

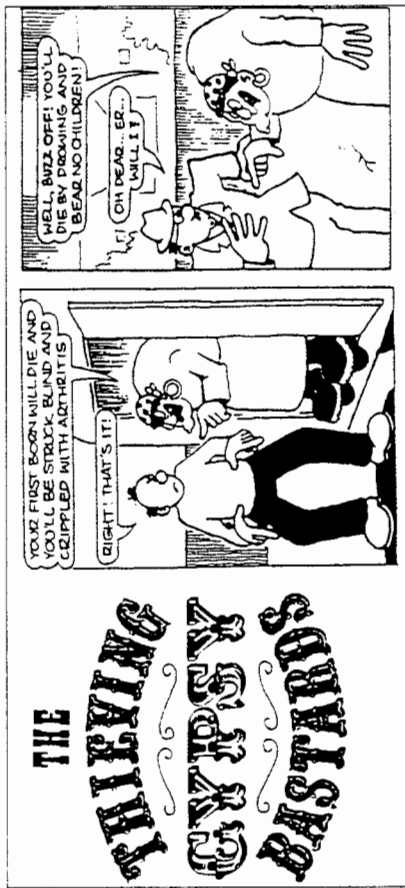
This cartoon from Germany combines all three stereotypes of stealing, fortune telling and knife-wielding.

may be the natural attraction of the 'exotic' or unattainable, but it may also be a way of underscoring, subconsciously, the perceived lesser value of non-western peoples. One writer describing a nineteenth century Romani encampment in Romania which he never actually visited, basing his account instead the writings of Grellmann and others (St. John, 1853:142), also edited in some opinions of his own:

Nothing can be more abominably filthy than the habits of this degraded tribe ... we are sorry to be obliged to add that both men and women are, as a rule, exceedingly debauched,

but this did not stop St. John from adding that "these bold, brown, beautiful women only make one astonished to think how such eyes, teeth and figures can exist in the stifling atmosphere of their tents" (*loc. cit.*). At the time and place he was describing, the Romani men known as the *scopiți*, who drove the coaches and horses for the ladies of the aristocracy, were castrated by their owners because of the threat they were imagined to pose to their passengers. Félix Colson, the French diarist who visited a slaveholding estate in Wallachia in the 1830s, wrote of the female Romani slaves' being provided to guests as sexual entertainment, while at the same time being called "whores" by their owners (Colson, 1839:35).

Romani morals are in fact excessively strict by non-Romani standards; showing the legs, for example, is *gadžikani forma*, or non-Romani behaviour, and neither men nor women should wear shorts. The dancers who lift their colourful skirts on the stage of the *Teatr Romeni* are all non-Romanies, since the Romani members of the troupe will not do this. Virginité at the time of a first marriage is required and discovery of its



A cartoon strip from the British comic *Viz*, 1990.

absence are grounds enough for the marriage to be terminated. Topics concerning sex or other bodily functions are strenuously avoided in mixed company.

When the issue of body searches came up in a court case in the United States involving the illegal entry by the police into a Romani household, all of the Romani women in the courtroom arose and left; simply to be in mixed company when this was being discussed was improper. It is not at all polite to talk about visiting the lavatory, or whether a woman is expecting a baby, or, in some groups, to talk about going to bed or even to say that word. If there are Romani girls and women who are prostitutes today, you can imagine how desperate their families' situations must be to allow this.

## Magic

The image of a 'gypsy with a crystal ball' or tarot cards is very common, and there are many books on Romani magic, fortune-telling and curses. Fortune-telling is a widespread means of income, for reasons that are easily understood: it is a tradition brought from India, it requires little or no equipment and can be done anywhere, there is a steady demand from the non-Romani public to have predictions made about the future, and it is a skill which gives Romanies a small measure of control and protection. It should also be kept in mind that not all groups practice fortune-telling, for instance the Bashalde – the Hungarian-Slovak Romanies in the United States – who emphatically state that this is something which

distinguishes them from the *Laxe* (the Kalderash). And consider for one moment – if we really had magical powers, why haven't we used them to improve our own situation? To bring an end to antigypsyism, and to acquire wealth?

