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# Unraveling the "Gypsy Question": The Tale of the Romanian Roma and Solutions to Romani Integration

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Unraveling the “Gypsy Question”:  
The Tale of the Romanian Roma and Solutions to Romani Integration  
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### Abstract

The Roma are a misunderstood and often controversial minority in Europe and across the globe, even their name is a source of dispute; e.g., “Roma” versus “Gypsy.” Although difficult, Romani integration into Romanian society is possible; however, this integration requires an informed approach in policy and public attitude. Often times, local governmental focus centers not on what can be done *for* the Roma, but what can be done *about* them. This approach lacks understanding, although its sentiment is the basis of the “Gypsy Question,” both in Romania and in Europe. Integration of the Roma, at its foundation, requires an understanding of (a) who the Roma are, including correct terminology when referring to the Romani people; (b) from where the Roma originate and their subsequent treatment since arriving in Europe; and (c) why previous integration policies have failed and what solutions exist to overcome barriers to integration. As policy makers move forward from this groundwork, the Roma may finally find a home in Europe and Romania.

*Keywords:* Roma, Romania, Romani history, Gypsy

*Racist beliefs allow the majority to justify practices that keep Roma out, and to deny responsibility for their results. Racism is a tool in the fight for wealth and privilege. Racists have used it well enough over generations to have effectively turned Roma into something less than full citizens of the countries in which they live.*

The European Roma Rights Centre

As a missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, serving in Romania, I was able to live around and associate with the Roma. Through my experiences, I have found that many people are misunderstood and simply do not have a voice. One of these people is the Roma. They are seen as problems, victims, and sometimes treated as less than human. Certainly, this situation is pitiful, yet it need not remain this way.

I believe that through scholarship and seeking to understand this group through their culture, history, and experiences, we may cultivate a better way through which the Roma may both have a voice and unite their voice with our own in promoting justice, equality, and acceptance across the globe. I dedicate this paper to my Romani friends and acquaintances, honoring them for their dedicated, daily efforts to rise above intolerance and racism.

### Unraveling the “Gypsy Question”

#### The Tale of the Romanian Roma and Solutions to Romani Integration

Amin Maalouf, a French author, in his book *On Identity* lamented, “...we lump ... people together under the same heading, taking the path of least resistance ... ascrib[ing] to them collective crimes, collective acts and opinions. We blithely express sweeping judgments on whole peoples, calling them ... ‘lazy’, ‘touchy’, ‘sly’, ‘proud’, or ‘obstinate’.” Those people who are least understood often suffer this treatment most frequently, and the Roma – as known more commonly, although incorrectly, as “Gypsies” – are no exception. Through the centuries, the story of the Roma has evolved from nomadism, to sobering enslavement, to genocide and oppression in WWII, and to an ostracized minority in the twentieth-century. Regrettably, many still consider the Roma as problems and treat some as less than human; however, overcoming these prejudices is possible.

Roma acceptance and eventual integration into society requires a fair understanding of their story and history. Their integration must not come under terms of assimilation and loss of identity, rather through understanding and acceptance. Understanding requires a scholarly approach based in (a) appropriate terminology regarding the Roma, (b) the Romanian Roma’s history, and (c) current considerations for Roma integration.

#### **Naming the Roma**

To understand the Roma, one must recognize their various names, which are a major consideration and debate of Romani scholarship. Various cultures and people use different terms or definitions for the Roma. In English, the two most common names are “Roma” and “Gypsy.” “Roma” is widely considered the proper and politically correct term, whose use is pushed and celebrated by scholars (Gay y Blasco, 2002). However, the term “Roma” should not be confused with the name of the country Romania (România) or its people, Romanians (Români), whose

names are a derivative of the Latin adjective *Romanus*, relating to the Romans (DEX, 1998). The term “Roma,” on the other hand, derives from Proto-Indo-Aryan languages.

The term “Gypsy” tends to be the term most widely used in common vernacular. The term “Gypsy,” however, tends to reflect only a stereotype. For example, in *The Economist* article “Europe’s Spectral Nation,” published May 10, 2001, “Gypsy” is used to mean the, “dark-skinned Romany-speaking nomads of Hindu origin.” Unfortunately, this definition glances over the fact that not all Roma are dark-skinned, nor do all Roma speak Romany. Furthermore, although both “Roma” and “Gypsy” are the most common terms in English, many other names also exist. For example, in England, “pikeys” and “travelers” are also used (Bancroft, 2005).

The Roma live in many nations across the globe; therefore, additional terms exist, reflecting the various regions. Often times, these other terms carry similar stigmas as the English term “Gypsy” (Gay y Blasco, 2002). In Europe the predominant term is “tsygane,” which differs only slightly in form from language to language; e.g., its German form “Zigeuner,” the Hungarian “Cigany,” the French “tsigane,” or the Romanian “țigan.” These terms come from the Greek word “atsinganoi” – a derivation from the name of a heretic sect to which the Roma might have been likened, further implying a sense of ostracism. Especially in Eastern Europe, “tsygane” has a very strong derogatory meaning compared to the English term “Gypsy” (Lemon, 2002).

