# 7

# Acculturation and Identity

## *Romani Communities in the United States during the Interwar Period*

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### INTRODUCTION

In November 1921, an article in the *New York Times* asserted that "the American gypsy has little in common with his European brother." Instead of telling fortunes, the "American gypsy" makes fortunes. Instead of buying or selling horses, the "American gypsy" deals in "second-hand automobiles."[1] The people who in Europe were "wrapped in song and melody" have now "lost all faculty for music." In short, "because of new conditions, [the gypsy] has changed occupation, dress, has forgotten his language, [and] has neglected his song."[2] The article's author was Konrad Bercovici (1882–1961), a Romania-born, Paris-educated, Jewish American immigrant and transatlantic popularizer of his interpretation of Romani culture through some forty books, including *The Story of the Gypsies* (1928) and an autobiography titled *It's the Gypsy in Me* (1941).

Less than four years later, the *New York Times* expressed nearly identical concerns in an unsigned magazine article, "Three Contend for Crown of Gypsies." Describing the death of Nicholas John, "King of the Gypsies," the reporter observed that "The Americanized gypsy is rapidly casting his Old World ways to the winds."[3] Instead of traditional horse-drawn wagons to convey the "King's coffin," there was an "automobile

[1] Konrad Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance: They Swap Autos Now, Wear Store Clothes and Seldom Dance, but Still Roam On," *New York Times*, November 20, 1921, section 7, 4. Capitalization has been retained in all quoted material.

[2] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.

[3] "Three Contend for Crown of Gypsies: Forces of Old and New World Line Up for Royal Contest," *New York Times Magazine Section*, March 15, 1925, 5.



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hearse." Instead of traditional use of the patteran, the news of the "King's" death traveled by "Telephone and telegraph wires." In sum, the reporter concludes, "The truth is the gypsy is conforming to the new civilization." If it were not for "the brilliant coloring of the women's clothing ... they would pass unnoticed among the many foreigners that crowd the streets. The advent of the automobile has changed their customs."[4]

These two *New York Times* articles provide a useful starting point for this chapter's examination of concerns regarding Romani acculturation and identity in the United States from the 1920s through the 1950s, especially as expressed by anthropologists, Gypsylorists, journalists, literary figures and members of Roma communities in New York. In so doing, it will also explore how members of these groups have held different concepts of acculturation – sometimes concurrently – throughout much of the twentieth century. Assumptions held about Romani people by diverse Americans impacted expectations about their culture, especially how, and even if, it should change with a transatlantic crossing. This is especially important to consider within Romani history because during these decades Romani people were so often posited as primitive, timeless and thus outside normal cultural and historical forces.[5] Despite this, Romani immigrants themselves made strategic choices about if, when and how to adopt to new circumstances they encountered in the United States.

## DEFINITIONS OF ACCULTURATION AND GYPSYLORISM

As defined by the anthropologist Margaret A. Gibson, "Acculturation is the process of culture change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact. ... Although in much of the literature on immigrant acculturation there is a presumption that the new culture acquired is some homogenous or standard form of American culture, the reality is often quite different."[6] Accordingly, scholars have differentiated among three primary forms of acculturation based on the extent to which an immigrant group succeeds in its coming into contact with the host culture. The conventional wisdom posits that the most "successful" form is "the traditional model of linear acculturation and

[4] "Three Contend," 5.

[5] Katie Trumpener, "The Time of the Gypsies: A 'People without History' in the Narratives of the West," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 843–84, https://doi.org/10.1086/448659.

[6] Margaret A. Gibson, "Immigrant Adaptation and Patterns of Acculturation," *Human Development* 44, no. 1 (2001): 19, https://doi.org/10.1159/000057037.

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assimilation whereby the immigrant group advances economically and is integrated socially, culturally and politically into the middle class."[7] At the opposite end is a marginalized form of acculturation, which leads the immigrant group "into an underclass" and "downward into poverty or ... trapped at the bottom of the economic ladder," with limited "opportunities for upward mobility."[8] In between the two is what anthropologists and sociologists have termed "selective acculturation," in which the immigrant group maintains "a strong ethnic enclave coupled with the deliberate preservation of the homeland culture, albeit in an adapted form more suitable to life in the host country." No scholar today would posit that a person's culture could remain stable or unchanged after a migratory experience.[9]

