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## **Roma: A Struggle for Reform**

### **Introduction**

“To where the Romani roads have been opened  
Now is the time – standup, Roma [...] (Jovanovic 1).

A Roma reform movement began in 1971 with the first World Romani Congress, held in London. A flag, motto, and anthem were established setting in motion a reform movement for Roma worldwide. This movement began a thirty year struggle to establish an accepted identity, bring justice for a historically feared, denounced, and persecuted people, as well as gain recognition as a nation. In order to succeed at reform, the Roma must apply the powers of the European Union to their cause, elect strong leaders, and acquire a positive media portrayal.

Gypsies are the Roma. Many names have been used to refer to these people, such as Cigano, Rom, Roma, Rroma, Tsigani, Tzigane, Ziguereen. Jennifer Tanaka of the Rromani Center in Bucharest states that, “[. . .] one may envision a dark-skinned group of people traveling in a band of wagons and playing music [. . .]” (1). The Roma are a forgotten people, and reform was undertaken to change their plight.

Scholars Acton, Kenrick, Fonseca, Hancock, and Fraser theorize that the Roma left their original homeland, India, during several grand migrating waves, diaspora. These waves of exploration started in the eleventh century when the Roma traveled from India across Iran and through Asia Minor. The second wave occurred in the fourteenth century, and by the sixteenth century the Roma had spread throughout the European continent, from Russia to Spain. The third wave, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was to the Americas.

Ian Hancock, Roma expert and professor at the University of Texas-Austin, writes, “Because they arrived in Europe from the East, they were thought by the first Europeans to be from Turkey or Nubia or Egypt, and they were called, among other things, Egyptians or Gyptians, which is where the word “Gypsy” comes from” (Brief 3). Today it is estimated that there 12,000,000 Roma worldwide on every continent, with the largest number in Europe, (particularly Eastern Europe).<sup>1</sup>

“Their history is one of sorrow and suffering.” (Patrin 1).

Scholars state that throughout history people have viewed the “Gypsy” as strange and alien. As nomadic, dark-skinned, non-Christian, spoke Romani, with no ties to the land, Roma were set apart from the host cultures. These “outsiders” were perceived as child stealers, cannibals, stateless wanderers, a threat to moral order, pariah, and a burden upon society, resulting in encounters of hatred, fear, and persecution. Spain, according to George Borrow, prohibited Romani dress, language and customs between 1499 and 1783 (2:1). In 1539 France expelled the Roma from Paris. In 1563 they were commanded to leave England under a death threat. In 1725 King Frederick William I of Prussia ordered Roma 18 years and older to be hanged. Gypsy hunting, similar to fox hunting, occurred in 1835 in Jutland (Denmark), and hunters brought in a bag of over 260 Romani men, women, and children. In Hungary and Romania, nobles used Roma as labourers and forced them into slavery, which did not end until 1855 (Religion 2).

In the twentieth century, the Roma faced persecution under Hitler’s Nazi Empire. Half a million or more Roma were killed in the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Hitler created a Racial Hygiene and Population Biology Research Unit which formulated plans for the separation of pure and mixed Ziguereen, the German word for gypsy.<sup>3</sup> During the Holocaust, Roma were subjected to slave

labor, sterilization, medical experimentation, or death at concentration camps, such as Dachau, Mauthausen, Ravensbruck, Auschwitz, and other camps. Ian Hancock relates:

Gypsies were beaten and clubbed to death, herded into the gas chambers and forced to dig their own graves and jump into them. [...] Children had their heads smashed by being swung by their feet against a wall. [...] Gypsies screaming through the night in anguish, waiting to be murdered (1).

Over 24,000 documents were drafted during the Hitler campaign to decide the fate of the Roma population. A Jewish survivor, Sigmund Strochlitz, laments the Gypsy camp terrors, “After a while it became clear that the Gypsy families were kept alive only to facilitate terrible gruesome medical experiments [...]” and they were eventually exterminated in the oven (Remembrance paper 11). After the experiments, Sigmund Strochlitz recalls that, “In the morning there was no more music, no more dancing, no more songs. Just stinking smoke in the air and total silence” (Remembrance paper 12). At war’s end between 70 to 80% of the Roma had been annihilated. But, silence did not remain as the voice of Roma reform grew stronger, from the experiences of the Porjamos, and would resonate approximately thirty years later.

