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Carol Silverman

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BULGARIAN GYPSIES:

ADAPTATION IN A SOCIALIST CONTEXT

by Carol Silverman

Gypsies have played significant economic and cultural roles in Bulgarian society since their arrival at least six centuries ago. In the 1970s, however, the ethnic category "Gypsy" was abolished, and since that time the word has begun to disappear from print. Despite the official denial of the existence of Gypsies, they are indeed a growing population with a complex relationship to the socialist centralized government. This article explores the adaptations of contemporary Bulgarian Gypsies in terms of government policy, economic niche, and cultural roles. Fieldwork was conducted during three research trips in 1979, 1984, and 1985, for a total of 15 months. Participant observation centered in the cities of Sofia, Sliven, Septemvri, Straldzha, Razlog, and Smoljan, and in surrounding villages; approximately 8 extended Gypsy families were involved.

Reliable population figures for contemporary Bulgarian Gypsies are impossible to assemble because virtually no census data on ethnic groups have been published since World War II (Georgeoff 1981:49). Foreign scholars estimate between 260,000 and 450,000 Gypsies out of a total population of 8.5 million Bulgarians, representing 2% - 5%.[1] Statistics from the late Ottoman period demonstrate that the Gypsy population has increased significantly during the last 100 years. Mihov, in his NASELENIETO NA BULGARIA I TURTSIA PREZ XVIII I XIX VEK (The Inhabitants of Bulgaria and Turkey in the 18th and 19th Centuries) sets the figure for Gypsies in late 19th century European Turkey as 200,000 (Georgieva 1966:25). Georgieva's statistics for the Bulgarian city of Sliven reveal that the population of Gypsies jumped from 1074 in 1874 to 5,134 in 1956; this represents an increase from a 5% Gypsy population to an 11% Gypsy population (Georgieva 1966:27). Today Sliven has approximately 30,000 Gypsies, making it the largest Gypsy settlement in Bulgaria (Puxon 1973:17). Moreover, the Gypsy birth rate is significantly higher than the Bulgarian birth rate. Families of 4-6 children are still common among Gypsies, whereas the Bulgarian average is now 1.5 children.

Gypsies seem to have been well established in large numbers throughout the Balkans by the 14th century, some settling and others remaining nomadic (Soulis 1961:152,163; Kenrick and Puxon 1972:15). Soulis claims that they entered Byzantium from north India as early as the 11th century (1961:163) although Clebert and Kenrick and Puxon cite the 14th century (1970:54; 1972:15). Initial curiosity about Gypsies by Balkan peoples and governments eventually gave way to hatred and discrimination. In Romania they were serfs during the 13th and 14th centuries (Kenrick and Puxon 1972:51). Indeed, their very name came to assume an insulting connotation (Soulis 1961:163). The Bulgarian appellation <u>Tsigani</u> comes from the Greek <u>atsingani</u>, the name of a heretical sect (Soulis 1961:145-146; Kenrick and Puxon 1972:15).

Although despised and perpetually falling at the bottom of the Bulgarian social hierarchy, Gypsies have been indispensible suppliers of diverse services to non-Gypsies. These include fortune telling, music, horse dealing, bear keeping, entertainment, animal trading, acrobatics, blacksmithing, coppersmithing, tinsmithing, woodworking, sieve making, comb making, basket weaving, shoemaking, and seasonal

agricultural work (Soulis 1961; Marinov 1962:227-9). Many of these occupations continue today. Nineteenth century sources consistently document a distinct economic niche for Gypsies while underscoring their separateness and their exoticism as a culture. In the twentieth century, more thorough ethnographic work was published in Bulgaria, including linguistic analyses of the dialects of Romani, the Gypsy language, and descriptions of occupational groupings (Kostov 1962, 1970, 1973, 1975; Petulengro 1915-16).