The term Roma, on the other hand, does not carry the same stigma as “Gypsy” or “tsygane,” and for this reason, the term Roma is preferable. Nicolae Gheorghe, a Romanian sociologist, belonging to the Roma community, along with Jean-Pierre Liegeois, former director of the Gypsy Research Center at Rene Descartes University, Paris, (1995) explain what the word Roma may signify:

A broad term used in various ways, to signify: (a) Those ethnic groups (e.g., Kalderash, Lovari etc.) who speak the “Vlach”, “Xoraxane” or “Rom” varieties of the Romani language. (b) Any person identified by others as “Tsigane” in Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey, plus those outside the region of East European extraction. (c) Romani people in general.

Therefore, the term “Roma” rests in contemporary ethnic and racial constructions, without overreaching or furthering established stereotypes.

### **Roma History**

A knowledge of the history of the Romani people is essential to facilitate and foster understanding of the Roma. Romani history provides the context from which their culture is derived, and it suggests as to how or why the Roma react to past and current integration programs or policies. The history of the Romanian Roma of most relevance to this topic focuses on four key periods: (a) the origins of the Roma, (b) the Romanian Roma’s slavery and liberation, (c) the oppression and treatment of the Romanian Roma during WWII, and (d) the Roma in Communist and post-Communist Romania.

### **Roma Origins**

Uncovering the truth about the Roma’s origins is difficult, as it is with many migratory people. The Roma’s history is not a record penned by their own hands, but rather one written by non-Roma writers and historians. This situation may give way to certain prejudices regarding the Roma; therefore, the retelling of the Roma story requires care and discretion, seeking truth between legend, myth, and existing recorded histories.

**The Roma Migration from India.** Scholars and academics studying the Roma generally agree as to the place of origin of the Roma, yet many theories exist as to how the Roma

migrated into Romania and the rest of Europe. Romani scholars identify the origin of the Roma and their migration as Northern India, most notably the regions of Punjab and Rajasthan (Brearley 2001, 588-99). Linguistic studies have confirmed this assertion (Vaux de Foletier, 1984). Beyond this identification, however, there are many conflicting theories. The largest determinant to knowing the most correct migration story stems from the lack of documentation of this period – referred to by many scholars as the “prehistory of the Gypsies.” Historian François de Vaux de Foletier asserts, “writers of ancient India were only interested in gods and kings, and paid scant attention to the people known as the... Dombari” (1984). The Dombari, being the group considered the proto-Roma, or ancestors of all Roma populations (Sampson, 1923, 156).

Romani heritage lies hidden in their mixed migration story. Donald Kenrick, an author and esteemed scholar of Romani studies, suggests that the Roma did not all leave the regions of Northern India together, nor at one time. Kenrick believes that they integrated into the Persian Empire, having intermarried and intermingled, and evolving into a group called Dom, which later evolved into the Roma appearing in Romania and other parts of Europe (2004).

On the other hand, not all scholars see a clear connection between the Roma and Dom. Ian Hancock, Romani scholar and director of the Program of Romani Studies and the Romani Archives and Documentation Center at The University of Texas at Austin, critiques Kenrick’s assumption, theorizing that the Dom left India much earlier than the Romani people, and that the latter left no earlier than A.D. 1000 (2000, 1-7). This assertion points to the idea that the Romani and Dom both originate from the Dombari, yet had a definitive split, contrary to Kenrick’s assertion.



Additionally, Hancock clarifies this distinction between the Dom and Roma, citing errors in other works. For example, he claims that the Indian musicians mentioned in the Shah-Nameh and the atsingani mentioned in *The Life of St. George the Anchorite*, both of which were previously believed to be ancestors of the Romani people, may have been the ancestors of the Dom but not those of the Romani people (2000, 8-13).

Although historians may disagree on exactly who are the ancestors of the Romani people, their migratory path is clearer. For example, linguistic studies show in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the group’s migratory path took them through Egypt, wherein the term “Gypsy” was coined as a derivation from “Egyptians” (Bancroft, 2005). Hancock details that the Roma migrating from the Indian regions of Punjab and Rajasthan moved through the Persian Empire, Northern Africa (Egypt), the Byzantine Empire, and finally to Eastern and Western Europe (2000). In *The Economist*, the article “Europe’s Spectral Nation,” quotes Hancock explaining,

... The latest research indicates that the original [Roma] were a mix of Indian ethnic groups assembled in the early 11th century as a military force to resist Islamic incursions. Romany developed in India as a military lingua franca with heavy Persian influences, as did Urdu; the Romany word for a non-[Roma], gadje, is derived from the Hindi word gajjha, meaning civilian. The first record of [Roma] in the west is in Constantinople in 1054; their first appearance in Europe proper came as military attachments to Ottoman armies.