### Our stereotypes of non-Romanies

It surprises some people to learn that just as you have stereotypes of 'gypsies', we have stereotypes of you non-Romanies as well. It is commonly believed, for example, that non-Romani men and women are insecure about what behaviour is appropriate for their respective genders: should a man cry, or cook? Should a woman swear, or wear trousers? Non-Romanies are thought not to have respect for age, putting their aging parents into homes, and allowing the children to speak rudely to their elders. It is believed by some that non-Romanies will happily talk about the most intimate details of their private lives to complete strangers; that they announce the fact to everyone that they need to visit the toilet and then don't wash their hands afterwards. That they allow their pets to sleep on their beds and to eat from the same plates that they use themselves; that their young women are immodest in their dress and sexual behaviour.

These, of course, are stereotypes, and they are surprisingly like your own notions about us. They are no more typical of your non-Romani behaviour than your ideas about Romanies are typical of us, and while some of them may describe some people, no single person has all of them and some individuals have none of them at all. Once we become individual people to each other, we stop being representatives of an entire group, labeled with all of the stereotypes associated with that group. There is a saying in our language, that *kana jeklt Rrom si doxálo, sa'! Rrom si doxále*, "when one Romani is guilty, all Romanies are guilty". It shouldn't have to be that way.

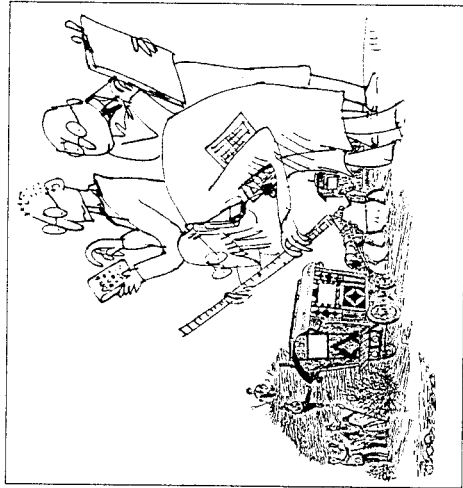
### Some suggestions

When you talk to us, be sincere, and say what you want; we have a lot of practice in recognising insincerity. When non-Romanies have come asking questions it usually has not been to benefit us, but just the contrary. Eva Justin, who worked with Robert Ritter in the Race Hygiene

Centre in Germany collecting genealogical data on who had 'Gypsy blood' pretended to be our friend, asking for the names of relatives so that she could warn them of what was in store. She was even given a pet name, *Lolf Tschlai*, because of her red hair. But she was turning all of the information she collected over to the Nazis to make it easier for them to find us. Sometimes people befriend Romanies because they are writing a book or a dissertation, but they won't tell us that. Don't 'collect' us as curious in an insincere way and then abandon us, but be straightforward, don't be shy to express your curiosity or your desire simply to be a friend. And if you meet with skepticism or suspicion at first on our part, be patient. Many real friendships have eventually been made in this way.

Above all, remember that we are people, with names that our parents gave us. When a Romani character turns up in a novel he usually has no name, simply being identified as 'the gypsy'. Call us by our personal names, so that we are identified as individuals; don't refer to the child in your class or your waiting room as 'the gypsy'. This should also be the rule in newspaper accounts; unless the ethnicity of a person being written about is essential to the story, don't include it gratuitously. And don't be tempted to provide other clues just for the sake of it, such as "the dark-skinned Mr Lakatosz" or "Mrs Cooper who lives on a trailer site" unless they add constructively to your report. And speaking of names, don't decide what we as a people are to be called. A certain European government wanted to make the horribly offensive word *Tsigani* our official designation; one writer argued that *Gypsy* was perfectly acceptable because it is what Romanies in Hungary, Germany and elsewhere call themselves. Of course they don't – *Gypsy* is an English word. Someone once said that those who are in control of a people's name are in control of those people themselves.