The literature on Bulgarian Gypsies is quite problematic in the area of classification of groups. Some authors divide Gypsies on the basis of dialect (Kostov 1962, 1970, 1973, 1975) while others divide them on the basis of religion (Marinov 1962; Georgieva 1966), occupation, degree of nomadism (Andreas 1916), region, or some combination of the above (Petulengro 1915-16:3-6). My fieldwork, though incomplete in this area, indicates that dialect and religion are the two most important aspects of emic group differentiation. The groups among which I worked called themselves: Erlija (a dialect designation); Horahane or Turski Tsigani (Turkish speaking or Moslem Gypsies); Bulgarski Tsigani (Bulgarian Gypsies, meaning either non-Turkish-speaking or Christian); Kalajdzhii (coppersmiths); Kopanari or Vlashki Tsigani (Romanian speaking). All of these groups, with the exception of the Kopanari, speak Romani and refer to themselves as Rom.

According to Bulgarian scholars writing in the 1960s, the Gypsies lived a misery during the Ottoman period. The "backwardness" of the Gypsies before 1870 (the date of the Bulgarian liberation from the Ottoman Turks) is blamed on the oppressive "Turkish Yoke". After 1870, the situation did not improve, because of the "exploitation by capitalists". Another official reason given for "the slow progress" of Gypsies was their Moslem religion (Marinov 1962:227-229; Georgieva 1966:25-31). Bulgarian scholars view 1944 as the turning point in Gypsy history: since the 1944 socialist revolution, Gypsies have become "cultured, advanced, and educated". Today, it is claimed, they are equal citizens of Bulgaria; prejudice is gone and assimilation is the happy ending (Marinov 1962:267-270; Georgieva 1966:43-44).

My data contest this conclusion. I have found Gypsy ethnicity thriving and adapting in creative ways to the pressures of assimilation. In spite of the fact that Gypsies do not exist on paper in Bulgaria, they make an indelible imprint on the cultural landscape. In the 1970s there began a silence in print, but Gypsy musical recordings were still released. In the early 1970s the internal passport designation "Gypsy" was abolished, and Gypsies with Moslem names were given new Slavic names.[2] Gypsies were legislated out of existence and therefore the "Gypsy problem", i.e., their low status, was solved. Ethnographic work on Gypsies has halted, but occasional magazine articles have appeared on traditional Gypsy crafts with a conscious omission of the word Gypsy. For example, articles on bear trainers as children's entertainment nowhere mention that all bear trainers are Gypsies (Ivanov 1984; Ivanova 1982). Similarly, ethnomusicologists no longer refer to zurna[3] players as Gypsies, and education journals refer to Gypsy children as children with Gypsy ancestry. This silence in print belies the current situation where both Gypsies and Bulgarians are acutely aware of their respective distinctiveness.

This article analyzes the Gypsy niche in the context of Bulgarian government policies and the Gypsy response to these policies. The aim of government policies is to instill in Gypsies the socialist work ethic (working diligently for the good of the nation), the Bulgarian world view and culture, and the desire to be like other

Bulgarian citizens. Gypsies, however, strategically subvert these policies for their own aims, which involve maintenance of their distinct culture and ways of life.

Sedentarization and Resettlement

A number of Gypsy groups have been sedentary in Bulgaria for centuries, while others have more recently settled (Petulengro 1915-6). The abolition of nomadism has been a goal of virtually every European government: an 1886 Bulgarian decree prohibited nomadism plus the entry of Gypsies from abroad (Kenrick and Puxon 1972:54). Gypsy neighborhoods have grown up on the outskirts of towns, facilitating access to city trades, and many Gypsies have built their own homes. In Sofia, the neighborhood Fakulteta occupied by home-owning Erlija Rom, is dated from the early 20th century and is still growing. There, and in the Gypsy neighborhoods of towns like Razlog, two and three story houses are being built to accommodate extended families. These homes, often luxuriously furnished, are showpieces for both Gypsies and the government. In general, housing for Gypsies has improved in the last 20 years because of the rising standard of living (Marinov 1962:270).

