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## **Pogroms Erupting Across The New Europe**

**U**nder the czars pogroms were launched against Russian Jews to relieve political tension. Now, in the new United Europe economic troubles are unleashing pogroms against Roma, also known as Gypsies, her largest and most defenseless minority. Of 16 million Roma some 10 millions live in Europe. Most have long been hauled off their ancient nomadic treks, many for centuries, and forced into a life not their own. Trapped in countries where they were born, but denied documents to prove that they exist, they have struggled to survive outside of any form of basic social protection or inclusion.

Those who have survived these centuries of persecution and marginalization have done so mostly by withdrawing into invisibility. Even the famous ones will not admit to being Gypsy. Charlie Chaplin, Rita Hayworth, Yul Brunner, Elvis Presley, Django Reinhardt, to name a few in the entertainment world. In the political arena there were Juscelino Kubitschek, former President of Brazil, and our own Bill Clinton, who is of Romani descent. Mother Teresa was an Albanian Gypsy. In 1984 Sonya Kavalesky, became the first female professor in the world, teaching mathematics in Sweden. There are countless successful Gypsy athletes and dancers. Gypsy music and musicians have influenced great composers such as Bizet, Haydn, Brahms and Ravel. They are undeniably part of Western culture. They have been for over six hundred years. Since they are a peaceful people, (Gypsies are, nor ever have been, killers) instead of retribution they have always opted to quietly disappear into the background in order to survive. In fact the choosing of peace over war and conflict, life over death, is at the core of Roma history.

They originate from the Indian Subcontinent and began their migrations around the 11th Century. They were drawn from different tribes to fight the brutal Muslim invasion of Northern India. Instead they decided to flee its terror, and in Diaspora became one people, a nation without borders and without written records to leave behind.

What they took from India was the language and respect for animal life, not only those that shared the space they were about to cross: the wily bear, the wolf with his human eyes, but most of all the horse, symbol of freedom, power and beauty. Like many nomads the Gypsies followed the cult of the horse. The eating of horse-flesh became the most ignoble of crimes, banishing a Rom from his tribe forever, to a Gypsy a fate worse than death. For the culture that emerged almost at once was built around strong family ties, absolute loyalty, honesty, self-reliance and strict rules of cleanliness. It is not clear at what point these refugees split into different tribes, as would their traditions, cultural habits and dialects. The split occurred along the lines of their livelihood. There were the iron-workers, the horse-dealers, the bear-trainers, the basket-weavers. All of them had the knack for trade, the talent for music and poetry. And whatever the differences, they remained united in their search for a peaceful existence and the enjoyment of life, which pursuit found renewal and revitalization by taking to the open road. Travel also served to keep in contact with the various extended families, and the finding of brides, thereby preventing

### Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

inbreeding, and a weakening of the basic mental and physical health of the tribe.

Roma to this day are proud and very protective of their culture. What the few non-Gypsies who step beyond the prejudice that cloaks the Gypsy people, the few who actually have the opportunity to get to know them, will find are tightly knit communities with strong women, protective men, and children who grow up fast. The notion that Gypsies steal children, who they know would never survive the harshness of Gypsy life, aside from the fact that Gypsies have numerous children of their own, is one of those enduring prejudices that make the least sense of all. Gypsies always have and still work as a family unit. They work hard, but a Gypsy works to live; he does not live to work. And yes, if pushed into a corner, where the choice is stealing or die, the Gypsy will steal in order to survive. Like among all other groups, wherever there is poverty and despair there is crime and of course begging. To a Gypsy stealing is a means of last resort, because if he is caught, he will be taken away from his own people, to a Gypsy a punishment worse than the jail he will be condemned to.

They arrived in Europe in the early 14 hundreds with great panache, like eccentric dukes and counts, with colorful and lively entourages of musicians, dancers, fortunetellers and talented craftsmen. Some arrived as pilgrims traveling for penitence. They were erroneously called Gypsies, because they were believed to arrive from Egypt. Right from the start these dark strangers evoked strong feelings and prejudice that split in two, from the beginning that prejudice ran along lines of class. The poor regarded them with suspicion and hate, some of the wealthy and more educated with longing and romanticism, enjoying their art.

Kings and feudal lords, even a Pope gave the Gypsy caravans letters of safe passage upon their arrival in Europe. In Russia the nobility valued them like cherished pets. Great Russian lords were proud to house their own orchestras of tziganis. Aristocrats married Gypsy women, as did Tolstoy's brother. Ana Karenina was based on his Gypsy sister-in-law. Even Hitler, among all those he was about to eliminate, showed a weak spot for the Gypsies and wanted to preserve some of the still purely nomadic Gypsies, falsely believing them to be ur-Aryans, in a zoo-like enclosure, for young Germans to visit on their day of rest. Dr. Mengele, uncle Mengele to the Gypsy children to whom he gave candy, in one of his death camps kept a little Gypsy boy with a haunting singing voice, all dressed in white, at all times by his side. But just before the door was thrown shut after the last interned Gypsy child had been led into a gas-chamber, he shoved the little boy in after them, last minute, almost like an afterthought. It was what most other persecutors of the Roma did and do to this day: in the end they feed these dark strangers as scapegoats to riled-up hate mobs. Except for the Russian aristocracy, most remained loyal to their Gypsy friends, till they themselves were devoured by the Great Revolution. But in Russia, even most of the peasants loved their tziganis, and when Russia's freedom was threatened by the Nazis, theirs was the only war the Gypsies joined to fight. It was the one country in Europe that had treated its Gypsies as fellow human beings.