If you're writing about Romanies, avoid such words as 'wander' and 'roam', since they suggest aimlessness and lack of purpose, and perhaps the luxury simply to travel at one's whim. Don't say that we live in 'tribes' – that word should only be used in its proper sociological sense, and generally speaking, Romani social structure isn't tribal. Don't speak of the 'gypsy lifestyle', but refer instead to 'the Romani way of life'. Our culture is not 'stylish', except as it is perceived to be in fashion magazines; it is rooted in a tradition a thousand years old. And besides, we are not one monolithic whole; there are many Romani 'ways of life'. Most of what is in this book, for example, only describes the language



A cartoon from the magazine *Buhazi* reflecting a common Romani attitude towards the non-Romani 'experts'.

and customs of Vlax Romanies, and it would be a mistake to think that it applies to all groups everywhere.

Don't let your choice of words add to the 'strange' image of Romanies when you write about us; one journalist wrote of our origins as being "shrouded in mystery" (Godwin, 2001:78), when he could just as easily have said that they were not known at the time that he was referring to.

If such wording would not be used when describing other populations, it serves no purpose to use it to describe Romanies; a description of New Zealanders wouldn't say that they "were thought to descend from British immigrants", yet Kingfisher Publication's *Children's Encyclopedia* (New York, 1994:318) still writes that "Gypsies ... probably came from India" and the 2002 edition of *Pears Cyclopaedia*, like so many other encyclopedias has at its entry for *Gypsies* "a nomadic race, *believed to be of Indian origin*" (Cook, 2002:L54, emphasis added). The Cowan Report mentioned in Chapter 1 says of this "the Roma are genetically closer to Asians than to surrounding Europeans. This conclusion can hardly be described as exciting news; it has taken genetics 70 years and several thousand blood samples to confirm what has been known to linguists for the past 200 years" (Kalaydjieva et al., 1999:13).

Don't make uninformed statements about us, such as "Romanies have no religion" or "Romanies don't have a written language" or "Romanies are afraid of water" or "Romanies never lie to other Romanies"; better to ask us directly than to repeat this kind of misinformation taken from books and assume automatically that what you've read about us is true. The older written sources are usually full of mistakes. In one book, Manfri Woods' *In the Life of a Romany Gypsy* (1973), a whole creation myth and religion was invented, and has been repeated as fact in at least four other published works since then. Some recommended titles of

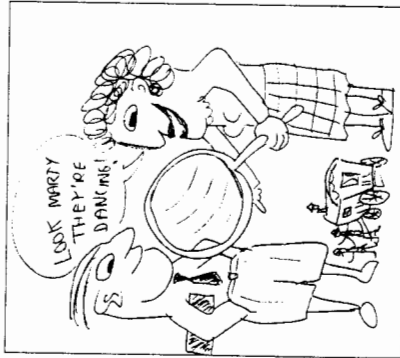


sources which are reliable are provided in Chapter 15.

For a lot of people, the first and only Romani person they've ever met comes to represent *all* Romanies for them. Each one of us is different – don't judge an entire people on just one individual. Similarly, students newly come to Romani Studies may judge all subsequently-encountered groups by the first that they got to know – a characteristic that one writer has called "Kalderashocentrism". There are great differences among Romani groups, and what might appear to be 'more Romani' in one rather than another may turn out simply to be a custom adopted from the local non-Romani population.

Don't imply that our way of life is archaic by asking whether we 'still' do things ("do they still arrange their marriages?") – this is another way of suggesting that we 'still' have a way to go before we catch up with you. And at the same time, don't be disappointed when we don't match the Hollywood small-g gypsy image. One journalist, writing an article about Romanies for an American newspaper included the words "sadly, some of them are now living in houses". If that writer had actually met any of us, he'd have known that fewer than three per cent of Romani Americans live permanently in trailers today. When non-Romanies abandon their older customs, they call it 'progress', but if we do, we're seen as losing our 'gypsiness'. Don't try to save us from that, or show us how to be more 'gypsy' the way the English woman "Indian Kathy" tried to do and who.

