

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Nationalities Papers has received a surprising number of responses to its special issue *Gypsies in Eastern Europe* (Vol. XIX, No. 3, Fall 1991). The majority expressed personal gratitude that an effort was made to integrate the study of Gypsies into the mainstream of the journal's concerns. However, a sizeable minority of letters took specific issue with some of the points raised, in particular in Ian Hancock's article. A selected exchange follows below.

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To the Editor:

I am writing in response to the article by Ian Hancock, "The East European Roots of Romani Nationalism,"¹ especially his criticism of non-Gypsy authors under the subheading, "Non-Gypsy Attitudes to Romani Unity."

I group the persons criticized by Hancock into four sections. First, I will deal with Hancock's charges against the following scholars of Gypsies: the British Dora Yates and Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald, the American Werner Cohn, and the Hungarian József Vekerdi; secondly, I will discuss in some detail Hancock's criticism addressed to myself; thirdly, I will turn to the Czech Jaroslav Sus; and lastly, I would like to comment on Heinrich Himmler, as referred to by Hancock.

In Hancock's eyes, the "guilt" of the authors in question consists of their claiming that Gypsies do not represent a totality and do not aim at unity with other Gypsies. It is true that there exists, scattered in different countries, a small number of enthusiastic Gypsy and non-Gypsy organizers of Gypsies, who are working along the lines of what Hancock calls "Gypsy nationalism." As can be expected, they may overreact to the fact that Gypsies had to live, for centuries, like pariahs on the outskirts of European societies. These activists claim to speak for the Gypsies but, in spite of certain organizational achievements, they still have little impact on the Gypsies as a whole. We can even see in Hancock's article that it is difficult to organize the Gypsies.

Some things which these organizers of Gypsies plan are remote from the daily concerns of the majority of Gypsies. One of the favorite projects of some organizers, in which the majority of Gypsies are disinterested, is the creation of a literary Gypsy language.² (Although present Gypsy, or Romani, dialects developed from *one* language, their mutual intelligibility varies from little to practically nothing. As a result, there would have to be *several* literary Gypsy languages.)

In reality, literacy has only a short tradition among Gypsies. Because all Gypsies, if they still speak Romani, become bilingual at an early age in the

language of their host country, they take it for granted that their children learn to read and write in their second language (*i.e.*, not in Romani). This does not mean that they should not have a literary language. But the first step toward any attempt at creating one would be to include a realistic assessment of the actual linguistic situation of Gypsies.

Hancock's criticism of me stems from my review³ of Krume Kepeski's and Saip Jusuf's grammar of Romani, published in Skopje, Yugoslavian Macedonia.⁴

My general objection to the Macedonian Romani grammar then, as now, is that it creates the false impression that Gypsies share a literary language. In reality, there still is no literary Romani. One specific example of this unrealistic approach is how the compilers of the Macedonian Romani grammar handled the borrowed words (in this case, from Macedonian). One of the unique features of the Gypsies is that each Romani dialect abounds in such borrowings. It is a result of specific local histories of the Gypsies.

Enthusiastic "Gypsy nationalists," however, dream of creating a "literary" Romani which would compare in every way with literary languages which have hundreds of years of evolution behind them. Acting along these lines, the authors of the Macedonian Romani grammar eliminated from the living Romani that they started with most of the borrowed words, and replaced them with words from *Hindi*. Why from Hindi? It obviously seemed to them (and to other "Gypsy nationalists" too) that it followed logically from the fact that Romani and Hindi are cognate languages. It did not matter to them that the Hindi words they incorporated into their "literary" Romani are *incomprehensible* to Gypsies, and that their large number makes his "literary" Romani a foreign language even to those Gypsies on whose dialect (or dialects) it was based.

Since the integration of Gypsies into non-Gypsy societies is accelerating, Romani is (or, more correctly, Romani *dialects* are), unfortunately, gradually falling into disuse. As a specialist in Romani dialects, I am, naturally, for keeping *all* Romani dialects alive. By declaring that the Macedonian Romani grammar represents a "literary" Gypsy language, the illusion is created that all is well with Romani. In fact, the Macedonian "literary" Romani is an unneeded, nonviable creation. At the same time, the present situation of the endangered living Romani dialects goes unchallenged.

For this precise reason I wrote for the *Newsletter* of the Gypsy Lore Society (North American Chapter) a practical program of what, in my opinion, should be done for Romani, rather than fortifying complacent illusions such as that of the "nationalists." What Hancock quotes as an illustration of my supposed "hostility" to "Gypsy nationalism" comes from my program proposal. Here are some relevant excerpts from that program:

"[I]t should be the aim of Gypsyologists to capture the genuine, vanishing Gypsy culture and language in all their local varieties,

in order to save them for the treasury of the works of the human spirit.