**Roma Arrival in Romania.** Estimates of the dates of the arrival of the Roma in Europe differ from scholar to scholar. A Romanian author, Konrad Bercovici, claims that the Roma, “were already on the banks of the Danube when the Roman legions appeared,” although this previous assertion may be more hyperbole than truth (1928). Hancock, in his work *The Pariah*

*Syndrome*, suggests that according to papers in the archives of a monastery in Tismana, Oltenia, bearing the date 1387 and signed by Mircea the Great, the Roma had been in Wallachia for almost a century (1987, 42). Perhaps more concretely, Romanian scholar Bogdan Petreiceicu Haêdeu indicated that the Roma were in the Balkans, and had started to be enslaved, some time prior to A.D. 1300, and research conducted by George Soulis, former professor of history at University of California, Berkeley, appears to confirm this assertion (Soulis, 1961, 142-165).

**Roma Diaspora.** Moving beyond the confines of the migration from India, other historians and scholars have turned to science to determine the migration of the Roma and their subsequent spread throughout Europe and the world. Radu Ioviță, faculty member and research fellow at the RGZM Archaeological Research Institute in Germany, and Theodore Shurr, professor of anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, describe more recent migration flows than those proposed by Kenrick or Hancock. They argue, “molecular genetic studies ... unambiguously support ... historical data for three major recent migrations of [the Roma] in Europe” (2004, 267). They provide considerable evidence to support three major migrations: (a) Initial migrations into North / West Europe, (b) 17th-18th century expansions from Moldova, Wallachia, and Hungary, and (c) 19th-early 20th century exodus from the southern part of present-day Romania (the Romanian Old Kingdom) following the abolition of slavery (275-278).

By the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, all European countries were home to Roma communities (Vaux de Foletier, 1984). Although historical writing is not consistent on this matter, documents describe Romani communities living in Romania as far back as the 11<sup>th</sup> century and others only to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (“Romii din România”). More recently, the Roma have traveled settled in other continents, as well. Roma minorities today live in Europe, Asia, North America (most prominently Canada and the United States of America), South America,

and Australia (“Multi-Ethnic States and the Protection of Minority Rights”). These last migrations illustrate how the “Gypsy Question” became both a European and global phenomenon.

### **Roma Slavery and Liberation**

Upon their arrival in Europe, the Roma were not slaves; however, political and economic circumstances quickly pushed the Roma into servitude and slavery. Opposed to the idea that slavery was an inherent condition of the Roma, Nicolae Gheorghe postulated that that part of the Romani population migrated into Europe through the Caucasus and Crimea, turning south into the Balkans (1983). He further believes that Roma were allowed to move freely and work unmolested for a century or more before social and economic factors drew them into a situation of enslavement (1983). Rather than assume all Roma were slaves upon arrival, greater understanding comes from historical factors facing Europe, preceding the Roma’s arrival, which contributed to their enslavement.

**Economic and Historical Considerations of Europe.** At the beginning of the Middle Ages, Europe began to face a crisis. Islamic encroachment on the Byzantine Empire closed many lucrative trade routes with the Orient and religious fervor contributed to the start of the Crusades, a series of holy wars, lasting from A.D. 1099 to A. D. 1212. During the Crusades, “constant military traffic through southern Europe, and the prosperity that feeding and equipping an army brings to a society in time of war, [allowed] the Balkans [to flourish], while Western Europe entered a period of slow decline” (Hancock, 1987, 43). Balkan trade prospered because the flow of soldiers made the trade routes safer; however, due to the losses of war, there was a gradual depletion of the work force throughout southeastern Europe, including the Balkans. For example,

the peasantry moved up in the social system to become the new middle class in Moldova, Transylvania and Wallachia (Panaitescu, 1941).

Despite initial benefits from the preparations of war, the long-term effects caused major economic hardship for Europe. The closing-off of the trade routes and the continuing necessity of feeding the soldiers and population began to strain the economy. Eventually, the establishment of a large, unpaid labor force to produce food and goods more cheaply was not only necessary, but also slowly becoming a reality. Hancock concludes, “The reasons for the institution of slavery in the Balkans were economic as much as anything else” (1987, 41). At first, the virtual absence of a working class made the Roma and their skills (e.g., smelting and the manufacture of firearms and shot) very welcome in Europe; however, their usefulness soon became a curse. Measures were soon taken to keep the Roma in southern Europe by force, so necessary had they become to the economy (1987, 43). The Roma, explained Hancock, “were quickly incorporated, by legislation and by force, into the system which came totally to rely upon them during the five centuries which followed” (1987, 44).

**Roma Enslavement in Romania.** The Roma enslavement in Romania reflected the economic and political realities of Europe at the time. The Centre for Documentation and Information about Minorities in South-East Europe compiled a survey of historical records, explaining Romani slavery in the Romanian Principalities from different perspectives. Some historians explain their enslavement as something inherent to their supposed *pariah status* in Northern India (Hancock, 1987, 29). Other historians see slavery as something done from necessity; e.g., authors describe Roma having to sell themselves as slaves in order to pay debts (“Romii din România”).