Since the 1950s the socialist government has embarked on a policy of integrated resettlement of Sofia Gypsies, tearing down many old neighborhoods and assigning families housing in new apartment complexes. The crowded Sofia neighborhood Konjovitsa, home to thousands of Erlija Gypsies living in small houses, is being torn down, and the inhabitants are being given new apartments scattered all over the city. Many mourn the passing of the old neighborhood and extended family living, while others eagerly claim their right to live interspersed among Bulgarians. A number of Gypsy families have been given apartments in the Ljuljin apartment complex in Sofia. There, amidst concrete terraces, playgrounds, and the hostile stares of Bulgarian neighbors, they still celebrate open-air weddings and baptisms. One weekend they may congregate at one relative's apartment, the next weekend at another's. Although the entire extended family rarely lives together in an apartment, they still gather frequently. In short, scattered housing has not prevented Gypsies from congregating and celebrating.

Although they may be considered sedentary in terms of residence, most Bulgarian Gypsies still travel because of their occupations. Bear and monkey acts, music, ironworking, woodworking, and selling old clothes, trinkets, and black-market items all involve servicing the customer population on their own territory. Travel away from home can be as long as a month or as short as overnight. Travel is also encouraged by in-group ritual events such as kin weddings, funerals, and hospital visits.

Occupations

Contemporary Gypsy occupations in Bulgaria are quite diverse, encompassing traditional trades as well as wage labour. The selling of family-produced wood items is still common among the Kopanari (also known as Rudari, Ludari) who are Romanian-speaking Christians. They produce spoons, bowls, troughs, distaffs, and parts for the loom, as well as baskets and brooms. Kovachi, iron workers or blacksmiths, sell family-produced knives, hammers, sheep shears, sheep bells and supplies for horses and for the hearth. They are Moslems, usually speaking Turkish

as well as Romani, and many live in the city of Madan in the southern Rhodope Mountains near the Greek border. Some iron workers do sheet metal work or make stoves and pipes. Kopanari and Kovachi sell their products at local peasant markets or to state enterprises.

One family of Kovachi has successfully made the transition from free enterprise peddlers to a state-regulated business. Located on a busy Sofia street, their shop draws a steady stream of customers. On the wall a state-supplied schedule of prices is posted; the family keeps a percentage of all sales and also pays annual taxes. The shop is run by two brothers, whose teenage sons already know how to forge iron and make repairs. This case illustrates adaptation to state socialism with the loss of neither the traditional occupation nor the family transmission of skills.

Middleman peddling is another visible Gypsy niche in contemporary Bulgaria, especially at local markets. Horse dealers (dzhambazi) are rare, but sunflower seed peddlers are found at every gathering. Old clothing peddlers solicit items from house to house and set up stands at subori (festivals or gatherings for political or religious purposes). Trinket sellers are common at subori, enticing children with toys, hair ornaments, jewelry, belts, and balls, and their parents with scarves, cassette recordings, and velvet wall hangings. Selling trinkets is actually a government-sponsored job given to people who can prove they are disabled. Thus, many Gypsies claim handicaps to be entitled to this occupation which involves a great deal of travel.

Black-market peddling provides supplementary income for Gypsies with the necessary connections to suppliers. Currently, blue jeans from Italy, lingerie from Greece, scarves from Turkey or Japan, tee shirts from the United States, and electronics from Japan are in great demand. Gypsies with relatives in Yugoslavia or Turkey can sometimes establish illegal trade routes. If caught, they end up in jail, but may try to bribe their way out with connections. Vruzki (connections) are the key to getting anything accomplished in Bulgaria, and Gypsies artfully cultivate vruzki. Vruzki also help obtain scarce Bulgarian goods such as building materials, and help wade through the bureaucracy.

Many traditional Gypsy services are still viable in contemporary Bulgaria, while others have declined. Fortune telling and begging are now quite rare, but on several occasions I observed children begging in Tsum (the central department store in Sofia) and soliciting from house to house in villages. Bulgarian Gypsies laughed when I told them that American Rom generate a large portion of their income through fortune telling, but in 1985, I was approached on a Sofia street by a Gypsy woman offering to help me "solve my problems". Customers seem to be foreigners rather than the typical house to house pattern of earlier decades. Kalajdzhii, on the other hand, still solicit work from house to house. They repair tin and copper vessels and can occasionally be seen camping outside villages.