“Unfortunately, many of the prevalent interpretations of the Gypsy culture or certain aspects of them are not based on an objective analysis of the reality, but rather on preconceived ideas which may have been derived from an observation of other ethnic groups, but which do not apply to Gypsies...

“[W]hat the present situation calls for (quite apart, of course, from the need for an improvement of the material conditions of the Gypsies) is to record many spontaneous and genuine texts on any topics from the real life of Gypsies, in all living Romani dialects in the form in which they are really spoken, *i.e.*, without eliminating any borrowed elements and without introducing any new expressions artificially. All such texts would serve non-Gypsy and Gypsy students alike as sources of the real, living Romani. Many of the texts would, in addition, contain information about Gypsy institutions and customs. If in the process of looking for native assistants and of training them for this task, literary talents should appear, so much the better. But even in such cases I would not rush to call their Romani a “literary language,” not, that is, if we are to be serious about the meaning of “literary language.” The proposed existence [creation] of a “literary” Romani would confine potential writers speaking dialects other than the one which might by accident come to be called “literary” Romani. Our aim should be the opposite: to encourage writing in all dialects of all varieties of the Gypsy language. Systematic work on this project may lead some day to the appearance of a genuine Gypsy literature, perhaps in several forms.

“The idea of a ‘creation’ of a literary Romani (in one or more forms, no matter on what dialect or combination of dialects they may be based) may seem to be in tune with certain trends of modern times. In reality, however, it is mere toying, a waste of energy and material means which are not abundant for Gypsy studies. While a missing attribute is being *artificially contrived*, which is supposed to *make the Gypsies an ethnic minority in the conventional sense* in the eyes of *wishful thinkers* and bureaucrats, irreplaceable values of Gypsy culture are being lost in our time.”⁵

(I have italicized the words that Hancock selected to illustrate (on. p. 256) my supposed “guilt.”)

I still hold these same opinions. With an objective approach, Hancock would have recognized that I was writing in the interest of the true Gypsy folk culture which, after all, should be one of the main concerns of “Gypsy nationalists.”

Hancock refers to Jaroslav Sus as a Gypsyologist. But he is not. His book⁶ is an application of the theory of nationality, as it was proclaimed by Marxists of the Soviet variety. Its main source was the official decision of the Communist leadership of Czechoslovakia on the political status of Gypsies. They had decided, in their official capacity, against which there was no appeal, that the different groups of Gypsies in Czechoslovakia were not to be considered a national minority (much less, of course, national *minorities*).

Contrary to what one would expect, Hancock mentions Heinrich Himmler for a different reason than having been the head of the organization which was in charge of the systematic murdering of Gypsies. At first, I did not understand the relation alleged by Hancock between Himmler and the people accused of hostility to “Gypsy nationalism.” Finally, I came to understand Hancock’s train of thought. It goes as follows: Himmler—so Hancock says (p. 255)—decided, in spite of his genocidal intentions, that “certain conservative Romani families” be spared from execution in order to save them as historical curiosities. He did so not because there was a whiff of compassion in him, but only after cold-blooded reflection. The objective scholarly interest of the Gypsyologists criticized by Hancock is comparable to the heartless interest of Himmler in the Gypsy families he decided to spare. Their “sin” was not acknowledging the existence of “Gypsy nationalism.”

An objective article on what Hancock calls “Gypsy nationalism” would be a welcome contribution to Gypsy studies. But Hancock’s article does not represent objective scholarship. It is not adequately documented. It is calculated to appeal to emotion rather than to logic.⁷

1. *Nationalities Papers*, xix, No. 3, Winter 1991, pp. 251-267.

2. See, for instance, “Forging a New Gypsy Spirit: Will Sanskrit Help?” *The New York Times*, August 27, 1990, p. A4.

3. *Newsletter of the Gypsy Lore Society, North American Chapter*, 5, No. 3, 1982, p. 1.

4. Krume Kepeski and Saip Jusuf, *Romani gramatika—Romska gramatika*. Skopje: Nasa Kniga, 1980.

5. *Newsletter of the Gypsy Lore Society, North American Chapter*, 6, No. 1, 1983, pp. 8-

9. See also my reply in No. 3 of the same volume of the *Newsletter*, p. 2.

6. Jaroslav, Sus, *Cikánská otázka v CSSR* (“The Gypsy Problem in Czechoslovakia”). Prague: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1961.

7. I wish to thank Fr. Francis Glimm for his suggestions.

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