Nicolae Gheorghe suggests that groups, “arriving in an agrarian Romanian society, struggling to subsist following the devastation of the Crusades and migrations of earlier centuries, brought technological tools and skills that were needed in the Medieval Romanian Principalities” (1983, 20). Essentially, enslavement became a solution for Romanian landowners (i.e., aristocracy and monasteries) to safeguard the technological advancements that the Roma introduced (1983, 20). Kenrick adds that the Roma settling on vacant land as peasants became the serfs of the landowners, nobles or monasteries (2004, 48). Gradually, laws and regulations were created to support the existing system of oppression.

Upon conquering the Southern and Eastern Romanian Principalities of Walachia and Moldova by the Ottoman Empire, the number of Roma slaves increased. During this time, Roma were categorized in groups based on their skills. For example, Roma serving in homes were differentiated from Roma working the land, or those serving the nobility in court, or even spoon fashioning denominations that are still associated with Romani tribes today. This categorization is comparable to the American system of slavery forced upon Africans (“Romii din România,” 49).

Further, the American treatment of African slaves is comparable to conditions faced by Romanian Roma. For example, enslavement included a system of treatment and punishments that were worse than for lower class Romanian serfs (Kenrick, 2004, 48). Romanian Roma were beaten or killed for a variety of reasons: theft, running away, and rape. Additionally, someone marrying a Roma slave was liable to become a slave as well (“Romii din România,” 49).

The Roma in the Western Principality of Transylvania, which had been under Austro-Hungarian rule since the 11th century, faced comparable discrimination. They faced great disadvantages, as Romani slaves could not speak the language of their owners. Furthermore, the

Roma were prohibited from wearing their traditional attire, practicing any form of nomadism, or even call themselves “Roma.” Social discrimination mounted to such a degree, that Roma were accused of cannibalism and vampirism (“Romii din România,” 49).

**Roma Emancipation.** As modern concepts of nation and national identity surfaced, slavery became condemnable and disappeared in most of Europe by the 13th century (“Romii din România”). Under influence from western European nations, nations in the Balkans, such as Romania, began to develop a conscience about slavery, especially considering their increasing economic reliance upon the West. Mihail Kogălniceanu stirred public conscience with his firsthand descriptions of what he had seen as a boy growing up in Wallachia:

On the streets of the [Iasi] of my youth, I saw human beings wearing chains on their arms and legs, others with iron clamps around their foreheads, and still others with metal collars about their necks. Cruel beatings, and other punishments such as starvation, being hung over smoking fires, solitary imprisonment and being thrown naked into the snow or the frozen rivers, such was the fate of the wretched Gypsy. The sacred institution of the family was likewise made a mockery: women were wrested from their men, and daughters from their parents. Children were torn from the breasts of those who brought them into this world, separated from their mothers and fathers and from each other, and sold to different buyers from the four corners of [Romania], like cattle. Neither humanity nor religious sentiment, nor even civil law, offered protection for these beings. It was a terrible sight, and one, which cried out to Heaven (1837:16-17).

Although they had once influenced the introduction of slavery, the new political and economic conditions of Europe led to the emancipation of the Romanian Roma.

In the territory of modern-day Romania, Romani enslavement ended in Transylvania by the 14th century. Kenrick attributes this change to the sufficient serf work force, which alleviated the need for Roma slaves (2004). In the other two Principalities, the 19th century liberation movements led to the formation of Romania in 1857 (by uniting Walachia and Moldova), which also prompted public debates about citizen rights. Jean Alexandre Vaillant, a political activist and supporter of abolition, captured the plight of the Roma, declaring that those who

...shed tears of compassion for the Negroes of Africa, of whom the American Republic makes its slaves, should give a kind thought to this short history of the Gypsies of India, of whom the European monarchies make their Negroes. These men, wanderers from Asia, will never again be itinerant; these slaves shall be free (1857:7).

Starting with the groundbreaking acts of Moldovan slave owners that freed their Romani slaves around 1842, Roma enslavement officially ended in 1864 (“Romii din România.”).

Although the Roma were freed, their conditions did not immediately change. In *The Economist* article “Europe’s Spectral Nation,” it was noted that 600,000 Roma were allowed to continue to live where they previously had been enslaved and worked; however, they were not allocated land (2010). The Roma resorted to making a living in modest ways; e.g., selling glass bottles, fortune-telling, or further developing wood and metal manufacturing skills (Grauer, 1934, 108).

### **Oppression of the Roma: World War II**

During the Second World War, the Roma received harsh treatment across Europe. Hitler included the Roma in his list of undesirable peoples, whom he sought to eradicate. Under the government of Marshal Antonescu, the Roma of Romania faced similar persecution and

oppression, including the deportation of more than 30,000 Romanian Roma; however, this behavior is surprising compared to the treatment of the Roma in Romania preceding the war.