Perhaps the most colorful Gypsy service trade is animal entertainment. Bear and monkey trainers still travel from village to village for festivals since the popular proverb claims, "a festival without a bear trainer is a waste of time". These Romanian-speaking Kopanari live mostly in North Bulgaria but during the summer months they can be found throughout the country. From an early age, the bears are trained to dance, wrestle, salute, ride bicycles, and do acrobatics. They are purchased from zoos for large sums of money, approximately 2000-3000 leva, a factory worker's annual salary. Bulgarian folklore includes many beliefs related to

the power of the bear, such as if a woman wants children, she should pluck a few hairs from a bear's stomach and tie them around her waist, with a black string for a boy and with a white string for a girl (Ivanov 1984:48). Also, it is believed that the smoke from burning bear hair can cure a variety of illnesses. In extreme cases the bear should walk over an ill person or the ill person should be pulled through the bear's open mouth (Vukanović 1959:120-123; Ivanov 1984; Ivanova 1982). Since bears can cure, very rarely will a trainer be turned away empty handed from a house. Rather, clothing, food, and money are solicited for the bear's musical performance, plus extra fees for curing. A number of Kopanari have modest homes and earnings from this trade.

The musical portion of the animal trainer's performance has received less attention in the literature than the animal's tricks. The trainer often sings improvised historical ballads or humorous songs while accompanying himself on the gudulka, a pear-shaped bowed lute. Many Kopanari make their own instruments since they may be woodworkers in addition to animal trainers. The following song, sung by a monkey trainer in a Sofia market, cleverly comments on the advantages and disadvantages of socialism:

> We Bulgarians used to be fond of our property,
> Now we're fond of living.
> Our property has been collectivized,
> Our money is in the bank,
> My wife is at the Black Sea,[4]
> My son is with someone else in the mountains.
> There aren't anymore kjuchetsi[5]
> Instead there's the hully gully, the shake, and discotheques,
> Cars and strange women,
> Years for love, years for life,
> All this dear Uncle Dimitrov[6] gave us.
> Women no longer fight over the children,
> For the children are in day care centres.
> Our worries are taken care of by the state.
> The years, you have flown by like fleas,
> It's good for the young but bad for the old.

Indeed, Gypsy street singing may be a unique forum for social commentary.

In recent years, animal trainers have been subject to state regulation. The trainer must obtain a license, and bears are usually barred from large cities. However, some trainers have been hired to perform at kindergartens and at hotel shows. Few young Gypsies seem to be following this trade probably due to the necessary committment to the years of training. But numerous trainers still follow the summer circuit of festivals and markets.

Music is a profession that has continuously provided Gypsies with a viable economic niche in Balkan society. In Bulgaria, Gypsies have a virtual monopoly of some instruments, namely zurna (oboe) and tupan (two-headed drum). Whatever instrument they play, Gypsies learn the repertoire of the local peasants in order to be indispensible at weddings, baptisms, house-warmings, saints' day festivals, etc. Many proverbial expressions attest to the musical ability of Gypsies, such as playing "like a Gypsy", meaning excellently. Gypsies themselves tell the following riddle: Who has first, second, and third place for musical skill? Gypsies have first place

and Bulgarians have third place. OK, then who has second place? Gypsies, they have second place too!

While Gypsies have been professional musicians for at least 600 years, the past 20 years have witnessed a grossly inflated market in Bulgaria.[7] Since the 1960s, electrified bands playing folk music have become the rage, both at Gypsy and at Bulgarian celebrations. Some musicians are as famous as rock stars in the West, and the family who hires them earns status in their community. A typical contemporary band consists of clarinet, saxophone, accordion, electric bass guitar, drum set, singer, and sound man (who owns the amplification equipment). Each of these seven people can earn in one day what a factory worker earns in a week. A well-known musician can earn a factory worker's monthly salary in an evening. It is not surprising, then, that in many Gypsy neighborhoods, almost every male plays an instrument.