The idea of having some "Gypsy blood" is an attractive one to some non-Romanies; a cartoon from the short-lived newsletter *Dukhum*.



Another Buhazi cartoon.

dressed in bead-and-feather adorned buckskins, rides her piebald stallion Indian-style along the roads of Kent. She is seeking out gypsies in their roadside camps to restore their pride and their forgotten crafts (Zygmant, 1974:16).

It isn't necessary to try to become one of us by giving yourself a Romani name, or dressing in 'gypsy-like' fashion, or calling us 'brother' and 'sister'. At the same time, conforming sensibly in some ways where dress is concerned will certainly help you and us both feel comfortable together, particularly regarding how you clothe your lower body. The appeal of having some 'Gypsy blood' is not uncommon among non-Romanies, but if such a wish were ever realised, it might not prove to be so romantic. To paraphrase Arigon Starr, "everyone wants to be a Gypsy, but if they could, they'd find it scary. You're in a place where you're invisible" (Elkind, 2000:1).

We are both *here* and *now*, so please address us as 'you' and not 'they' when you are talking directly to us – by calling us 'they' you are removing us to another place away from you and not acknowledging who is right there in front of you. And when writing about us, don't describe our way of life in the past tense – by doing that, you are removing us to another time. An example of this distancing us from the present, as well as of grossly distorting our culture, is found in one encyclopedia (Walker, 1983:361):

The matriarch was the center of gypsy tribal life. Everything that went on around a tribal mother resembled the old pagan sex rites. Her husband was a drone, whose function was to impregnate her. The tribe supported him in idleness, but looked down on him as a non-productive member if he failed to beget perfect children.

Sometimes in the portrayal of our people, and in films especially, characteristics typical of quite distinct Romani groups are all thrown together, so that in a scene which takes place in Ukraine or Lithuania, for example, the actors might be shown wearing Spanish Romani clothes and living in British Romani waggons. In novels, when the author wishes to include some of our language for authenticity, British Romanticist Romani words

(usually traceable to the writings of George Borrow) are put in the mouths of Hungarian or Russian Romanies, or else British Romanichals will be described as participating in a *kris*, the internal legal system specific to Vlax Romanies. This kind of misrepresentation is relatively harmless, except that it helps keep alive an inaccurate idea of what we are really like.

In more serious situations of conflict or misunderstanding, the best solution is very often compromise – neither side being 100 per cent satisfied, but attempting to work together by meeting half way. Sitting down and talking, getting to know each other as equals, is the first step to starting this process. And who knows – when you get to know us better, you might discover fascinating aspects of the Romani world that you never dreamt existed.

You can be a very real factor in the future peace and stability of your country. The Romani population is huge, numbering in the millions in Europe alone, and like the rest of the European population, it continues to grow. In May 2001 the British magazine *The Economist* reported that "In Slovakia, Gypsies... might even become a majority in the country by 2060" (Ledgard, 2001:29). None of us is going anywhere, and we really have only one choice: to learn to live together. The alternatives are simply too awful to contemplate. Destroying whole populations, as the Nazis attempted to do, ultimately fail, but at tremendous cost. Maintaining a racially segregated society is miserable for everybody, and enormously expensive. Learning not just to tolerate each other but to respect each other as well is our only real option.

Suggestions like these have been made elsewhere. In August 1983, a Romani woman from Finland, Saga Weckman, attended the Eleventh International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Quebec, and circulated a document there entitled *Researching Gypsies: Advice from a Romni*. Her comments are valuable because they come from a Romani person. They are given here:

- 1 Make yourself familiar with the essential elements of Romani culture and social organisation, no matter what is the actual research problem you are interested in.
- 2 When researching, be genuinely yourself. Do not try to 'become a Gypsy'. You can't. And do not try to over-please us.
- 3 Do not pigeonhole us into the framework of the governing majority and its science. It has been attempted for over 400 years already, with

little success. In some ways we are like other people, but hasty generalizations are dangerous.