**The Roma Before World War II.** Significant economic growth accompanied the Romanian economy between the two World Wars. The Centre for Documentation and Information about Minorities in South-East Europe suggests that, in the years following the First World War, the Roma community in Romania organized and attempted political and social lobbying. The first Roma organization, *Asociația Generală a Romilor din România* (The General Association of Romanian Roma), was founded in 1933, followed by Roma newspapers – the first of which were *Neamul Țigănesc* (The Gypsy People), *Glasul Romilor* (The Voice of the Roma), and *O Rom* – and other organizations working for equal rights. The World Roma Congress was held in 1933, with partial support of the *Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România* (The General Union of Roma in Romania) (Achim, 1997). Records show that most Romani groups had integrated into Romanian society and communities by 1940 (Păun, 155).

**Persecution of the Roma in the Second World War.** Despite the progress achieved preceding the Second World War, the rise of a Fascist regime in Romania created a bleak future for the Roma. Heavily influenced by Romania’s political alliance with Nazi Germany, the Romanian Fascist regime, led by Marshal Ion Antonescu, pursued an anti-Roma policy. It was during this time that the concept of the “Gypsy Question” appeared in Romanian political discourse (Achim, 1998). In the context of a collapsing economy and territorial losses to the Soviets in 1940, nationalism started to overlap with xenophobia. Any non-Romanians were persecuted, in an effort to “Romanianize” the country (Achim, 1998).

Persecution of the Roma spread across Europe like wildfire. The Roma and those assessed to be part-Roma became the target of “sterilization, deportation and murder,” as well as



medical and genetic experiments, resulting in the killing of 500,000-1,500,000 European Roma (Vaux de Foletier, 1984; Clark, 1998, 40). Moreover, some historians recognize that local police units massacred many Roma without taking them to concentration camps. Significantly, the Nuremberg Trials – meant to prosecute the political, military, and economic leadership during the Nazi regime – did not include witnesses on behalf of the Roma, nor were the Roma paid war crimes reparations (Puxon, 1972, 130).

**Romani Deportation to Transnistria.** In Romania, Antonescu’s anti-Roma policies sought to remove the Roma from Romania, thereby solving the “Gypsy Question.” One portion of this policy focused on the deportation of more than 30,000 Roma to Transnistrian concentration camps, located on the territory of the current Republic of Moldova (Belton, 2005). Antonescu’s government defended his policy by applying Aryan ideology and considered it necessary to comply with the political alliance with Nazi Germany. The government rationalized the measures by conducting a survey to locate and register “problem [Roma],” eventually leading to their deportation:

The survey encompassed non-settled [Roma] and, among settled ones, those with a criminal record, recidivists, those who made a living out of theft, and those with no visible means of support. In all, 40,909, including the above categories and their families, were blacklisted. This represented 20 percent of the 208,700 [Roma] living within Romania’s 1942 boundaries—as estimated by the Central Institute of Statistics. (Achim, 2007, 89-90).

The government’s decision to deport the Roma appears to derive from the government’s ethnic policy, or more specifically, from its project of homogenizing the population in ethnic terms (Ionescu, 2003). On the other hand, although the supposed benefits of the deportation

remain a mystery, the outcome is not. Many of the thousands of Roma deported by the Antonescu government to the Soviet territories beyond the Dniester River were killed or died of hunger, cold or disease (Achim, 1997, 56).

Deportation met with some approval from the populace. In areas where animosity existed between locals and Romani residences, support for Antonescu’s policies surfaced. One such example comes from Captain N. Dogaru, a retired officer from Târgu Jiu, who demanded the Roma be removed and colonized; i.e., deported to Transnistria (Achim 2007, 93). Captain Dogaru penned a letter in support of the deportation:

We think the government’s colonization measures are a good opportunity and that the Gypsies in Târgu Jiu should be among the first to go. Alternatively, the municipality of Târgu Jiu and the Prefecture of Gorj County could find a commune in our county, round them up from the entire territory of the county, and colonize them there, turn them into a village where they can be put to work under stern supervision and control (ANIC, 1942, 203).

In this case, animosity toward the Roma perpetuated Antonescu’s policy.

**Opposition to Romani Deportation.** The official Romanian explanation for deportation contended only the criminal, problematic, or unsettled Roma faced deported. The government argued that through their deportation Romania should be a more productive and better country and nation, having been saved from a pervasive threat; however, “most Romanians did not support the government’s policy toward the [Roma] during World War II” (Achim, 2007, 97). Opposition and concern regarding the Romani deportation stemmed from two groups: (a) politicians and cultural figures, and (b) common Romanians; i.e., Romanians living in the country or in villages.

The opposition from politicians to Antonescu’s measures is understandable and predictable. Viorel Achim, Senior Researcher at the Nicolae Iorga Institute of History, Bucharest, Romania, identifies that politicians protesting against deportation, “did so for moral reasons—repelled by the cruelty of the treatment—but also mainly out of concern about the consequences this policy might have on interethnic relations at home and on Romania’s international status” (2007, 92). One noted politician who voiced concern was Constantin I. C. Brătianu, leader of the National Liberal Party (Ancel, 1985, 225). Beyond his objections on moral grounds, Brătianu identified the harsh and negative effect that deportation would cause the Romanian economy.

