

# A Gypsy speaks: Who says your laws are more righteous than ours?

By Ian Hancock

"You should be aware that Peter Maas (*The Washington Star*, Q and A, Nov. 25) is not an expert on American Gypsies; by his own admission he "used to think they were Indians," add his knowledge, such as it is, derives from books and the acquaintance of just one family; in particular just one member of one family. From this he has attempted to give what you yourself call "an account of gypsy (sic) life in America." As a result of the paucity of his sources, his portrayal is inaccurate, and perpetuates a damaging image.

There are several theories about the origins of the Rom ("Gypsies" — capital G, please); the most recent research — based upon comparative linguistic reconstruction, the examination of early chronicles, and blood-type affinities — point to a North Central Indian origin.

There now appear to have been two historical migrations out of India, one during the 5th Century AD, one in the 11th Century. In both cases, the ancestors of the modern Gypsy population appear to have been abducted and brought to Persia. Then the Battle of Terain in 1192 appears to have forced the *Romani*

*Ian Hancock is a professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin, and general secretary of the International Gypsy Committee.*

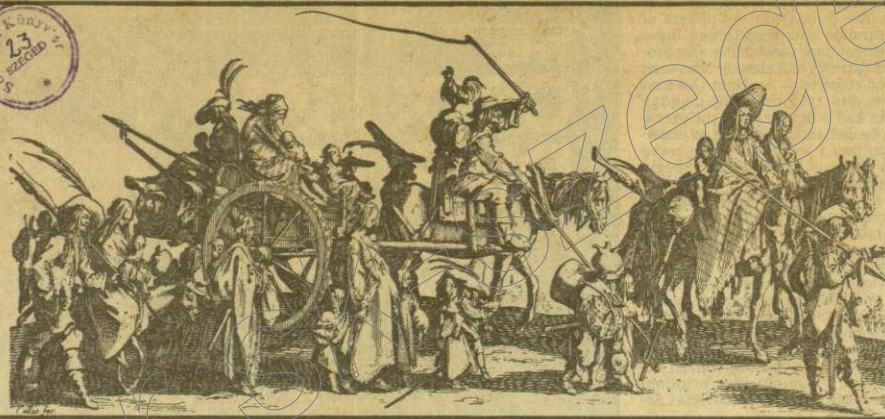
population to move on. At least 200 years seem to have been spent in Epirus (Little Egypt) in what is now northern Turkey; hence the false assumption, repeated by Maas, that Gypsies came from Egypt itself. Epirus was at that time a Greek-speaking area, hence the large medieval Greek vocabulary in the modern *Romani* dialects. The first recorded appearance of Gypsies in Europe was in about 1320.

By 1380, Gypsies in southern Europe had become enslaved by the gajo, or non-Gypsy population. This

It was late last night,  
when my lord came home,  
Enquiring for his a-lady, O!  
The servants said,  
on every hand:  
She's gone with the  
raggle taggle Gypsies, O!

—Old Ballad

One of a series of four etchings entitled *The Gypsies (Les Bohémiens)*, by Jacques Callot, circa 1621. An inscription reads, "The only things these poor fortune-telling beggars carry with them are things yet to come."



condition lasted until the abolition of Gypsy slavery in 1856, after which many eastern European *Rom* fled to America.

For the millions remaining in Europe, persecution continued, and still does. Hitler considered our people to be racially impure, and attempted to exterminate the entire race as part of the Nazi final solution. A half million were lost before the end of the war, including seven members of my own family.

European and American countries have anti-Gypsy laws still in effect. In Italy all Gypsy-owned vehicles must carry special blue license plates. In 1969 British government officials caused three Gypsy children to be burned to death by pushing over their parents' trailer with a bulldozer because Gypsies weren't allowed to stop anywhere. In the same country a year earlier, a member of parliament suggested that Gypsies be exterminated; another suggested driving them into the sea. As recently as 1927 a group of Gypsies was actually

charged and arrested for cannibalism in Czechoslovakia. The charge was dropped, but not before the news had reached the public, and their stereotypes had been reinforced. Mud does stick.

In 1964 I was myself initially denied entry into Canada on the grounds that my people are Gypsies; (Canadian officials were not abashed in letting me know the reason why.)

