

Sonia Meyer

**Encounters with Europe's 'Eternal Strangers' – Her Gypsy People**

*Nomadic Gypsies were part of the landscape of my childhood - the forests and hinterlands of Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia during World War II. I don't remember them out in the open, where we came under fire and had to dive into ditches to avoid getting killed, or when we raced towards railway tunnels to avoid getting mowed down by German Stuka bombers diving down upon fleeing groups of women and children. The Gypsies (Roma) appeared in moments of calm, deep in the thick of the forest, walking along deer paths, singly or in small groups, long after partisan ambush attacks had subsided, the bombs stopped falling and the steady noises of the forest had come back to life.*

**M**y mother told me forest Gypsies were unlike the ones getting trapped in houses. These Gypsies could read the forest like a map. They sensed what was afoot long before the first shot was fired. I remember one Gypsy woman in particular who was dressed the traditional Gypsy way, long skirt and a colorful top. She traveled with a shaggy pony, which she let graze free while talking to my mother. None of us, the women and children of partisan fighters, had domestic animals. Domestic animals had to be destroyed before we went into hiding in the forests and abandoned barns or burned-out houses in winter. Dogs or cats, let alone a horse could easily give away our locations and endanger us all. It was that same Gypsy woman who provided me with my first exposure to fortune-telling when she told my mother that not only would we survive the war, but that I, her only child, would travel far. Knowing what I know now, the Gypsy woman merely saw the fatigue in my mother's face that signaled the end. In a war zone if you stop running, you die. So Gypsy's fortune telling was a bit of hope for my mother. By then we had made it to the last spring of the war. The Germans knew they had lost the war.

*On their flight back home Nazi planes dropped bombs helter-skelter just to get rid of them. The advancing Russians flushed out whoever was left alive in the forests, trying to kill off the rest. By the time the shooting stopped, I was told on average two out of ten partisans made it out alive - among them, by the luck of the draw, my mother and I.*

I was not quite seven years old, when we started our long walk west, from the Czech border. There were no roads, no railway tracks left to travel. We crossed fields scarred by bomb craters with dead soldiers were scattered around. We crossed typhoid-infested towns and villages where we couldn't stop on our way back to Cologne, the city my mother had called home. During that trek of several weeks, I cannot conjure up one single Gypsy face from within those walking masses of starving refugees who surrounded us. Nor do I remember seeing any of them among the dead piled up in those bombed out villages and towns or on one of those many killing fields. Finally, starving, we crossed the only bridge left over the Rhine River into a city leveled to the ground and overrun by rats. With nothing to eat we would forage for food and one day returning from one of our search-for-food walks into the country side, we stumbled on an encampment of Gypsies. They were German Sinti, who had been seden-

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tary before the war. They told my mother they were awaiting the return of loved ones, who had followed the promise of work, only to end up in labor camps. "Nazi bastards probably killed them all," my mother whispered to me after we left.

*It was on account of my mother's highly vocal and open opposition to the Nazi regime that we left everything behind in 1939 and went underground. Yet even she would not have believed what surfaced only years later - besides the millions of Jews, the Poles, the Russians killed during the war, close to one and a half million Roma had been massacred by the Germans - 70% of Europe's Roma population. Their deaths would remain unrecorded for many years to come, and no Gypsy has been compensated for their losses to this day.*

Miraculously our building in a suburb of Cologne was almost intact and since my family had been politically persecuted, we were allowed to recover half the belongings of the apartment we had left behind. But the prayed-for peace soon turned to nightmare. I now found myself on the other side of the war. Where once I listened to nothing but how to fight the German army, or to clandestine radios of what was really going on, which could get you shot, I listened to how the people I grew up to think of as the enemy, had suffered bombardments, hunger, loss of husbands and sons and the rape of women.

Although I was alone with my mother, who was in a state of total collapse, I was German-born and forced to go to school. There I found myself surrounded by a state of denial of the harm the Nazis had inflicted on the rest of Europe. Soon the most active Nazi bosses started to return from short internments by the Allied Occupation Forces, far better nourished than the rest of us. This started to create an inner rage that soon grew bigger than me. At the slightest provocation, I let my schoolmates have it, by word and fist. After all, while they had sat in basements and bunkers waiting for the bombs to drop, my father had taught me how to toss hand grenades. But being a minority of one, the German headmistress ended up locking me up into a room storing maps for hours on end.