Many Romanian citizens echoed Brătianu’s concern that Romani deportation would negatively affect the economy. The Roma arrived in Europe and Romania, offering many unique skills; e.g., metal working or carpentry (Hancock 1987, 41; Grauer, 1934, 108). Their skills helped make the Roma an integral part of Romanian communities, villages, and the domestic economy as a whole; therefore, their absence would be significant and undesirable. For example, a group of villagers from Popoveni, Balta Verde commune, Dolj County petitioned to Antonescu that a Romani blacksmith not be deported, citing his importance to their community:

We badly need him in this town, for he is a hardworking, efficient blacksmith, and he’s the one we go and see when we need to fix anything in our vehicles, build new structures, shoe our oxen and horses, repair our plows and harrows— in short, anything that has to do with iron working. Not to mention that he is also skilled at wheeling, carpentry, etc. (ANIC, 1942, 65).

Communities across Romania made similar petitions to Antonescu and government officials. Often times, they defended local Roma for their status as members of their rural or urban

communities, noting that they led normal lives and made no trouble, but rather that their economic role was vital in the respective communities (Achim, 2007, 98). Although the Roma faced persecution during the Second World War, this persecution was not universally accepted or supported.

### **The Roma in Communist and Post-Communist Romania.**

The close of the Second World War ended a dark chapter of European and world history, yet the situation of the Roma did not immediately improve. Romania soon came under the power of a new Communist government, which did not look favorable upon the Roma. The Communist dictatorship sanctioned social segregation by controlling all aspects of Roma life, including Roma organizations and collectivities. Erika Schlager, counsel for the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, documents there was “segregation in housing and employment; repression of the Romani language and repression or manipulation of Romani cultural organizations; confiscation of private property including horses and wagons; and . . . child abduction and forced sterilization” (2001, 226).

The Communist regime sought to assimilate the Roma into mainstream society. Communist oppression followed a systematic process of ignoring Romani culture and identity by forcing it in a non-“Gypsy” mold (“Romii din România”). The Roma were forbidden to practice their traditional commercial occupations; instead, they were incorporated into the new Communist institutions. A dual project of mandatory settlement, on the one hand, and ignorance and disregard for Roma cultural and ethnic difference, on the other hand, emerged (Achim, 1998, 194).

The effect of Communism on Romania and much of Eastern Europe was momentous. The entire structure of society was radically altered. Romania’s historic agricultural economy

based on small private farms was abandoned for collective farming. Further, the movement away from a traditional agricultural economy marginalized the Roma. Traditional Roma skills and professions such as blacksmiths, coppersmiths, or woodcarvers became archaic and irrelevant for a modern economy. This marginalization may attribute to a return to a nomadic lifestyle.

**The End of Nomadism.** Once a defining characteristic for many Roma across Europe and Romania, the Roma caravan is no longer seen, rather only referenced in books and films. Much of Europe categorized the Roma as travelers and nomads, this distinction held true even in Romania. In Britain, for example, ethnically motivated attempts to settle the “nomadic [Roma],” served as basis for the new solution to the problem of the “Gypsy Question” – the politics of assimilation, approached from the perspective that “they must become sedentary in order to be helped” (McVeigh, 1997, 17).

Following the end of the Cold War, European countries tightened border policies, in order to restrict population flows. Efforts to stamp out nomadism have been pushed by most European nations, whether by governmental policy (e.g., forced settlement in Communist nations) or legislation. Western European examples include the British Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act and British Nationality Act (Kennington, 1986, 80; Bancroft, 2005, 6). This legislation against nomadism targets the Roma and illustrates yet another struggle for this group of travelers:

The apparent discontinuity between the treatment of Roma under Communism and the post-Communist era may hide a deeper continuity, explicable in terms of the way in which the modern nation state functions as a social-engineering state, focusing its energies on ‘out of place’ peoples (Bancroft, 2005, 25).

Researcher, political activist, and professor at Queen's University Belfast, Robbie McVeigh, suggests that attempts to end nomadism resembles genocidal Nazi Holocaust; and it is a twin of earlier efforts to exterminate, evict, and exclude, framed as doing something for the Roma, rather than against them (1997, 22). Although McVeigh recognizes the harsh tone and controversial nature of his assertion, he underscores that assimilation attempts to address non-Roma concerns and interests by eliminating the “Gypsy Question.” Thus, assimilation, according to McVeigh, is a more politically correct phrasing for genocide:

The efforts of well-meaning politicians, social workers and educationalists and health workers who adopt a sedentarist and assimilationist paradigm vis-à-vis [Roma] and other nomads is equally genocidal in effect. Forcing nomads into houses is – at a social, cultural and spiritual level – no different from forcing nomads into gas chambers. ... [P]erversely, it has sometimes been the case that sympathetic welfarism has proved more successful in the obliteration of nomadic people. Repression may simply lead to the expulsion of nomads from an area with their identity intact while assimilation insists on their absorption. ... Genocide and assimilation carry with the same ruthless imperative – the relentless sedentary colonization of nomadic space (1997, 23).