The economics of this music scene is important to grasp in order to understand recent government intervention. The hiring of a band for an event has always been in the realm of the free market. A family would approach the leader of the band, and they would bargain until an amount was agreed upon. In addition to the decided amount, a musician would also collect tips. In the 1970s the state began to tax musicians on their incomes, and also began to put pressure on them to accept regular state jobs, such as playing in restaurants. Many Gypsies have successfully combined a Sunday to Friday restaurant job with Saturday wedding jobs. The restaurant job entitles them to pensions, paid vacations, free medical care, etc., while the weekend work generates extra money. Other Gypsies, who prefer to play only at private events, are faced with heavy taxation.

In 1985 the state began to regulate the free market bargaining process itself. In a few targeted regions a state commission rated each band and assigned to it a category which dictated how much it could charge. Musicians are extremely upset over this intervention, and have already begun to circumvent it by charging the official amount of money over the table, but requiring more money under the table.

A further effort at state control involves the kind of music Gypsies play. Bulgarian Gypsies are noted for a type of dance and music called kjuchek, which is heavily influenced by Turkish music. In the past five years, the state has attempted to prohibit any Turkish or other foreign influences in folk music. The goal, absurd as it may seem, is to purify folk music to its original Bulgarian state, devoid of foreign traces. The playing and dancing of kjuchek has been prohibited, but despite these sanctions, it is still the most popular Gypsy dance and music. It is performed at every Gypsy celebration and is disseminated via unofficial cassette recordings (Silverman 1987).

Another recent ruling prohibits the playing of the zurna because it is supposedly a Turkish instrument. Although it was banned from weddings in certain villages as early as 1980, Gypsy zurna players are still locating audiences by travelling to districts where the ban is not enforced. In August 1985 the zurna was banned from the Pirin Pee Folk Festival, even though the instrument is distinctive in the Pirin region. Ironically, Gypsy zurna players arrived at the festival after the official activities to play offstage in an open field. Hundreds of people gathered to dance, and the Gypsies earned a great deal of money from tips. This example illustrates that although Gypsy music may be excluded from official contexts, it has a secure place in unofficial contexts (Silverman 1987).

Wage Labour

The Bulgarian government has succeeded quite well in reducing poverty among Gypsies and, in fact, among all citizens. Employment is available for all willing persons, and Gypsies have been integrated into some occupational spheres. As early as the 1950s, the government urged Gypsies into state-sponsored wage labour. Gypsies have indeed filled a low status economic niche: unskilled factory jobs are common, as are agricultural jobs on cooperative farms (Marinov 1962:269). Also widespread are Gypsy toilet and street cleaners, railroad station cleaners, and train cleaners. Working for the state transportation agency gives the employee and his or her family free travel on the trains, an important bonus for Gypsies. More important, working in any government (i.e., wage) job entitles the worker to a pension, medical benefits, vacation packages, and occasional bonuses.

Adaptability is the key to Gypsy occupations, whether in the private or in the state-sponsored sphere. When working a government job, Gypsies often mold the job to their own family's needs and fail to display the Bulgarian work ethic which stresses pride and devotion to the nation. For example, one 41-year-old woman cleans the train station in her home town of Septemvri but skips work at least one day a week to help with a new grandson at home. Yet she was sure to report to work the day the supervisors distributed free watches to employees. In addition, her family liberally travels for free on the entire country's railway system. Gypsies also commonly miss work on Fridays and Mondays during the summer, when weddings take place.

Occupations are often changed and recombined, so a typical person may have 3-4 sources of income. For example, one 50-year-old man is a porter who waits with his horse and cart at the train or bus station for customers with goods to transport. His father was a self-employed carter and his grandfather was a horse dealer. His family owns a small plot of land (the maximum plot allowed by the government) on which he plants corn for animal feed. He buys calves and lambs cheaply by travelling to remote villages. He fattens them up (sometimes by force feeding) and then sells them to the state meat processing plant for a sizeable profit. One season he planted grass for brooms. His family harvested the grass and cheaply hired a craftsman to make brooms; they then sold the brooms to a state enterprise for a profit. In addition to this agricultural and animal dealing, this man also privately sells cement, bricks, animal meat for consumption, and black market clothing. His network of connections (vruzki) is large and secure, and for this reason he is the "big man" of the neighborhood. Typically, economic exchanges are accomplished through reciprocal favors, both among Gypsies and between Gypsies and Bulgarians.