*My only escape was the Gypsy camp. They were quickly reverting to nomadic ways. They had picked up stray dogs that now charged any stranger approaching their camp. I ignored the dogs, and they ignored me whenever I walked by to join my Gypsy friends. Together, often lethargic with hunger, we sat in silence staring into the purifying flames of their Romani fires.*

Before the onset of winter we formed gangs to "procure" potatoes and briquettes from parked freight cars in the outskirts of Cologne. We waited in the dark for allied soldiers to take a break, before half of us climbed up, the other half stood on the ground with open sacks. We divided it into equal shares. I never considered it theft. It was exactly what I know constitutes most of Gypsy theft: steal or starve. Besides, I never asked, but I don't believe that my Gypsy friends in their make-shift camp received cards for whatever meager rations like the rest of us. They always walked me home to make sure I was safe because the trip was through ruins infested with pedophiles and where dead children were found on a daily basis in the basements of burned out houses. But one day came, after their loved ones failed to return, my Roma friends decided to leave in search of them, still hoping, still believing.

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My own departure from Cologne and Germany took place soon after. My mother's siblings, all of whom had gone underground for the duration of the war, finally tracked us down. My mother was taken in by a sister and I was suddenly lifted from poverty into a life beyond the reach of most Gypsy people. I also found my time divided between Italy and the United States. After the age of twenty-one, free to do as I pleased, I started to bury the war while crisscrossing the world.

*It took another war to make me look back. I was thirty, happily married with a child, another on the way, a dog, a cat, a garden in Cambridge, Massachusetts., Young people around me broke out into the rage I knew so well. I watched them march to protest the misbegotten Vietnam War. I couldn't help but visualize young me, grown up in peace, suddenly being dropped onto the killing fields of a dirty war, such as the one in Vietnam. The time had come for me to turn back and face the war I kept buried deep within. What popped up at once were my Gypsy friends, like isolated images of peace in a tormented world. In order not to relive the rage, I decided to revisit the war, but seen through the eyes of a Russian Gypsy girl. I knew Russian Gypsies had fought alongside Russian partisans, because Russia was one of the few European countries that had treated its Gypsies for the most part fairly well.*

I realized at once that, although I'd known them, felt at home with them, I knew nothing of Roma culture. I started my research at Harvard's Widener Library; I had gone back to school. What I found in the stacks were a few articles in sociological journals, some novels written by non-Gypsies that either sounded like fairytales, or far removed from the people I had known, until I came across a novel by the Gypsy writer, Mateo Maximoff, "The Ursitory." I read the novel, and there were the people whose spirit I recognized. It was self-published and had a Parisian telephone number in back. I had lived in Paris, I called the number. A husky voice with a heavy accent answered. I introduced myself and told him right off what my intentions were. Relive the war, but seen through the eyes of a young Gypsy girl. Contrary to prejudice, honesty is vital among Gypsies and those they trust. A friendship started from then on. On my next trip to Europe, I went to meet him in person. His house was situated in a poor neighborhood of Paris. It was the size of a trailer, its walls lined with movie reels and books.

Maximoff was famous among Roma, both as a writer and one of the first pastors of the Romani Christian churches, but also because of his connections with persons high up in the French government. A small cemented courtyard in front of his house was enclosed by a high wire fence. Upon leaving, he closed the gate with several padlocks. The neighborhood looked mostly Algerian to me. "They steal around here," he said, as we walked toward a little Algerian café, his second home he told me. He led me straight to a table clearly reserved for him. The round table was placed against the wall directly across from the exit. "I can't help myself," he said, his eyes never leaving the one door leading in, "ever since the war." I knew all about the fear of getting caught. We talked about the war. He told me all about how he and his family tried to flee, but were caught and interned several times. I told him about the rage I still felt, whenever I thought about the war. "That's because you were allowed to express it," he said. "You didn't lose your freedom. In those camps, they squeezed the soul right out of us. Tried at least," he corrected himself.

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Wine and good food led us to lighter topics. We talked about the passion we shared for the love of writing, the reshaping of the past which was the greatest adventure and escape of all. As we walked back to his house, I asked him in parting, how Roma were faring at that very moment in France. It was 1997. He told me things were quiet. There was no unemployment among Gypsies of his tribe. They were working in hospitals, repairing metal containers of all types. Mateo was of the Kalderash tribe, metalworkers since ancient times. I told him that I hoped after all the suffering brought on by World War II, the world had learned a lesson, once and for all. "I hope you're right," he said, but his melancholy eyes meeting mine expressed his doubts.