McVeigh further predicts an even stronger trend to “re-integrate” and “assimilate” in European history and political policy. His point is significant, however, as it forewarns concern regarding “integration” being solely a replacement for “assimilation” in political discourse. Integration, therefore, should not mean the Roma must completely assimilate and lose their unique identity, history, and culture.

### **Roma Integration**

Viorel Achim, Senior Researcher at the Nicolae Iorga Institute of History, Bucharest, Romania, argues that many projects attempting to solve the “Gypsy Question” arise due to the ideological belief that Roma could “only be “civilized” if they give up their cultural heritage and become “Romanians” or “Hungarians” (1998, 199). Local governmental focus “still centers not on what can be done *for* [the Roma], but what can be done *about* them” (Kohn 1996, 179). Achim expands the analysis, noting, “...a tradition of laissez-faire attitude when it comes to the Roma, leaving their problems to resolve themselves” (1998, 211). With these considerations in mind, understanding the “Gypsy Question” and pursuing effective Romani integration rests in (a) recognizing the Roma’s situation today and (b) identifying barriers and solutions to past integration attempts.

### **Romani Communities Today.**

Data of Romanian Roma population ranges from 535,250, according to the 2002 Romanian Census (the second largest minority group after the Hungarians), to 2,150,000, as recorded by Liegeois and Gheorghe (Recensământ 2002; Liegeois and Gheorghe, 1995, 76). A report by the Centre for Documentation and Information about Minorities in South-East Europe makes mention of over 40 different Romani tribes and groups currently living in Romania (“Romii din România”). Of the numerous tribes mentioned, several are more well known, if not by their name, for their skills and traditional craft: Căldărari (the Braziers), Fierari (the Blacksmiths), Grăstari (the Horse- Sellers), Lăutari (the Fiddlers), Spoitori (the Tinkers), Argintari (the Silverers), Ursari (the Bear-Leaders), Lingurari / Băieși (the Spoon-Makers). (“Romii din România”).

The report also notes that some groups, such as the Lăutari, have a more traditional lifestyle and culture (e.g., regarding work, marriage, education, music, etc.), whereas others are more integrated into the mainstream Romanian population. Such integrations are deemed necessary in response to “rising intolerance of the Roma and of racist attitudes on the part of the majority population,” (Achim, 1998, 210). The report also comments on the political advantages of integrating from the standpoint of being better treated in the fields of employment, housing, health services, and education (“Romii din România”).

These advantages appear to be sorely needed in the Romani context. A 1992 study conducted by the University of Bucharest and the Research Institute for Quality of Life reports, two-thirds of the Roma have no profession or occupies only low qualified positions. Further, only about a fourth is employed, and a sixth of the total population is self-employed. Although the income level is comparable to national figures, Roma families are, on average, twice the size of non-Roma families. Romani living conditions are reported to be below the standards of the mainstream population, and the Romani illiteracy rate is nearly 27%. This statistic reflects their general lack of higher education, wherein under 4% have completed secondary education, and less than 1% has studied in higher education. The average life expectancy is the lowest in the country, and it is accompanied by the highest infant mortality rates in the country. The study concludes that Roma lifestyle is worsening (Achim, 1998, 203-207).

### **Barriers to Integration Policy**

Previous solutions to the “Gypsy Question” have resulted in failed integration policies. These policies focused on how the Roma can fit into majority populations; i.e., how well the Roma assimilate into Romanian society. This model has reportedly given the impression that, “The Roma will not achieve what they intend to without full participation, and that means ... *doing what*



*everyone else does*” (PER, 1997). Two major barriers exist to Romani integration in Europe and in Romania: (a) failure by governments and non-Roma groups to allow or embrace Romani participation in the public sphere without forfeiting their cultural identity and (b) weakness of Romani leaders to adequately participate in the public sphere.

**Failures of Non-Roma.** Governmental leaders must be willing to embrace the Roma and do so without stripping them of their culture and identity. Although certain positive steps have been taken in recognizing the Roma (e.g., public and political recognition, led by the Council of Europe, that the Roma are citizens of Europe – a transnational, stateless, and “true European minority,” which opened the discourse towards Roma rights), additional progress should be encouraged (ERTF, 2005). Within reason, therefore, governments should encourage Romani participation in government and the political arena:

The significant under-representation of Roma in elected bodies and public administration at all levels of power throughout the European Union bears witness to the failure of democratic processes and ordinary recruitment procedures to bring about the equal inclusion of Roma (ERIO, 2006).