### **Analysis/Interpretation: Opre Roma, “Roma Arise”**

Roma faced persecution gallantly for nearly a thousand years, and a reform movement would be born from perseverance, courage, and endurance. In 1971 the First World Congress, held in England, created a flag, motto, anthem, governing body, and laid the groundwork for future congresses.

The first Congress established four strategies: 1) standardization of the Romani language; 2) improvements in social aspects of life, including education, employment, housing, and health care; 3) demand for human rights approach, to guarantee protection against discrimination and

mistreatment; and 4) recognition of political status. With this birth of a Roma spirit, reform has been a dynamic but gradual process. Acton and Klimova state that reform stemmed from a small seed planted during this first Congress (7).

The language strategy was an essential element of unification. Gypsies have never kept written records as Romani was passed down orally. Speaking fifty to one hundred dialects identity would begin with the establishment of a Linguistic Commission for the standardization of Romani. The commission validated Romani as a form of Sanskrit and published a Multilingual Romani Dictionary and an alphabet which has enabled the language to be codified. In addition, a Romani encyclopedia was created, and Romani literature and Romani courses at universities, such as Nitra, Bucharest, Prague, University of Toronto, etc, were developed. Moreover, subsequent congresses would press for documents to be prepared in Romani as the common language.

By subsequent congresses, the words of Gypsy songs and fables were being transcribed, documents and literary works were being written in Romani, periodicals and a bi-annual Roma journal were being published, as well as a Yugoslavian grammar textbook. This concentration on language in written form is, “[...] a step towards unification and may lead to a deeper self-awareness among this people in search of itself” (Petrova The Roma 4). Language development and standardization has helped and continues to build a consistency. According to Jean Pierre Liegeois Roma can be viewed as a mosaic of ethnic fragments, but, nevertheless, these travelers or wanderers see themselves as one people and this first strategy, language unification, is targeted to create a sense of belonging, despite differences (13). Even the term “Roma” itself may be the most important factor of shared terminology, according to Ditte Lauritzen, who states that, “[...] the introduction of the term ‘Roma’ reflects an attempt to break away [...] and to

produce a more positive image of themselves as a single ethnic group occurring in different countries” (4). This has a parallel with the African American experience in North America and its struggle on deciding accepted identity, evolving from colored, to Negro, to black, to the now accepted African American terminology. Establishing a name and similar language unified Roma.

The second strategy aimed to eliminate or reduce the problematic aspects of Roma social and economic life. Dimitrina Petrova of the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) demonstrates the plight of the Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, using the authority of Human Rights Watch (HRW) statistics, showing Roma unemployment ranges from 40 to 100% (Roma rights 2). Deborah Harding of ERRC states that Roma challenges, “[...] include massive unemployment, state-sponsored discrimination, deep poverty, and pariah status. The majority are neglected, poorly educated, lacking in employable and organisational skills and with few experienced leaders” (2). She cites that in Romania, for example, Roma are forced into low paying jobs, causing 80% of Roma to live on less than \$4.30 per day in Bulgaria and Romania, while in Hungary 40% live below this level.

This vicious circle of despair stems from a lack of education and forces Roma into the role of marginal citizens. Education is a prominent problem plaguing the Roma community. Without education, Roma will never be able to end their struggle. Vojtech Lavicka, a student, reflects on his own Roma youth in the Czech Republic, “I am a Rom [...] and children at school called me “stinking Gypsy” and plugged their noses when I was around [...]” (1). This twenty year-old is optimistic and sees hope in the solidarity that is beginning among the victims as an important element of reform. Svetlana Vassileva, a school teacher in Bulgaria, remarks how, “Most bilingual children, which means most of the Roma, simply do not know enough Bulgarian to

participate. For a teacher the easiest solution is simply to get rid of such problem kids” (3). For example, in the Czech Republic 75% of Roma children attend schools for people with learning disabilities; in Hungary 44% are in special schools; and in Slovakia, they are 28 times more likely to be sent to a special school. In Serbia and Montenegro the Roma have the highest illiteracy rate, 34.8%. Education is the essential forum for moving forward. Without education the Roma will never be able to take charge of their lives. Linked with the language strategy, schools should incorporate Romani culture or aspects at least, as well as Romani history, in the curriculum. In turn, teachers should be trained in Roma origins, background, and history, in order to understand better who they are teaching. Finally, schools could begin instructing Romani as a second language (similar to the US efforts in ESL – English as a Second Language – program).