Mercifully Mateo would not witness the violent outbreaks of renewed Gypsy persecution ten years later. I personally saw the first signs when during a subsequent visit to Paris, in fact the year Mateo died, and I witnessed a bell captain chase a Gypsy woman and her baby like an unwanted dog from the front of his hotel. Reactions were on the rise to the onslaught of Yugoslav Roma escaping yet another genocidal European war. Defenseless Roma were fleeing a war that was using them as human shields. Their hopes for a better life would soon be shattered.

I had read every little slip of research I could find on the life and culture of the Roma. More had been written by then; articles appeared on the web about the Gypsy people, who had arrived in Europe more than five hundred years before.

They were Europe's largest ethnic minority. Erroneously believed to originate from Egypt, they were actually from India, but called Gypsies, a name that was to brand them like a curse during centuries of persecution and increasing marginalization. It is for that reason that many modern Gypsies want to be known as Roma, their true name. By then I knew all about the invisible wall that divides Gypsy from non-Gypsy, Roma from *Gadje*.

Perceived as dirty, thieves, untrustworthy, liars, lazy - in reality theirs is a culture based on respect for life, family loyalty, honesty, self-reliance, and yes, hard work, but as a family enterprise, and not in the confinement of a nine-to-five job. Their abhorrence toward killings of any kind includes the killing of big animals, most of all the horse, which used to be considered sacred among many nomadic tribes. Above all their lives are ruled by strict and complex rules of cleanliness. By those rules non-Gypsies are considered ritually unclean and close contact with them is to be avoided. This constitutes their part in the creation and maintaining of this deep divide.

However, few people have tried to see European history from the Roma perspective: For hundreds of years, ever since leaving India, they have watched non-Gypsy societies enter wars over religion and/or territorial dispute. In the Middle Ages they witnessed outbreaks of plagues in densely populated villages and towns. From afar they watched the slaughter of horses for food, to a nomadic Gypsy the most heinous crime of all. They witnessed the hunting for pleasure of animals of the wild, creatures nomadic Gypsies considered equal sharers of their own space of life and nature. There had been times when they themselves became the hunted.

Then, of course, there were and still are those *Gadje* who under cover

of anonymity, usually not the happy well-adjusted ones, who approach them to have their fortunes told. Often they divulge the dark side of their own culture - those who have been molested as children, a crime beyond Gypsy imagination, family cruelty and neglect, crime and greed, and on and on. The Roma call it the "reading of good fortune" and their customers must find it soothing and comforting else Roma women would not have centuries of non-Gypsies returning for more.

*By now my general knowledge of the war had risen way above our own little enclave of fighting and sabotage. I knew about the masses of trained killers, the many cold and calculated schemes of effective mass murder. I have read the proofs, I will never truly comprehend, but what struck me as largely overlooked was the indifference of most of the rest, the absence of any real opposition. It made it impossible for me, when confronted with human rights' abuse, to look the other way. That and a growing recognition of my mother's unusual familiarity with the Gypsy way of life and the many additional encounters with Roma, of which I have only pointed out a few, drew me back into the path of their lives.*

At first I came across the more joyful sides of Gypsy life. I decided to attend the annual Gypsy pilgrimage in Saintes Maries-de-la-Mer in Southern France. Members of the Italian branch of my extended family, insisted they'd come along. We stayed in the one 'decent' inn at the time. It was within walking distance to the village of Sainte-Marie-de-la-Mer. France in those days gave permission for caravans, horse-drawn and motorized, to travel the open roads for the ancient event, when Roma on horseback accompany the cortege of Gypsies carrying Sarah la Kali, the black Gypsy saint into the sea. Those caravans now stood parked along one side of the road to the village. People from all over came to see them. And Gypsies from all over Europe averted their eyes when these well dressed Gadje came walking past them in sturdy walking shoes.

This in turn provoked the sarcastic remark from my Italian kin, "and how do you suppose you can possibly approach these people?" As an answer to them I walked to the other side of the road and started talking to a pony grazing on a tiny piece of grass fenced in by a simple string on metal posts. At once the *Rom*, one of the Gypsies who had averted his eyes without for a moment losing sight of us, approached me, asking in broken French, "what do you think you're doing?" To which, without taking my eyes off his horse, answered, "I am talking to your *gres*, your horse."