Another specific case will illustrate Gypsy response to government pressure to accept the Bulgarian work ethic. M.K. is a 55-year-old musician from Razlog who comes from a family of zurna and tupan players. From an early age he earned money by playing zurna at private weddings and other events. For ten years he played in the Pirin folk ensemble to earn pension credit and to travel around the world. The pay was very low, and so he also played weddings on weekends, earning as much for one wedding as he did for one month of wage labour. He also did a little acting on the side. Fed up with the low ensemble wages, he gave up that job and continued playing privately on weekends. After a few years, the government

insisted that he take a "real" job. Even though he paid musician's taxes on private earnings, the government threatened to move him to a remote area if he didn't take a "real job". So he contracted with the local hospital to plant, harvest and manage their vegetable garden. This paid very little, so he let his wife work the plot while he travelled to Sofia four days a week for a high-paying construction manager's job. His aim was to make connections at the Sofia job to arrange a two-year work trip to Libya. In Libya, he can earn enough international currency to be able to finance his two sons' weddings. The local authorities have given him some flack about maintaining two jobs (the hospital garden and the Sofia construction manager), but so far he has managed to circumvent repercussions and also to play music every weekend. The case of M.K. illustrates how Gypsies remain economically flexible within the centralized socialist economy. They manage to take the best of socialism without giving up the independence of the free market.

Education, Language, and Religion

Gypsies have been integrated into the Bulgarian educational system to a remarkable degree. Compulsory education to the 8th grade is enforced, and most young Gypsies are now literate in Bulgarian, while speaking Romani at home. Many Gypsies also speak Turkish. Bulgarians boast of Gypsies who have completed secondary school and university (Marinov 1962:268). Integrated education, however, like integrated housing and work, has not erased the distinctiveness Gypsies feel. Even though many children can pass as non-Gypsies at school, at home they display a pride in being Gypsy, and, more important, they marry Gypsies.

In the 1960s ethnographers boasted of Gypsy cultural organizations such as drama groups, music ensembles, and newspapers (Marinov 1962:268). Perhaps the most famous of these was the Romski Teatur which was composed entirely of Gypsies and performed plays about Gypsy life in the Bulgarian language with songs in Romani. Unfortunately, it was disbanded in the late 1960s along with Gypsy dance ensembles. The Gypsy newspaper Nevo Drom is now called Novi Put and is printed in Bulgarian; it follows an assimilationist line. In 1984 Gypsy music and songs were removed from restaurant shows and from phonograph recordings; the last recording of Gypsy songs was released in 1983. Dissemination of Gypsy music continues, however, through unofficial channels such as cassette recordings.

In the early 1970s Gypsies with Moslem names were forced to accept new Slavic names. Thus Ali Mustafa became Ilija Marinov. Most Gypsies now use two names, one official Slavic name for documents and school, and a second Gypsy name for home and for the Gypsy community. In picking new names, some Gypsies creatively chose the names of famous politicians, composers, or music stars. There are now Gypsies named Todor Zhivkov (Communist Party Secretary), Filip Kutev (Director of the national folklore ensemble), and Lili Ivanova (popular singer). Multiple names, like multiple occupations and languages, are not a burden to Gypsies.

The majority of Bulgarian Gypsies claim to be Moslem, but they are not devout. Elderly Moslem Gypsies abstain from alcohol and pork and pray at home, but younger Gypsies do not follow these practices. In the last decade the Bulgarian government has clamped down on Islamic practices, closing mosques, and prohibiting

circumcision, the speaking of Turkish, and the wearing of shalvari (Turkish style balloon trousers) and headscarves for women (Amnesty International 1986). Under this policy, Gypsies have not suffered as much as the ethnic Turks for whom ethnicity is vested in a single religion and language. Gypsies continue to privately celebrate Moslem holidays such as bajram and ramadan, to wear shalvari at home, to henna their brides, and even to circumcise their sons. Gypsy folk religion is actually on eclectic combination of Moslem, Christian, and pre-Christian ritual. For example, in the spring eggs are dyed red for good luck, and Erdelez (St. Georges Day) is celebrated by both Moslem and Eastern Orthodox Gypsies as well as Eastern Orthodox Bulgarians.