The Roma have a marginal position, socio-economically, in most European societies. Ironically, this common plight also adds to the sense of belonging together. Despite differences Roma have faced joblessness, housing issues, and educational discrimination. This commonality has moved reform forward toward the goal of improved social and economic conditions.

Strategy three aims to eradicate discrimination and mistreatment. Litigation, lobbying, and mass protests, mirroring the American Civil Rights Movement, have recently become the model for fighting human rights violations, with the ERRC paving the way. The HRW and the ERRC have investigated serious cases of mistreatment, abuse, and even murder. Thus, human rights are becoming another unifying factor in this Roma reform movement. In a case similar to the United States *Brown v. Board of Education*, twelve Romani students challenged the racial segregation and discrimination in the Czech Republic’s school system. Unlike *Brown*, the Court denied the children the right to equal education. In contrast, in 1995 Kiril Yosifov Yordanov, a Bulgarian

Rom, won a case paying him reparations for police brutality. Additionally, in Assenov v. Bulgaria, the European Court of Human Rights, an international court of law, rewarded Anton Assenov financially, as another victim of police brutality (Petrova, Roma rights 1). Legal means are fast becoming a new way to fight oppression. For example, a Hungarian court rewarded damages to a Rom for not being served in a pub (Petrova Roma rights 3). Similarly, blacks in America were refused service at restaurants, which was followed by sit-ins and legal action. Mass protests were becoming an acceptable Romani reform strategy. In Slovakia, a large protest brought shockwaves to that nation, as Roma marched and protested, demonstrating a new fire and willingness to unite in vocal support for reform measures. Litigation and action is a new strategy for a people who have remained silent for so long.

#### “Nation in the making”

Strategy Four was to win recognition of political status. Since 1971 and the creation of the RUI, over 70 Romani organizations in some 28 countries have become created. These diverse organizations reflect the growth of Romani political presence, with Romani councils, unions, societies, foundations, associations, bureaus exist world-wide. In 1979 the Council of Europe, and the U.N. agreed to recognize the Roma as a distinct ethnic group, and several years later accorded voting rights to the Romani Union.

A Declaration of the Roma Nation was set forth, and this document was sent to the Czech Republic, Italy, Yugoslav, Romania, Bulgaria, and Austria. In a letter to friends, RUI President Emil Scuka states, “It is a declaration of our will to convince world to consider us as equal nation with our culture, tradition, and self confidence” (1). Before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Paolo Pietrosanti of the International Romani Union, pleaded that, “The Roma Nation, made by individual citizens of dozens of states, needs and deserves adequate laws, which

not per chance, are the same that everyone needs and deserves in a deeply rapidly changing society” (Agenda 14). Pietrosanti also expressed that Roma ‘have a dream’ much like the political, concrete, realistic dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. The dream is not for a state or independence, but to be seen as humans who have suffered discrimination. In an interview with Jim Clancy, Paolo Pietrosanti stated that the political status needed was that of a nation, whose people share the same traditions, same origin, the same language, “the very same language” (2). Pietrosanti continued by saying that the Romani can live together with anyone, in any state, but they must have recognition and gain the human rights platform on which to survive. The Czech government recognized Romani nationhood. Slovenia, Finland, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania recognized the Roma as a national or ethnic minority. Russia established Roma as a culturally autonomous nation.