Due to a lack of understanding, policy makers and government officials facing the “Gypsy Question” have long believed that Romani culture and heritage were inconsistent with traditional national identities; therefore, they should be discouraged (Schlager, 2001; “Romii din România”). Experience has shown this belief to be untrue. Romani activists point to efforts by several NGOs to compile texts meant to explain the history of Roma groups, leading to the acceptance of their cultural and ethnic differences; i.e., memoirs and personal histories, recognized to be “a powerful way to bring the voice of Roma to the ear of the public” (ERRC, 1997). The results of these efforts for improved and less biased media coverage had positive results:

After visiting the communities and speaking with their representatives, the journalists concluded that Romania’s ethnic minorities should be supported to preserve their traditions and cultural identity, and also that it is necessary to stimulate greater dialogue between ethnic minorities and the majority (“Europe’s Spectral Nation”).

Clearly, Romani culture and identity has value and merits defending; however, Romani leaders must be willing and able to bring this contention to light.

**Weakness of the Roma.** The weakness of the Romani movement stems from the inability of Roma to articulate their own objectives and from Roma letting others to fulfill their responsibilities (Andereck, 1992). Romani activists have been forced to convince a non-Roma world that Roma leaders are well organized and united to work for Roma rights – and, in the process, empower the same Roma that in other contexts were constructed to be victims:

Romani leaders must grapple with fateful questions about the future of their communities: tradition versus modernization; whether, to what extent, and how the Roma should participate in mainstream society; how 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; and how to defend themselves against discrimination and exclusion while honoring their separate self-identity. Thoughtful and balanced public debate about these problems has been inhibited by the paucity of educated and articulate Romani spokesmen who simultaneously command the attention of majority political institutions and have the confidence of traditional Romani communities (Stewart, 1997, 13).

### **Successful Romani Integration**

Despite previous failures of Romanian policy towards the Roma, integration is possible. Education is ultimately the key to bridging the Roma and other minority groups into mainstream society. Integration, therefore, need not come by way of assimilation and loss of Romani culture and identity. The Roma community should not feel the need to assimilate in order to enjoy their rights as citizens of Europe. Romani activists must “draw on common roots and common perspectives beyond citizenship, [or] group affiliation,” and reach out, sharing their culture and commonalities with the majority of the population (Kenrick, 2004, 100).

Additionally, if government officials and society desire Romani leadership to participate more fully in the public sphere, then education must be provided to the Roma minority. If democracy is the vision, it should not be taken for granted that Romani leaders are necessarily democratic. They, like others in society, need to be educated (PER, 1997).

Educational reform opens the door to the integration of Romani youth. Schools teach principles and ideas, such as nationalism, patriotism, and a nation’s history and identity. Courses highlighting these topics, making special effort to include Romani heritage, culture, and values, are of special value and importance to fostering understanding and tolerance between Romanians and Romani. Governments pursuing educational reforms should consider the creation of special courses taught in the native languages of the Roma, thereby increasing the perceived level of acceptance of Romani culture. Teaching the Roma in their own language facilitates increased comprehension of their shared national identity and their role as a part of the Romanian identity.

Although plausible, these steps to resolving the issue of integration, understandably, face several obstacles themselves. Civil society will not follow suit simply because it is told to act in a certain way. For example, in America, blacks were not treated differently just because the

government passed laws providing civil liberties. The populace needed encouragement from a firm unyielding government. After the Supreme Court issued its historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, soldiers escorted groups of black children to schools, which were previously segregated, forcing the populace to adhere to the new moral and social code. This posed a challenge to society, which lasted decades; however, with time and sustained effort, racial discrimination in America has significantly decreased in many meaningful ways. Governmental policy, therefore, may expedite change for the better. Similarly, Romania needs to be committed to reform and change, choosing to actively support and defend the Roma, thereby ensuring them a place in Romanian society.

### **Conclusion**

Although the “Gypsy Question” has existed for many years, integration of the Romani people is possible. Historically, the Roma have been characterized as a misunderstood and often controversial minority in Europe and around the globe. Certainly, evidence exists to both show the Roma as victims and perpetrators, yet, however difficult, Romani integration into Romanian society is possible. This integration requires an informed approach regarding policy and public attitude, ensuring the Roma may contribute to Romanian culture and society, rather than be assimilated into it and thereby losing their unique heritage and traditions.

Distancing governments and public opinion from what Achim described as, “...a tradition of laissez-faire attitude when it comes to the Roma, leaving their problems to resolve themselves,” is key to this paradigm shift (1998, 211). As governmental focus centers on what should be done *for* the Roma, rather than what should be done *about* them, the “Gypsy Question,” will become more manageable. Integration of the Roma, at its foundation, requires a scholarly approach based in (a) appropriate terminology regarding the Roma, (b) the Romanian

Roma’s history, and (c) current considerations for Roma integration in Romania. Ultimately, Romani integration requires the efforts of government officials and Romani leadership to reach out, learn from one another, and embrace commonalities. As policy makers move forward from this groundwork, the Roma may finally find a home in Europe and Romania.

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