The two *New York Times* articles published in the 1920s ran counter to these conventional contemporary views of acculturation and identity. For Bercovici, the Romanies' ability to acculturate successfully and to make fortunes rather than tell fortunes was lamentable, not laudable. He did not welcome what could have been interpreted as their economic advances and integration into the middle class – a perspective representing several aspects of what present-day scholars have identified as Gypsylorism. As defined conceptually by Ken Lee's seminal article, Gypsylorism is a "discursive formation that emerges from asymmetrical exchanges of power of different sorts (political, economic, cultural, intellectual and moral) that in turn help to re-constitute and perpetuate the unequal exchanges that underlay the initial discursive formation."[10] If "Orientalism is the discursive construction of the exotic Other *outside* Europe," then Gypsylorism is a "particular variant" that constructs an "exotic Other *within* Europe – Romanies are the Orientals within."[11]

Another characteristic that Lee attributes to Gypsylorism, and more particularly to Bercovici, is to regard Romanies "as exotic and anachronistic outsiders in a modern setting – the exotics/primitives within."[12] In that sense, the two *New York Times* articles partially qualify as

[7] Gibson, "Immigrant Adaptation," 20.
[8] Gibson, "Immigrant Adaptation," 21.
[9] Gibson, "Immigrant Adaptation," 20–21.
[10] Ken Lee, "Orientalism and Gypsylorism," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 44, no. 2 (2000): 132.
[11] Lee, "Orientalism and Gypsylorism," 132.
[12] Lee, "Orientalism and Gypsylorism," 135–36. This is similar to Philip Deloria's description of "Indians in unexpected places," when Native people were (and are) perceived as humorous anomalies when shown engaging in everyday scenes of modern life. Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (University of Kansas Press, 2004).

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Gypsylorist: lamenting how American Roma have cast their "Old World ways to the wind" of modernity, and how Romani people in the Americas were acculturating to the point of losing their distinctiveness, even while Romani culture remained perceived as anachronistic.

Certainly, the 1920s was not the earliest decade when interested witnesses suggest the decline, if not loss, of Romani identity and culture. Earlier, there were the "folklorists, linguists, ethnologists and (amateur) historians" who had founded the Gypsy Lore Society in 1888, "intent on preserving the remains of Gypsy culture, searching to achieve this end as romantically inspired 'archaeologists' for the last traces of a people they saw as vanishing."[13] Significantly, the organization's founders regarded the Gypsy Lore Society as a truly transatlantic organization, based on an initial suggestion from William John Ibbetson in 1887 "that the Anglo-American Romany Ryes should form themselves into a club or correspondence society, for the purpose of compiling and publishing" Romany songs and words.[14] The Gypsy Lore Society's first officers were Charles G. Leland (1824–1903), an American folklorist and poet who served as president, and Henry Thomas Crofton (1848–1928), an Anglo-Irish solicitor who served as vice president. Leland had even earlier lamented "the picturesque traits" that were "so rapidly vanishing" among the Roma.[15]

## THE POPULARITY OF KONRAD BERCOVICI

However, neither Leland nor most Gypsy Lore Society members could equal Bercovici's influence, at least in terms of readership, making him hugely responsible for spreading and entrenching primitivist assumptions about Romani people. The editor's introduction to one of Bercovici's stories in *American Magazine* referred to him as "one of the widely known authors of this country."[16] Moreover, firms in the United Kingdom published several of his books – most notably *Gypsy Blood*

[13] Wim Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy: From Enlightenment to Final Solution* (Routledge, 1998), 172. Here again we see commonalities with assumptions about Native Americans and others. Patrick Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800–1930* (Cornell University Press, 2003).

[14] W. J. Ibbetson, "Songs of the English Gipsies," *Notes and Queries* 7th series, 4 (November 12, 1897): 397.

[15] Charles G. Leland, *The Gypsies* (Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 189.

[16] Konrad Bercovici, "The Romantic Gypsy," *American Magazine* 107 (February 1929): 24.

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(1922), *Love and the Gypsy* (1923), *Between Earth and Sky* (1925) and *The Story of the Gypsies* (1928) – and publishers in Moscow and Leningrad translated at least fifteen of Bercovici's short stories into Russian during the 1920s.[17] These publications and translations suggest that Bercovici was not only popular abroad but also part of an intellectual movement that was fully transatlantic.