A nation is generally perceived as a territory. The Roma want to be a nation without a territory. The Roma live in different national contexts but see themselves as a distinct national identity. Nationally, they have a flag, motto, anthem, and governing body, with the IRU maintaining a president, parliament, court and a government with commissioners. Dimitrina Petrova in “The Roma: Between a Myth and the Future” states that the myth continues, “They have no state, no history, no army, no language, no religion, not ethnicity, and no spirit of solidarity” (13). But, this is just a myth, because Petrova sees this as a “[...] nation in the making” (13). But the Roma want acknowledgement of national status and a seat in the UN General Assembly and all rights that go with such a seat.

Scuka presented the Declaration of the Roma Nation to UN Secretary-General Annan. Scuka, “[...] described the Roma Nation as a colourful and optimistic people living all around the world, [...]” and pointed out that the Roma structure is similar to the structure of the United

Nations. From the meeting, Scuka declared he had the feeling that Mr. Annan was prepared not only to hear the voice of the Roma people but also to help them. This meeting represented the first occasion in which a UN Secretary General had met with the IRU to discuss recognition of a Romani nation (Press Conf 1).

**Argument/Evaluation: Reform strategies achieved; three more challenges await.**

The four strategies since 1971 have helped Roma gain power and find their voice. The Roma must create three further schemes to strengthen reform success. They must use the European Union to push the reform strategies, must elect and recruit leaders, and must gain a positive image in the media to support their efforts.

The European Union, (EU), an intergovernmental organization of 25 European countries, stretches from the Atlantic to the Aegean, from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Established in 1992 by Treaty, EU activities include public policy, including health, economics, foreign affairs and defense. The Council of the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Court of Justices are all subsets of the EU. The Copenhagen Criteria set the rules for membership, “Membership requires that the candidate country has achieved stability of institution guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities” (1). The Copenhagen Criteria is the levy on which Roma reform will hinge.

Petrova views EU as a powerful leverage for Roma future. Romania and Bulgaria are scheduled for membership but they must meet conditions, including helping the Roma. “The EU has also put in place a legal framework to prohibit discrimination against Roma and other ethnic minorities. The EU Directive requires current and future member states to put in place detailed rule discrimination, (European Commission). George Soros, a Holocaust survivor states,

“During the Holocaust, few spoke up in defense of Jews. Even fewer spoke up on behalf of the Roma. With Roma continuing to suffer in an ever-expanding and ever-richer E.U., let us not be silent today” (Forward 2). Thus, the European Union can serve as a mechanism for Roma rights, regulations and reform.

Historically, Romani leaders have been the elders in the communities. Until recently, younger and more educated Roma have stepped into the role as leaders for a brighter future. According to Andrzej Mirga, The Project on Ethnic Relations is aiding in identifying and preparing a Romani elite for leadership. This new leadership must come to terms with the struggle between tradition and modernization, which means, “[...] to define, preserve, or restore their minority cultures while enjoying access to the benefits and protection that come from participation in the larger economy and society [...]” (8). In addition, Mirga states that these leaders need to know, “[...] how to defend themselves against discrimination and exclusion while honoring their separate self-identify” (Roma in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century 9). According to the National Democratic Institute, the leaders would be trained in developing realistic goals, political campaigns and platform, regarding the Roma population but also appealing as well to non-Roma society (15). NDI recommends, “[...] that training include basic governance, legislative process budgeting policy, and resource implications of European integration, public-private economic development partnerships, negotiation, and consistency relations” (1). Scuka and Pietrosanti are examples of the new elite. These new, young elite are being asked to represent, debate, and negotiate on behalf of all Roma.<sup>4</sup>

The third challenge lies with the media. The media must start focusing on positive angles, not the negative images of the Roma that are reinforcing stereotypes. For example, the media must focus on Romani contributions to society. There are historical

references to musicians holding royalty enthralled by musical renditions. From locality to locality, Roma absorbed the music of the people and then blended it with the music of the next country they occupied, giving it a unique and new feeling. The Jewish Policy Report supports this need for a media that emphasizes Roma achievement by reminding us that:

Romany instrumental music, song and dance became popular from Spain to Hungary. Leading Rom musicians entertained aristocrats in Hungary and Russia, a few even marrying into the aristocracy. Numerous non-Roma composers Liszt, Bizet, Brahms, Rachmaninov, and Bartok were inspired by Roma music. Artists frequently painted and romanticized portraits of Roma (Brearley 14).