We struck up a conversation. He was from Holland. He traveled here once a year, he told me, had done so since the war. Unfortunately the place was changing, Gypsies were coming he'd never set eyes on before. With that he waved at his wife, and together we walked, ahead of my family-through-marriage, including my own open-minded husband, toward town. The little town square was swarming with Roma - women were reading palms, selling wares, smiling, gesticulating. Roma men were leading horses. Several Roma were entering the church by the square, from where the sounds of Gypsy music could be heard. We headed straight for a café, where I invited my newly met Roma friend whose name was Jon, to share a carafe of wine.

We sat down at a table, my family sheepishly following. At a table next to us, I noticed three Gypsy women. They were unusually heavy, eating pistachios and spitting out the shells. "What's with them," I asked Jon?

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He nodded and smiled, his eyes on my face. "Can you believe it, they're Muslims," he whispered, "we think from the Balkans. So instead of having one good and able wife, a contributor, like the rest of us *Roms*, he has three of them. So now he's the one out there hustling for a living. Plus," he lifted his glass, "no wine for him. As I said before, this place is changing."

However, on my trip to the Balkans several years later, I found no such multiple-wife families. I don't question people as to their religious beliefs, but spending time with several Roma Muslim families in the Balkans, I came away with the impression that for them it was probably a way to better blend into the majority population, a form of protection European Roma had to adopt in many host countries. Nonetheless, I found increasing levels of threat toward them. My friend Judith Latham, an American journalist, had organized our trip. We started out in Macedonia, where we stayed with a Roma family in the all Gypsy town of Shutka. Here the threat seemed no more than a shadow. Our Gypsy hostess pointed to an Albanian settlement in viewing distance from a soccer field, where her children participated in a game. She assured us that, so far, there was no interference and no problems. Children went to school feeling safe. She proudly walked us through the local school building. There was also no real food shortage, but jobs were hard to come by. It was when my friend, in her capacity as an American journalist, did not seem to be able to gain access to a nearby Roma refugee camp, that I started to wonder. A Roma leader, who very graciously escorted us around, came up with one excuse after another. Knowing the pride of most Roma, I felt this to be a sign of poor living conditions. Only later did we learn that, although the Albanians did not harass the long established Roma population in their own part of town, they threw rocks at the Kosovo Gypsies in their refugee camps, adding danger to already sub-standard living conditions.

*As soon as we approached the border to Kosovo I knew I had gone back in time. Even before we reached the border check point, the husband of our Shutka hostess told us, he hoped we didn't mind if he dropped us off in walking distance. We got out of his car and suitcase in hand continued on foot. The landscape ahead was hilly and green, but had the polluted look of the aftermath of a war. We passed by the border booth where we showed our papers. We stepped to the other side, and I felt I was right back at the Czech border of my childhood.*

Back then, American soldiers had helped us women and children and transported us on trucks whenever possible. They had given us kids our first candy ever. Now, in this place, NATO troops stood mulling about looking right past the people who were sitting on curbstones right in front of military barracks waiting to be picked up. Our expected ride, an American Roma activist by the name of Paul Polansky, who during the height of the Kosovo war had joined 466 refugees on their walk to safety, was nowhere to be seen. I suggested to Judith we turn right back, but she assured me he would show up, ultimately. I suggested that we at least put some distance between us and the grim border guards and walk to meet him. No sooner were we out of eye-sight of the border barracks, than a Jeep drove up and a side door swung open. Paul Polansky, looking a bit like Hemingway, leaned toward us, and said, "Hop in." We both squeezed in up front. As we drove off, two young men, clearly Gypsy, sat up. "Better safe than sorry," said Paul. This ducking for safety was repeated at every armed check-point we crossed. As a result our car was waved

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right through without the stop and search of many others.

We drove straight to a ramshackle little restaurant tucked between trees and bushes in the middle of a war-scarred nowhere. There, sitting at a table on a shaded porch, we were greeted by another young American activist, a woman. After the second bottle of white but warm wine, everybody relaxed, except the two Roma men, who Paul told us were interpreters. Their eyes remained restless, and they insisted on facing the dirt road that had brought us there. It did not take long for stories of horror to spill forth: arson attacks of Roma villages in the middle of the night by Albanian mobs, pursuing Gypsy families as they ran for their lives into forests where many were massacred execution style. "They even have new types of concentration camps," the American woman told us, "they force entire families, whole villages, to now live on lead polluted dumpsites. Nobody will ever get out of them their health intact. Some children die before they're born, others are born deformed, kids running around with bleeding gums. It's a death sentence. Whether they go, or whether they stay."