The *Komitia Lumiaki Romani* is a cultural-political organization run by and for *Rom*, with headquarters in Paris and bureaus in 9 countries and affiliated organizations in 19. We are concerned mainly with civil rights and war reparations issues. We have negotiated successfully with Willy Brandt for war crime reparations, the first of our people being recompensed earlier this year; we are also talking with UNESCO, seeking representation within the United Nations. We already have permanent representation in the Council of Europe. In March 1976, the second World *Romani* Congress is to petition the Eastern

bloc governments for official recognition of the *Rom* as a distinct nation of people within those countries.

A couple of other points:

One of your questions put to Maas unfairly presupposes that "traditional Gypsy practices . . . include a lot of stealing". It is true that Gypsies steal; so do members of all ethnic groups. Gypsies have a reputation for stealing because an illiterate, or, more accurately, non-mainstream society has less means of keeping such news from the public eye. Of course there are many places even today which adamantly refuse to serve Gypsies. A choice between stealing or starving is easily resolved.

You ask why people fall for Gypsy fortune-telling "rip-offs". For the same reason that people visit the much more highly-priced psychiatrists: they need help with their problems. Maas is right in saying that our women wait patiently for a sucker to come along, at least some of them do — but a great deal of good is done in

the meanwhile for a very small fee. And the expression "there's one born every minute" is yours, not ours.

The question about literacy is important. There is a reluctance, generally, to attend school because of the belief that contact with non-Gypsies is *marime*, or polluting. There is also a fear that some kind of romantic attachment may be formed with a non-Gypsy. This kind of ethnocentric outlook is not peculiar to Gypsies. Nevertheless there are several Gypsy schools in the U.S.A., and most American *Rom* have attended school for a little while and are to some extent literate.

As for your question on sex roles, in *Romani* society these are well defined. "Women's Lib" is a non-Gypsy concept and should not be applied in its Anglo sense to the Gypsy community. *Romani* society is matriarchal, Gypsy women have the principal control over finances and certain aspects of business. Sex roles are clear cut and present no conflict as they do in Anglo society.

A few of the questions to Maas by the *Star's* interviewer were good ones, and indicate some sympathy on your part. Of course it is unfair in the extreme to characterize Gypsies as a criminal group, but at the same time it is true that many Gypsies make a living "criminally". Firstly it must be realized that the term is yours, not ours (or rather, what is considered a crime in one society may not necessarily be considered such in another). Maas himself rightly points out that what is viewed as illegal by the gajo is not necessarily seen as such by the *Rom*. If I shoot a deer on your property, I'm poaching and liable to be arrested by gajo law for what is essentially considered theft rather than trespass; but if the same deer wanders off your property onto common ground and I shoot it, I am not — providing I hold a gajo-created license for my gun.

In a material society the interpretation of possession can become greatly distorted. God created all men equal; why should the laws of one group of men be any more righteous than those of any other? All are arbitrary. It cannot be a question of who was here first; Gypsy slaves were being transported to the New World by the English, Spanish and French as early as the 16th Century.

Nevertheless Gypsies have been forced to the edges of non-Gypsy society because of non-Gypsy laws. The gajo hold a romantic picture of the "wandering Gypsy" without considering that Gypsies wouldn't have to wander if the laws didn't force them to (cf. the \$1,000 required in Maryland to be able to stay put; we have similar cases on file from most states).

Hey man, I'm a university professor, and stuff like this is hurting me. And others like me. And Maas and his publisher have heard from us. We, the vocal ones, may not be 500,000 strong, but if even one individual's dignity and self esteem is affronted by such cheap commercialism, is it any the less immoral?

The Washington Star, Feb 3  
Ugly scenarios  
If U.S. Leaves  
Germany, Japan

By Morton Halperin

As a starting point for assessing what role the United States should play in the world today, I suggest that the ability of the international system to function depends on Germany and Japan continuing to accept the special restrictions which were imposed on them after World War II.

Two questions now have currency:  
● How long should the United States

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Cigánykutatás  
egyetemi tanár  
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Adat: Borrow, George  
V.ö. Adatár B5 kötet

(Cigány kutatás M. országon  
1844)

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