In 1939, an appreciation in the *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine* called Bercovici "the world's favorite writer of Gypsy tales."[18] According to another account, Bercovici "competed with [Irving] Brown during the interwar period for the title of 'greatest authority in the United States on gypsies.'"[19] Irving H. Brown (1888–1940) was a member of the Gypsy Lore Society and author of several publications on Romani lore in the United States, most notably *Gypsy Fires in America: A Narrative of Life among the Romanies of the United States and Canada* (1924) and "The Gypsies in America" (1929). However, when Brown falsely claimed to have "Gypsy blood," Bercovici gained an advantage and greater book sales by suggesting that Brown was "a 'counterfeit Gypsy' scholar."[20] In short, Konrad Bercovici – although relatively little-known today – was perhaps the most prolific and influential conveyor of representations of Romani culture during the first half of the twentieth century. The extraordinary popularity of Bercovici's writings, both inside and outside the United States, suggests that his views on Romani culture struck a responsive chord at the time and that they merit further examination, particularly as they relate directly to early twentieth-century thinking about transatlantic acculturation.

Additional support for Bercovici's significance in this context comes from Dalen C. Butler Wakeley-Smith's dissertation, "They Came Like Gypsies in the Night: Immigration Regimes, Race, and Romani Representations in New York City, 1890–1960." Wakeley-Smith noted how the 1920s (when Bercovici and Brown were at the height of their popularity) was a time when "'Gypsies' were showing up more and more in newspapers across the country, [but] the 'Gypsies' being shown and

[17] Glenora W. Brown and Deming B. Brown, *A Guide to Soviet Russian Translations of American Literature* (King's Crown Press, Columbia University, 1954), 48–50.

[18] Arthur Millier, "Master of Irony," *Los Angeles Times Sunday Magazine*, February 5, 1939, 5.

[19] David J. Nemeth, "Irving Brown: The American Borrow?" *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 5th series, 4, no. 1 (1994): 18–19.

[20] Nemeth, "Irving Brown," 19. The phenomena of ethnic impersonation by authors was not uncommon at this time. Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

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discussed were increasingly becoming domesticated 'Gypsies,' Americanized versions of their European counterparts."[21] Many of those reports of "actual 'Gypsies'" displayed "a tension between 'old' and 'new' ways with the automobile and networks working to move some groups into more permanent patterns of settlement, thereby shoring off some of the more noticeable vestiges of 'Gypsy' life."[22] The tension between these old and new ways – between maintaining cultural identity and acculturating to American customs and lifestyles – was one of the most important issues related to immigrants being debated during the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States.

Bercovici's critique of acculturation was important because he was so well known at the time. When Bercovici died in 1961, the *New York Herald Tribune* summed up his career as "nomad, blacksmith, teacher, farmer, musician, sailor, newspaperman" and (incorrectly) as a "Romanian gypsy."[23] In fact, Bercovici was born and raised in the Moldavia region of eastern Romania, in Galaţi and Brăila – but to a family that was Jewish, not Romani. Following anti-Jewish pogroms in Romania in the 1880s and 1890s, he moved with his family abroad – first to Brussels, ca. 1897, then to Paris, ca. 1899, and finally across the Atlantic to New York (by way of Southampton), ca. 1904. Described as "a big, fierce-looking fellow – broadly built with a shock of unruly hair and a Stalinesque mustache,"[24] he knew that some people mistook him for Roma, but he almost always let the misconception stand. As he explained in his autobiography:

> The legend of my being a Gypsy was growing, and I didn't care to dispute it. I wore flamboyant cravats and vests and welcomed the excuse to wear them; everybody said I was a Gypsy. . . . I bought a dozen of the most vivid scarfs and cravats and let my love for color run riot. No one had ever worn such red, yellow, and green shirts as I dared to wear at that time.[25]

Perhaps to counter what he lamented as the waning of colorful Romani culture, Bercovici sought not only to identify as Roma himself, but also to flaunt that identity in public.

[21] Dalen C. Butler Wakeley-Smith, "They Came Like Gypsies in the Night: Immigration Regimes, Race, and Romani Representation in New York City, 1890–1960" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2022), 161.
[22] Wakeley-Smith, "They Came Like Gypsies," 161–62.
[23] "Konrad Bercovici Dies at 80; Wrote 40 Books: Gypsy Came to U.S. in 1904 and Traded Fiddle for a Dictionary," *New York Herald Tribune*, December 28, 1961, 16.
[24] "Konrad Bercovici Dies," 16.
[25] Konrad Bercovici, *It's the Gypsy in Me* (Prentice-Hall, 1941), 133, 144.

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Bercovici continued his critique of Romani acculturation in an article published in the "Book Review and Magazine" section of the *New York Times* in 1923, following up on what he had articulated in the same newspaper two years earlier. Referring to New York, Bercovici observed, "There are hardly any tent gypsies now in and about the city. They live mostly in abandoned, empty stores on the lower east side."[26] Perhaps justifying his own colorful attire, Bercovici added, "the gypsies are becoming more soberly dressed from day to day. Those living in the city limits replaced their colored garb with a more sober one, trying hard to be as little conspicuous as possible."[27] He even lamented that "Their musical names had been Americanized to Mike and Jake."[28] In the words of a social worker quoted by Bercovici: "Look at them. They are getting so nice and white that in another few years they will be hardly distinguishable from the other people."[29] A racialized perspective clearly colored assumptions about acculturation.