After the restaurant we visited the American woman's boyfriend, an American activist as well. He lay in a fly-infested make-shift clinic filled with hepatitis-infected patients. Strangely I personally did not come across a Gypsy with hepatitis. What I did come across for the first time in my life, however, was what it feels like to be in a tiny unarmed community surrounded by racial hate. Here we were, Judith and I, in the typically immaculately clean interior of a small Roma house, within the circle of typical warmth and love of a Gypsy family. The wife of one of the Roma interpreters had prepared a wonderful meal which I was sure came at a price of sacrifice for the rest of the month, so we tried to recompense in a polite way.



Meanwhile I had been forewarned by Judith of a severe outbreak of hepatitis and an old timer to war zones told me take along a flask of gin to brush my teeth and to drink white wine instead of water. I found it a near lethal solution. Even more precarious was a trip to the outhouse which was like crossing a potential ambush at night.

Sending the two children of our hosts to school was out of the question. There was no certainty they would return alive. We met and talked to quite a few of the Roma of the village in my pigeon Romani. They did not dare go beyond their village. I told them to stick together, unite with other villages as well. Elect a strong leader. I took the liberty of offering that same advice on the last leg of our travel to a group of young, educated, bright Roma activists and aspiring journalists in Budapest, Hungary.

"That is our weakest link," indicated a charismatic Roma woman. "We are splintered into too many tribal groups. We have to unify, leave tribalism behind, and speak with one voice. But then," she told me with a heavy sigh, "dealing with my people is a physically and emotionally draining activity."

*It left me wondering who would lead the Roma into a better future at last. Would a strong unifying leader emerge from the beleaguered Roma in Kosovo, or would he be one of these bright, educated Roma activists in Budapest? Instead,*



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*not more than five years later upsurges of racial hatred and persecution would come full circle in my lifetime. My friend Mateo Maximoff had been right to doubt that Europe would learn her lessons. Europe has never truly confronted and dealt with the dark side of her past. Racial hatred, a mediaeval part of European cultures, was merely forced underground, where it was allowed to fester, sporadically erupting in unexpected places.*

In 1956 in the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev promised an increase in freedom, while behind the scenes he brutally cracked down on Russia's last nomadic Gypsies. Even after the break-up of the Soviet Union, after the blanket of standardization was lifted off her satellite states, the old racial hatreds were there intact.

The stripping of layer after layer of the harmony and peace-loving freedom of the European Gypsies' once nomadic life started soon after they appeared on European soil. Ordered or lured with promises into sedentary lives, what they found was persecution, humiliation and marginalization. All over Europe most Gypsies live in the shadows in various stages of statelessness. They have no administrative existence; they have no protection. It leaves them to be used at whim as scapegoats by unscrupulous men in power. The combination of the establishment of the European Union, opening the gates for long suppressed Roma to seek opening opportunities in the more developed West, followed by a downturn in the economy, soon gave rise to neo-Nazi tides sweeping once again across Europe. Whether they stayed, or whether they left, once again arson mobs terrorize Gypsy neighborhoods in the former satellite States, and neo-Nazi thugs kill the fleeing whatever their age, whatever their number. In Italy bulldozers simply raze Gypsy shantytowns leaving destitute families with no place to go, and all against the indifference and silence of the media. Slovakia has built a wall to keep Roma out. In the Czech Republic the National Party calls for a "final solution of the Gypsy problem".

If this new Europe, turned multicultural through unification, wants to represent itself as a true democracy, a system of moral evolution, it cannot do so without fully integrating the more than ten million Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority, a people who have contributed and are part of European culture, a people who since their arrival have been denied the right to be different. For many who have been marginalized into abject poverty, pushed into petty crime for survival, this will entail a long and arduous effort on both sides. But the time has come to build the bridge that will at last unite all the different European cultures. I am optimistic. For, although there is once again much evil, much indifference, there are also more and more of those of us who care.

— **Sonia Meyer's** Novel "Doaha, flight of the Russian Gypsies" will be published in November 2010 by Wilderness House Press.

