted with free travel tickets on railways religious conversion work carried out under the name of so-called Gypsy Mission, which we Gypsies have not yet come to appreciate, and have not more generally realised its blessing – humbly ask: that the Senate would be favourable to the Finnish Gypsies self-help company that we represent, and to grant the “Gypsy Theatre’s” six-person (6) stamp troupe starting today, free tickets for three months on the Finnish State Railways.

In Helsinki May 14th, 1917.

Helinä Svensson. Gypsy-born actress. Head of the “Gypsy Theatre”.

I. Cingardy Blomérus-Ora. Gypsy-born singer. Chairperson of Finnish Roma Civilisation Society. (KA. Senaatin talousosasto: F3 174/3, Eb 3439).

However, this request was unanimously rejected, with no justification for that rejection being published, as was the custom. Despite the absence of an official reason for the rejection, a few speculations can be made about the political and social reasons that led to it. First, Finland was still a part of Russia as a Grand Duchy of Finland in the spring before its independence in December 1917 and, during the Russian revolution occurring in 1917, there may have been no reason to support any kind of achievements interpreted as left-wing and radical. Second, the activities of the Gypsy Mission, which was prominent in the public eye, were seen as both socially and culturally constructive, and therefore supportable. Attention is also drawn to the fact that the emphasis on the application is strongly on Roma’s own activities and both signatories that appear state their Gypsy

background (although, in Helinä Svensson's case this status would be left without confirmation). Finally, from the point of view of the authorities, the pleading of a group of 'Gypsies' operating through an apparently unregistered association and the support of the project perhaps seemed simply dubious, based on old prejudices.

Whether that was the case or not, the public bickering ended with the decision of the editorial of the *Työmies*, but it undoubtedly continued with other occasions for a long time. That said, ribbings such as that of Blomérus-Ora in the last paragraph, were also familiar in the pages of *Kiertolainen*: she refers here to Oskari Jalkio's pursuit of natural medicine, which he actively introduced in *Kiertolainen*'s newspaper writings (Viita, 1967, pp. 66–67).

The Finnish Roma Civilisation Society moved into the twilight of history after 1917. Likewise, the Finnish Gypsy Theatre suspended its activities in 1918, when there was a sizeable civil war in Finland, and the revolutionary labour movement experienced a bitter defeat. Moreover, the name Ida Blomerus disappeared from the sources and archives after the Finnish Gypsy Theatre ceased its operations. Blomerus married doctor Eino Heikel in 1920 and acted as an entrepreneur under the name of Irda Heikkeli. She continued her career as an artist, at least to some extent, performing with the Helsinki based opera troupe in 1922 in Vyborg, together with renowned opera singers Wäinö Sola and Eino Rautavaara. The family's memory records state that she later kept a restaurant in Lappeenranta and moved to Sweden where she died in Gothenburg, in February 1953 (Wiborgs Nyheter, 1922, p. 3; Harri Blomerus, personal communication, December 19, 2020).

However, if other traces of Blomerus have disappeared, the poems written by her have remained: Ida Blomerus' song text *Sun ristisi juurelle, Jeesus* (By Your Cross, Jesus) can even be found in editions of the songbook *Hengellinen laulukirja* (Spiritual Songbook) favoured by the Baptist, Methodist and Pentecostal congregations as well as the Free Church in Finland (*Hengellinen laulukirja*, 1976, 469–470). It is also unclear which of the poems, if any, published with pseudonym in *Kiertolainen*, are written by Blomerus. Perhaps behind the name "Gypsy girl" (*Mustalaistyttö*) is Ida Blomerus – a Roma woman who defended the Roma civil rights alongside her impassioned but brief public career in the 1910s.

Ida Blomerus' activity and contribution to the 1917 Finnish cultural, social and economic life was exceptional. As a representative of that cultural life, she sought to develop herself through education as a 'Gypsy Singer'. However, in her social activities, she did not settle for being a line member of associations but was a founder and chairwoman, setting up that which is supposedly the first Roma-driven association in Finland. Furthermore, in economic life, she sought to act in her Romani-language artist name of Ida Cingardy Blomérus-Ora. Ida Blomerus will remain in the history of Finnish Roma as well as the history of Finland as a progressive and ground-breaking personality.