Bercovici's observations in daily newspapers and popular magazines certainly enhanced his reputation as an authority on Romani lore – which may have led Wakeley-Smith to label him "an avid 'Gypsyologist' of the period [early 1920s]"[30] rather than a Gypsylorist. Bercovici's own transatlantic identity – born in Romania, living in New York and with publications in the United Kingdom, United States and Soviet Union – may have drawn him to the transatlantic Gypsy Lore Society, which he joined in 1927. He remained a member for two years, but he let his membership lapse in 1929.

## THE GYPSY LORE SOCIETY VS. KONRAD BERCOVICI

The *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* had positively reviewed Bercovici's book, *Ghitza and other Romances of Gypsy Blood* (1921), noting that "Mr. Bercovici's matter is so fresh, and his narrative style so graphically

[26] Konrad Bercovici, "New York a Gypsy Capital: Last Refuge of Civilization-Hunted Tziganes in Abandoned East Side Stores," *New York Times*, July 29, 1923, section 3, 6.
[27] Bercovici, "New York a Gypsy Capital," 6.
[28] Bercovici, "New York a Gypsy Capital," 6.
[29] Bercovici, "New York a Gypsy Capital," 6.
[30] Dalen C. B. Wakeley-Smith, "'The One Primitive People Who Contact with Civilization Has Failed to Exterminate': New York and 'Gypsy' Madness in the 1920s," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 43, no. 1 (2023): 71, https://doi.org/10.5406/19364695.43.1.03.

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vivid, that he both arrests and holds one's attention, stamping scene after scene on one's mind as with a die; tense, passionate, dramatic scenes for the most part, but now and again, and with equal clearness of definition, some picture of workaday life."[31] However, when the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* reviewed Bercovici's *The Story of the Gypsies* (1928), it was not wholly positive. The review contained two sections – the first written by Bercovici's friend Victor Weybright, whose opening paragraph enthusiastically endorsed Bercovici's credentials as an authoritative expert:

> Mr. Konrad Bercovici is better endowed by nature for the rôle of *aficionado* than any man I have ever beheld. He looks like a Gypsy; he acts like a Gypsy. He was born in Rumania where Gypsies are plentiful as blackbirds; he studied music in Milan and Paris, roamed the Levant, touched India. He came to America thirteen years ago to seek his fortune, and found it. For the popular periodicals he writes stories of his own Rumanian Gypsies which are splendid and poignant, and which sandwich genuine romance into the prevailing loaf of drab fiction. An entire village suddenly catching fire could be no more dramatic than a village invaded by Gypsies in a Bercovici story. His English, like that acquired by many Continental linguists, is bold and ingenuous and composed of astonishingly effective rhetoric. Theodore Dreiser, the American novelist, calls Mr. Bercovici "The Gypsy," and there is no reason why he should not.[32]

Following Weybright's byline, the review contained an unsigned addendum, which began:

> As Mr. Weybright has confined himself in the preceding review of Bercovici's book almost entirely to the chapter on American Gypsies, it has been thought better to add some more general criticism of the work, especially as many of the reviewers who have dealt with it seem to accept Bercovici as an omniscient authority on the Gypsies.[33]

This "general criticism" referred to "inaccuracies" in the book, which were "probably due to carelessness and ignorance," including what the reviewer termed a "slipshod and imaginative treatment of his subject."[34] The review concluded by advising that *The Story of the Gypsies* "should be read, like the rest of Bercovici's books, solely for amusement. Of that the reader who knows anything about Gypsies or their history will derive

[31] T. W. Thompson, "Review of *Ghitza and Other Romances of Gypsy Blood*," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 1 (1922): 189.
[32] Victor Weybright, "Review of *The Story of the Gypsies*," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 8 (1929): 184.
[33] Weybright, "Review of *The Story of the Gypsies*," 189.
[34] Weybright, "Review of *The Story of the Gypsies*," 190.

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more from it than the author intended."[35] It seems likely that these criticisms motivated Bercovici to let his Gypsy Lore Society membership lapse in 1929.