In addition, Goethe was one of the first to characterize Romani chief as a noble savage, while Sir Walter Scott in his literary works romanticized Gypsies. Well known modern entertainers have claimed Romani ancestry, including actors Yul Brynner, Rita Hayworth, Michael Caine, Bob Hoskins, and comedian Charlie Chaplin (Culture 1). Thus, the Roma traveled through lands, leaving valuable pieces and absorbing additional value, for which the world must allow recognition.

The media must also analyze language, where negative connotations appear. The use of “gyp” refers negatively “to cheat” and references the Roma as the noun form “gypper.” The gypsy cab reference is to a cab without a license, again hurting the image of the Roma. The gypsy moth, an insect, is defined as a parasite, referring again to the negative image labeled on these travelers (Wesolowsky 12). Paraphrasing Tony Gatlif, the Gypsies cast a complex spell over the imagination, and the world romanticizes and demonizes them in the same breath (Bucking 2).

Media changes, though, are occurring. In Hungary it is becoming more common to see a Romani writer in the daily paper and now there is even an FM program on the radio run by and for Roma. Moreover, Roma journalists have started to appear on television, while in Slovakia five Romani newspapers have appeared (Goldston 3).

The Gypsy is a real, breathing and emerging person. Media must help to promote positive images because the public view is influenced by what they see in the news. As Gandhi stated Roma integrated themselves into the societies where they lived and were and are assets to the countries to which they belonged, adding color, spontaneity and zest for life (1). Diane Tong, Gypsitologist, wrote, “Gypsies are often devalued as people at the same time their arts are valued and imitated world wide” (15). The media of the world must recognize and acknowledge Roma contributions made.

**Conclusion: “It is the Romani movement ...**

**that can lead the Roma out of the Gypsy myth, and offer them future.”**

A better tomorrow for Roma will come with legal efforts by Roma national and international organizations (RUI, HRW and ERRC,), to provide legal protection and human rights. The EU must also help Roma to gain equal footing with their Gaje counterparts. Elite leaders must be trained to tackle the issues, including education, and employment. Media also needs to change its angle and portrayal of Roma. Moreover, UN recognizes Roma as a nation but a seat in the General Assembly would allow the Roma a voice in world issues.

The Gypsy is a real, breathing and emerging person. Jan Yoor’s writes that “The Gypsies [. . .] live in an everlasting Now [. . .] in constant motion, like the waving of branches or the flowing of water [. . .]” (5). Roma are beginning to leave the Now and head towards the future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Because of the nomadic nature of the people, the population estimations vary:

12 million as cited in “Religion and Culture of the Roma”

20 million as cited in Christian Science Monitor, for Europe only

12-15 million as cited in Roma News Network

The reason for the Diaspora of the Roma is one of the great mysteries of history. It has been proposed by some scholars that the Roma were originally low caste Hindus recruited into an army of mercenaries whereupon they were granted warrior caste status and sent westward to resist Islamic military expansion. Another theory is that they were captives taken as slaves by Muslim conquerors of northern India and that they became a distinct community in the lands of captivity. Why the Roma did not return to India, choosing instead to travel every-farther west into the lands of Europe is an enigma but may relate to military service under the Muslims.

<sup>2</sup>Called Porjamos, the Devouring, by the Gypsy/Roma. Some scholars believe 1.5 million is a more accurate death count, but lack of documentation on names transported and killed allows for the lower figures. For every Roma who lived, five Roma died in the Porjamos.

<sup>3</sup>Initially, the Roma were not seen as threat; Nazi racial ideology recognized Roma as Aryan. Based on the works of Professor Hans Gunther, who professed that due to all the traveling the Roma had become polluted with inferior cultural blood, the Aryan idea proved to be a fallacy because how could they now be part of the “super race.”

<sup>4</sup>EU – leaders: Livia Jaroka became the first Roma Member of the European Parliament, following the country’s accession to the European Union. Irish Charles Smith became the first Essex mayor of Roma descent, followed by the first Roma MEP, Juan de Dios Ramirez-Heredia, of Spain.

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