Weddings are two to five-day events displaying Gypsy ethnicity and some Balkan rituals which Bulgarian weddings have lost. Brideprice is currently practiced only among some Horahane, including Kalajdzhii, although in the past the custom was more widespread. The average age of the bride is fifteen or sixteen years, much younger than non-Gypsy brides, and by eighteen the woman may have two children. Arranged marriages are very common, although they have died out among most non-Gypsies. When two families cannot reach an understanding, bride stealing may ensue. I was told of numerous cases of fourteen-year-old girls who were abducted from school or from the grocery store by the groom's family or friends. Due to this danger, families tend to marry off their daughters young. After sexual intercourse has taken place, the families usually come to an agreement, since the bride's virginity is lost. A test of virginity is routinely performed by the mother-in-law, while the guests eat and drink. The whole Gypsy community is involved in a wedding, with music, dancing, and the display of the trousseau on the streets of the neighborhood. Given the large families, it is not surprising that every summer weekend is filled with Gypsy weddings.

Summary and Conclusion

The following is a joke popular in the Balkans today:

> A Gypsy was standing in the road striking his donkey with a stick and shouting, "Be a horse! Be a horse!" A policeman ran over and said, "how can you be so stupid as to think you can change a donkey into a horse?" The Gypsy answered, "Well, if you can turn a Gypsy into a Bulgarian then you can certainly make a horse out of a donkey."

The joke, of course, refers to the assimilationist policy of the Bulgarian government, and points out that just as one cannot change a donkey into a horse, one cannot change a Gypsy into a Bulgarian. In actuality, Gypsies are not only adamant about their distinctiveness but are convinced of their superiority to non-Gypsies. In spite of compulsory education in the Bulgarian language, Gypsies continue to use their own language, Romani, at home, and use Moslem names among themselves. Furthermore, they conform to the socialist work ethic just enough to reap the benefits of socialism, such as guarantee of work, medical care, pensions, and vacation benefits, without giving up the independence of the free market. They continue many traditional occupations plus run profitable black market enterprises. They are also defiant of the government in the realm of music and dance. Kiuchek, the Gypsy music banned from official media, is thriving in Gypsy neighborhoods, and is even popular among non-Gypsies in private settings.

It is clear that Bulgarian Gypsies are adapting well to the socialist environment. Indeed, most Gypsies claim the government has done much to help them. In comparison to the economic exploitation by landowners in the pre-war period, their current situation seems improved. Gypsies are somewhat protected legally from exploitation. They are officially entitled to the same jobs, the same education, and the same medical care as other Bulgarians. However, this does not add up to the same wage opportunities for Gypsies as for other Bulgarians. They tend to fill low status, low paying jobs. Furthermore, prejudice certainly has not disappeared and assimilation is not likely. Changing names and abolishing Gypsies as an official ethnic group has not altered the distinctiveness Gypsies embrace. The success of Gypsy adaptation to the Bulgarian socialist environment lies not in combating discrimination but in ignoring it. Gypsies display an attitude of freedom and daring in cultural and economic spheres which other Bulgarians do not enact. They supplement wage income with free market enterprise, whether legal or not, just as they play and dance their music, whether legal or not.

Notes

1. Estimates of the Bulgarian Gypsy population include:
   259,000 (Weekes 1984: 884)   363,000 (Puxon 1973: 17)
   450,000 (Puxon 1980)   300,000 (Kenrick nd: 71)
   400,000 (Amnesty International 1986: 2)

2. At this time, Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Moslems) were also forced to accept new names.

3. The zurna is a double-reeded instrument which is played exclusively by Gypsies in Bulgaria.

4. The Black Sea is the resort area of Bulgaria.

5. The Kjuchek is a typical Gypsy dance; recently it has been outlawed.

6. Georgi Dimitrov was the first president of Bulgaria after the 1944 revolution.

7. Music is also profitable for Turks and Bulgarians who are professionals. The music scene is not totally monopolized by Gypsies, but they are a major percentage of the professionals.

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Carol Silverman
Department of Antropology
University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403