Nevertheless, Bercovici's reputation in the popular press at the same time remained high. For instance, an article, "The Romantic Gypsy," which Bercovici had written for *American Magazine*, introduced him with considerable hyperbole, as follows:

> Mr. Bercovici writes about the Gypsies from the inside out. He speaks their language; he has lived with various tribes as they wandered here and there in many lands. He is a native of Roumania, and when still a boy he left home to live and sing and dance with the colorful bands of wanderers who scorn permanent homes. Mr. Bercovici came to America as a musician, but soon began to write, and is now one of the widely known authors of this country. He recently completed "The Story of the Gypsies," a book which interprets these mysterious, gay, and romantic folk as no other work has done. His fiction, written around the gypsies, has long been eagerly read by the American public.[36]

Much of Bercovici's popularity appears to have come from his ability to promote traditional assumptions about supposedly authentic Roma among a US population driven by nostalgia.

## DEBATES OVER ACCULTURATION

Konrad Bercovici's aforementioned article in the "Special Features" section of the *New York Times* in November 1921 seems to be his first published piece on Romani acculturation, appearing just before the publication of *Ghitza and Other Romances of Gypsy Blood* (1921), his first collection of short stories with Romani characters. The news article's opening paragraphs certainly grab the reader's attention:

> Gypsies no longer tell fortunes; they make them! They no longer steal, buy or sell horses; they deal in second-hand automobiles.
>
> The gypsy woman wears $20 shoes and $5 stockings. The gypsy man keeps his cash in the bank and sends his daughters to college.[37]

The article continues with numerous examples of Romani acculturation to mainstream American life, including claims that "beautiful shawls" are being "discarded, in favor of feather boas" and that the "younger set even bobs its hair."[38] Unlike in Europe where they lived in

[35] Weybright, "Review of *The Story of the Gypsies*," 192.
[36] Bercovici, "Romantic Gypsy," 24. [37] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.
[38] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.

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large, extended families, the Roma now have "small families ... and even divorces."[39] Rather than tending to animals as "miracle-working veterinarians, ... They are mechanics today; piecing together broken parts of an engine with copper wire, welding, melting and remolding with molten lead, tin and copper."[40] Bercovici concludes by referring to the transatlantic places of "recent origin ... Russia, Rumania, Brazil, Hungary, Spain or England," but laments, "[B]ecause of new conditions, he has changed occupation, dress, has forgotten his language, has neglected his song."[41] All of these changes point to inevitable acculturation in America, but Bercovici's one hope is that the Roma will be able to resist "assimilation" so long as American society does "not impose upon him the four walls of a permanent habitation."[42]

Bercovici's resistance to Romani acculturation and assimilation in the early 1920s was very much part of an intellectual zeitgeist, which sought to salvage and preserve the cultural identity of other marginalized groups in the United States, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, for fear that they and their cultures might be vanishing. For instance, the Harlem Renaissance was on one hand a broad cultural awakening for African American artists, writers, musicians and others, which began in New York's Harlem in the early 1920s and continued through the 1930s. However, one of the underlying principles for this cultural awakening was a fear that African Americans were losing their cultural distinctiveness – and especially their Africanness – through the processes of assimilation and acculturation, especially as they migrated from the rural South to the urban North. The distinguished scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. (writing in 1974 as Skip G. Gates) observed that the anthropologist (and noted Africanist) Melville Herskovits had lamented that "the African heritage of black Americans has disappeared through the process of acculturation. ... what there is today in Harlem distinct from the white culture which surrounds it, is, as far as I am able to see, merely a remnant from the peasant days in the South. Of the African culture, not a trace."[43] White visitors to Harlem feared that acculturation could change it from "being exotic, colourful, and sensuous; a place

[39] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.
[40] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.
[41] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 7.
[42] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 7.
[43] Skip G. Gates, "Of Negroes Old and New," *Transition* 46 (1974): 53, https://doi.org/10.2307/2934955.

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laughing, singing, and dancing; a place where life wakes up at night."[44] As a result, "White fascination transformed Harlem into a fantasy land more miraculously than Walt Disney ever could. Harlem became a national symbol, the symbol of the Jazz Age. Everything that Main Street, Zenith, and Gopher Prairie were not, Harlem was: Xanadu come to New York, full of the thrilling, the bizarre, the sensuous."[45]