In the rest of Europe, soon after their spectacular entry, the Gypsy trail turned into a trail of horror that in its endurance and persistence has no

### Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

equal anywhere else in the world. The fate of the Gypsies was about to turn into Europe's true and enduring Heart of Darkness.

I can only imagine being a Gypsy upon entering medieval Europe in those days. By then these nomads had several centuries of freedom under their belt. They had been famed musicians and entertainers at the luxurious courts of Persia. What they now crossed were feudal lands that looked more like places of confinement for the many peasants and serfs, who worked these plots they did not own from dusk to dawn. And whereas the Gypsies keep the interiors of their tents or caravans spotlessly clean, these peasants seemed to live in squalor. And each little hamlet had its lords, and overlords, to enforce obedience and religion, one religion to the exclusion of any other. For these masses of peasants and serfs there was lots of punishment by rod and no sight of a carrot. Yet whenever these feudal territories came under attack, these dictator feudal lords would order their serfs and peasants to go and kill for the land, and they would rush to kill and be killed. The Gypsies naturally moved out of the way of these killer wars, and became even more protective of their culture of non-violence. Gypsies are like all other people, they have their good and their bad apples, but rarely will a Gypsy kill, and never in cold blood and on a massive scale. Certainly not for a plot of land with a shack that to him looks like a cage.

But soon that killer righteousness turned on these dark strangers, who refused to settle in and called them pariahs and intruders. Open hunts were declared on Gypsy men, women and their children, as they were chased from place to place. When caught, they were mutilated, flogged and hung. Whole tribes were massacred. In Austria, children were taken systematically from their parents and placed in Christian households or with nuns. Gypsy women were forcibly sterilized. Gypsies were traded as slaves by lords and clergy in Wallachia up to 1865, when Gypsy slavery was finally abolished. Once again Gypsy culture closed in on itself, and retreated into invisibility.

No hiding place could save the Gypsy from the political upheaval caused by National Socialism in Germany. Again the hunt was on for those who were different. Like those Gypsies were either murdered straight out in forests or in hinterlands, with nobody close-by to witness, or lured from their caravans or the settled ones from their living quarters, almost lovingly, with promises of work. They were told to just come along to receive the necessary permission papers for these new opportunities, no need to worry about the animals they were leaving behind. They would return within the hour. No smashing of windows, no brutal grabbing of persons or property. The Nazis never separated their families. They knew, that was one thing the Gypsies would have resisted till death. National Socialism resulted in the murder of 1.5 million Gypsies, some estimate that constituted 70% of European Roma population. Yet of all those killed, their genocide is the least recorded, forgotten by all, except by their own.

In the aftermath of these dark times of European history, the resulting resolution was that from then on Europe would be immune to such heartless pursuits. Yet, almost sixty five years after the victory over National Socialism, anti-Gypsyism is as vibrant as before, is indeed resurging. In many of the countries that collaborated with the Nazis, Roma houses in

### Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

their shanty-towns are fire-bombed: Hungary, the Czech Republic and Italy. When in Hungary a terrified father with his five year old son, tried to flee his burning home, both were killed by waiting gunmen. Hard-working law abiding Gypsies are killed out in the streets for no reason at all. Teen-age girls attack Gypsy women carrying babies out in the streets of Belfast, Gypsy encampments are grazed down by bulldozers, leaving its inhabitants, old and young, with no place to go. One story that got out and shocked the world, was when two Gypsy girls selling trinkets along the shore, Cristina 12, and Viola 11, drowned in rough seas, were pulled ashore and covered with beach towels, with beachgoers showing no more respect or feeling than they would toward dead fish washed ashore.

Yet for a while there was hope. After the Break-up of Soviet Union, the establishment of the EU and the inclusion of more and more former satellite countries now independent, frontiers opened that had been closed to the Gypsies before. Like the opening of the American West this spelled new opportunities. Ion Cioaba, self-declared King of the Gypsies, before his death in 1997, warned the Gypsy people against simply leaving behind whatever little security they had. But the independent Gypsies, with the everlasting hope and optimism of nomads, no matter how long they have been trapped in dirty cages, would not listen. So, totally unprepared for modern life, their numbers soon swelling by Gypsies escaping ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the poorest of the poor Gypsies swept across this new Europe, that despite its vastly differing people from North to South, after centuries of territorial war fare, was reluctantly pretending to be one. Only one barrier remained firmly in place, the solid wall of prejudice that separates non-Gypsy from Gypsy, Gadge from Roma. That wall is over 600 years old and shows no signs of crumbling. So now the poorest of the poor, the sick and elderly, women with babies, find themselves without papers, without human rights, out in the streets and almost no one to speak up for them.

Vaclav Havel, human rights campaigner and the former Czech president declared the fate of the Roma would be a litmus test for the new democracies of Europe. A friend and Gypsy activist, who had the opportunity to see neo Nazis from up close, says Europe has already failed that litmus test. I am more optimistic as to the fate of the Roma than I have ever been. For the first time Roma are uniting to stand up for their rights. Romani women are forming activist groups to back up their men. Besides, I believe there is a little bit of the Gypsy in all of us; the part that loves freedom, loyalty and togetherness, all the good stuff that we are in the process of diminishing. Maybe, after centuries of maligning their culture and trying to shove ours down the Gypsies' throat, we should ask ourselves whether there is something we could learn from them, such as authentic human values: to Gypsies children are the center of their lives, their greatest wealth, they take care of their elders, their sick, wealth is to bring happiness and to share, highly valued are family love and togetherness, friendship and loyalty. The time has come to stand by our human brothers and sisters, whose only true crime has been that they look at the world with different eyes. The right to be different is one of the essentials of true democracy, one that enriches us all. The time has come for all of us to tear down this ancient wall of prejudice and intolerance.