- 4 Remember that you are the novice in Gypsy culture, not the expert. That is so, no matter how many degrees you have.
- 5 As is the case with any research into a culture, there is a common thread running through Romani culture. Without discovering that, any research on Gypsies will fail. Remember that you are dealing with a non-European (or Euro-American) culture. Do not force us into a European mould. We are an eastern culture, as we come from India.
- 6 Never be satisfied with the first answer you get to a question.
- 7 Although we speak the *gadji* language besides our own, it may differ sometimes from that of the majority. That is not because our use of the language is inferior to yours, but it is different, with different meanings attached to the same words. Pay attention to meanings, not to words, to avoid misunderstandings. You might also be made fun of through the use of that same language.
- 8 Do not draw too-hasty conclusions, as they are usually the wrong ones.
- 9 Come 'down' to 'our level' from your pedestal. From a platform you can never reach us.
- 10 Try to leave your attitudes and prejudices outside the door. Do not compare us with yourself.
- 11 Be a humane human being.
- 12 Always use our expertise about ourselves, but use it – and us – correctly.
- 13 Gypsies love authenticity in all its forms. Be genuine when you are working with us.
- 14 Never betray the trust shown to you.

Since then, two more sets of such guidelines have appeared: one a small book from the Union Romani in Spain in 1998, prepared in cooperation with the European Commission and entitled *The Gypsy People: A Guide for Journalists* (available from <http://www.unionromani.org>), and the other a pamphlet published in Britain in 2000 by The Commission for Racial Equality, entitled *Travellers, Gypsies and the Media: Guidance to Journalists*, which is reproduced here:

- Poor quality reporting which exploits or panders to stereotypes can cause much hurt to those about whom the stories are written. By repeating false and negative stereotypes, the media can encourage bad practice on the part of those with whom Travellers and Gypsies deal and can validate the expression of language and attitudes which in any other circumstances would be seen as totally unacceptable.
- The Commission for Racial Equality has handled cases under the Race Relations Act for Travellers and Gypsies for over 20 years. The number

of such cases continues to run at several dozen each year. The majority of these cases involve clear breaches of the Act. These guidelines are not intended to make the Media shy away from covering issues and stories to do with Travellers and Gypsies. Quite the contrary. The Commission for Racial Equality and those organisations representing Travellers and Gypsies want to see more coverage in the media but are keen to help the media develop a coverage that is honest and fair, open and inclusive.

- Steer clear of exploiting prejudice: the public wants a media that is campaigning, but those campaigns should be built on matters of genuine public concern, not simply prejudices against particular groups.
- Check the facts: go to the experts who can help to set the context. With these recommendations we include a list of contacts of individuals and organisations which can help you with various aspects of your story. Make sure that wherever possible you check the details with a relevant source, and don't just rely on expressions of local or popular prejudice. Many allegations are made about Travellers, Gypsies and now Roma asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, but can those making the allegations actually substantiate them?
- Don't let your news agenda only be driven by the way others are handling the issue: certain story-lines easily dominate media discussions of Travellers or Gypsies while issues of great importance to the communities involved are downplayed or ignored altogether. Don't write about Travellers or Gypsies only in the context of disputes over stopping places, look also at the problems they face.
- Look behind the story line: don't assume there is only one point of view. Always seek the views of Traveller and Gypsy organisations to see whether or not there is an alternative interpretation or a different and more significant story line to be presented.
- Listen to the people you are writing about: this is particularly important when it comes to the terms and language you use. Terms such as 'linker', 'itinerant', or 'gyppo' are all highly offensive to those about whom they are used and should be avoided. The terms Traveller(s), Gypsy or Irish Traveller should be used with initial capital letters. Offensive stereotypes (for example 'scroungers', 'dole dodgers', 'bogus asylum seekers') should only be used when they are accurate descriptions of particular individuals, and should not be employed to negatively stereotype whole groups.
- Don't label people if it is not relevant. Reference to the fact that an individual is a Traveller, Gypsy or Irish Traveller should only be made when it is relevant and appropriate.