Similar concerns led some whites in the 1920s to lament the acculturation and assimilation of some Native American tribes in the United States, particularly in the early 1920s, when the Harlem Renaissance was awakening and when Bercovici was writing cautionary articles in popular magazines and newspapers. For example, Paramount Pictures produced *The Vanishing American* (1925), a silent film directed by George Seitz, based on the 1925 novel of the same title by Zane Grey, which had appeared initially in serial form in 1922. Grey's goal was "to write a tribute to the American Indian," which "dramatizes the Indians' struggle for survival" in the face of advancing white characters – particularly missionaries and Indian agents – who sought to acculturate Native Americans.[46] The notion that Native Americans were "vanishing Americans" corresponds closely to the whites who sought to keep Harlem exotic and to the Gypsylorists who regarded Romanies "as exotic and anachronistic outsiders in a modern setting – the exotics/primitives within."[47]

Throughout the 1920s, Bercovici continued to express concerns about Romani acculturation, even while he also continued to publish numerous short stories – all highly romanticized and almost all taking place in Europe – in magazines (such as *Country Gentleman*, *Current Opinion*, *Delineator*, *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's* and *McClure's*) and in the edited collections of those stories, such as *Love and the Gypsy* (1923), *Iliana: Stories of a Wandering Race* (1924), *Singing Winds: Stories of Gipsy Life* (1926) and *The Story of the Gypsies* (1928). These fictional stories were attempts to keep alive what Bercovici had called "the old gypsy lore"[48] in the face of acculturation taking place in the United States during this time.

[44] Gates, "Negroes Old and New," 46. [45] Gates, "Negroes Old and New," 45.
[46] Angela Aleiss, "'The Vanishing American': Hollywood's Compromise to Indian Reform," *Journal of American Studies* 25, no. 3 (1991): 470, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875800034307.
[47] Lee, "Orientalism and Gypsylorism," 135–36.
[48] Bercovici, "Even Gypsies Lose Romance," 4.

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Several final examples appeared in Bercovici's *The Story of the Gypsies* (1928), which includes chapters on groups from England, France, Germany, Hungary, Macedonia, Russia, Spain and the United States. In the latter chapter, Bercovici again pointed to acculturation and loss of identity. Traveling west with a group of "Russian gypsies" led by "Chief Marco" with horses and wagons from New York City, Bercovici asked, "Why did you come to America? What made you come here?"[49] Marco's response contained a mocking question of his own:

> And why shouldn't I have come? Because there was a strip of water between this country and the one I was last in? Why does anybody come here? The only difference is that everybody else will stay here, while we will go on further; and tomorrow somebody will ask me in another country: "Why have you come here?"[50]

Marco's initial response to Bercovici suggests that he considered crossing the Atlantic Ocean from Europe as neither a barrier nor a path to acculturation, but rather a conduit to new worlds and the maintenance of Romani identity. However, three weeks later, when the group reached Toledo, Ohio, Bercovici noticed a dramatically different dynamic and what he perceived as a notably acculturated Marco:

> By that time, there wasn't a single horse or van in the tribe. The four-footed animals had all been traded and sold and bartered for automobiles. Chief Marco and his people had become motor enthusiasts, and had, in three weeks, learned all about machinery and its possibilities. No car had been with us longer than two days. There was continual bartering, exchanging, and selling. Everyone helped; even the women, who had hitherto been busy telling fortunes, were neglecting their profession for the newer and more exciting one of second-hand automobile trading. But somehow, the colors of the dresses of my Gypsy women friends had become subdued. When we reached Toledo, there was not a single scarlet scarf around the women's heads. At least two hundred American words had gone into the Calo language which my friends had been speaking among themselves. The Gypsies were still very gay, very spirited and happy; but it was a different sort of gaiety. With the change from horses to automobiles, something had gone out.
>
> Even Marco, the chief had seen the change in his people; for one day looking at his people, whose hands and faces were smeared with blackened grease, he asked me, "Why have we come to this country?" And pointing out John, his son, and a very good violinist, who had developed into the best mechanic of the tribe: "How will he ever play the violin again with fingers coarsened by the touch of steel and iron?"[51]

[49] Konrad Bercovici, *The Story of the Gypsies* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1928), 242.
[50] Bercovici, *Story of the Gypsies*, 242. [51] Bercovici, *Story of the Gypsies*, 244–45.

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In Bercovici's eyes, the United States and acculturation to American ways had negatively transformed Marco and his group. They may have been wealthier in material possessions, but poorer in cultural identity. Although Bercovici thrust his framing of acculturation upon "Chief Marco," some Romani Americans engaged with it to make sense of their own US experiences.

## STEVE KASLOV AND POSITIVE VIEWS OF ACCULTURATION

Just as Marco considered and made choices necessary to live successfully in his new home, so too did Steve Kaslov (ca. 1888–1949), variously described "as a leader of Kalderaš," "a leader of the Rusuya 'Russian' Rom group"[52] or as "a constant fixture of New York's 'Gypsy' life in the 1930s and 1940s."[53] For Kaslov in New York, much like Marco in Toledo, Ohio, some degree of acculturation was desirable, not something to be lamented. Kaslov believed "that gypsies must change" in order to adjust to their circumstances in the United States.[54] Moreover, "in many ways, Kaslov was an ideal 'Gypsy' for the public to consume in the press. He was large, loud, and by most accounts charismatic in his leadership and his affect. His persistence and use of relief funds enabled many of his kin to have work during a period of inactivity for many."[55] Somewhat ironically, at least in part because Kaslov met, or had thrust upon him, some of the expectations of an authentic "Gypsy" in the eyes of interested Americans, his perspectives on Romani cultural change were able to reach a broad audience. The US book publisher Victor Weybright romantically – but falsely – claimed in the pages of the *Survey Graphic*, that "Kaslov was born fifty years ago beside a green lane in Lowndes County, Georgia. He grew up in tent and caravan, always on the move. Married at an early age, he never spent a day of his life in school."[56] However, what Sheila Salo determined through research in census and immigration records is that "Kaslov was born in Russia in 1888," and

[52] James I. Deutsch, "Steve Kaslov," in *Roma Portraits in History: Roma Civic Emancipation Elite in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe from the 19th Century until World War II*, ed. Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov (Brill, 2022), 607.

[53] Wakeley-Smith, "They Came Like Gypsies," 183.

[54] "Gypsy School Days," *Newsweek* 15 (April 8, 1940): 32.

[55] Wakeley-Smith, "They Came Like Gypsies," 214.

[56] Victor Weybright, "Who Can Tell the Gypsies' Fortune?" *Survey Graphic* 27 (March 1938): 142.

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emigrated with his family in 1901 – first to New Brunswick, Canada, and subsequently to the United States.[57] Accordingly, Kaslov knew a great deal about transatlantic migration.

Although Kaslov had hoped to publish a complete autobiography, in order to "make a book about my people," we have today only portions of the intended book, which Kaslov either dictated to an "unnamed scribe" or that Carlos de Wendler-Funaro (one of Kaslov's non-Romani supporters) edited.[58] In one such portion, Kaslov describes exactly what Bercovici had observed about Roma living in stores, rather than tents. Moreover, in Kaslov's version, the decision to make this transition to stores was one that he made himself and one that specifically calls for acculturation to some mainstream American ways:

> We came to Newark, New Jersey. Then one day I said to the tribe, "Let's go to New York and rent ourselves some stores." Then the whole tribe started to holler, "We will not go to New York to live in stores. Because if the law finds out they will take our children and send them all to the poor house." "If you will do what I'm telling you to do, when we'll move into the stores, I want you all to dress your children like the American children and send them to school. Then nobody's going to take your children away. But if the children's society takes them, I will pay all expenses to get them out. The reason why I want you all to stay in stores is that you will not have to live in tents in cold rains and snow, and besides that, we all could make a good living in the stores by telling fortunes, and also it is closer for us to look for copper work."
>
> "So the next morning we went to Brownsville, East New York [Brooklyn], and rented about twenty stores around Pitkin Avenue, also a big stable for the horses and wagons. The next day we moved in our stores and stored our horses and wagons in the stable. In about a month or two all my tribe said, "It is very good to stay in stores in the winter and to send the children to school."[59]

Here Kaslov demonstrated the practicality of this residential acculturation – of living in stores in the city, rather than tents outdoors.

For similarly practical reasons it seems – although we lack Kaslov's own words on this matter – Kaslov sought to establish a Romani Coppersmiths workshop in June 1939, "thanks to money raised for rent, equipment, and running expenses by private philanthropists."[60]

[57] Sheila Salo, "'Lolya's Story': Steve Kaslov and His Memoirs," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 5, no. 1 (1995): 38.
[58] Steve Kaslov [Lolya], "The Ways of My People," ed. Sheila Salo, *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 5, no. 1 (1995): 43–44.
[59] Kaslov, "Ways of My People," 37.
[60] Victor Weybright, "A Nomad Gypsy Coppersmith in New York," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 24, no. 1/2 (1945): 7.

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However, in May 1940, the workshop closed because "at no time during the eleven months it operated were sufficient orders received to meet the expenses."[61] Confirming Bercovici's observation on the demise of "the gypsy coppersmith and tinker" is the fact that Kaslov tried to keep the shop running and "assumed entire responsibility for its further operation," but eventually accepted the reality of the mid twentieth century that "demand for the art of coppersmithing as practiced by the Gypsies had largely passed. Old cooking utensils are now more often discarded for new than mended, and cartons are generally used in place of tin cans." Occupational acculturation was less appealing to Kaslov, at least at first.[62]

Around this same time, Kaslov received additional kudos for his efforts to promote reading and writing skills among members of his group. Calling him "king of the Russian Gypsies in the United States," the *New York Herald Tribune* in March 1940 applauded Kaslov for having "selected thirty of his young men subjects to be the first to study simple English" so that "they can settle down at trade and become useful citizens."[63] As per Bercovici's observations from twenty years earlier:

> Kaslov explained that the gypsy's three time-honored methods of making a living, horse-trading, copper-smithing and fortune telling had all been taken away. Automobiles and aluminum ware have taken the place of horses and of copper, and fortune-telling, outlawed in many states, is not as popular as it used to be.[64]

Similarly, Weybright – one of Kaslov's advocates and who had also "frequently visited the Riverside Drive apartment of Konrad Bercovici, who always entertained a remarkable group of characters"[65] – describes how:

> in the old days, such work [i.e., mending stock-pots, steam-tables, mixing-vats, and so on] was suited to rovers. A month or two in one place, and the men would complete all available jobs, and move on. The women would likewise exhaust the fortune-telling market, and seek new clients to conquer. To-day a new generation of purchasing agents and foremen, who order things done through requisitions and trade union men, don't wait for itinerant tinkers. The ascendancy of aluminium and alloys has limited opportunity, too.[66]

[61] Weybright, "A Nomad Gypsy Coppersmith," 8.
[62] Weybright, "A Nomad Gypsy Coppersmith," 8.
[63] "Gypsies Learn English to Quit Romany Trail," *New York Herald Tribune* (March 21, 1940), 10.
[64] "Gypsies Learn English," 10.
[65] Victor Weybright, *The Making of a Publisher: A Life in the 20th Century Book Revolution* (Reynal/William Morrow, 1967), 77.
[66] Weybright, "A Nomad Gypsy Coppersmith," 3–4.

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Weybright – also considered as one of "the more informed observers of American Rom"[67] – noted that "the most precious item Steve Kaslov possesses is a brief-case that bulges with correspondence: copies of letters that he has dictated and of the replies from public and private agencies that he has sought to interest in adjusting his people to modern times."[68] Whether Kaslov would have put it in precisely the same way, his advocacy does reveal the pragmatism with which he approached new possibilities in support of the retention of community cohesion.

One of those letters was written by Kaslov (or more likely dictated by Kaslov – and typewritten by someone else) to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, dated June 18, 1937.[69] In the letter, Kaslov speaks of "the suffering that my people are enduring in this terrible crisis and depression." He explains:

> My people have money enough to travel, and are trying to make their livelihood; But they cannot do so anymore. For Telling-Fortunes and Copper-Smith, for they are chased out of town. ... FOR THIS REASON THEY ARE NOW WILLING TO BE LOCATED AND ESTABLISHED IN ONE PLACE OR COMMUNITY; AS A GYPSY SETTLEMENT. That then they will be under the supervision of the law, and will do whatever the law, and other agencies require of them to do; THEY WILL NOT DO ANY FORTUNE TELLING. ... My people THE GYPSIES ARE IN NEW YORK at the present time; they are mostly on Home Relief; We are having a most terrible time of it to live from that money; WE are handicapped from earning our own bread; And would be able to forgo home relief, if we had your most esteemed assistance in this matter; WHICH WOULD MAKE US SELF SUPPORTING, AND WOULD NOT BE COMPELLED TO RECEIVE HOME RELIEF ASSISTANCE; As we are doing at present. ... BUT WITH YOUR MOST CHARITABLE, AND WORTHY HEARTS, I plead your help, and aid in this terrible time, and hour of my people; So that thru you they may be able to become, and be at all times hereafter, honest, hardworking, AMERICAN CITIZENS. ... Most Humbly, and Gratefully yours. [Signed] Steve Kaslov, 208 Bowery, Borough of Manhattan, City of New York.[70]

Kaslov's personal appeal to the Roosevelts reinforced his desire that members of his community become more like other Americans: to be not only self-supporting, but also to give up fortune-telling, to stop

[67] Anne Sutherland, *Gypsies: The Hidden Americans* (Free Press, 1975), 1.
[68] Weybright, "A Nomad Gypsy Coppersmith," 4.
[69] The full text of the letter appears in Deutsch, "Steve Kaslov," 610–12. Capitalization is as in the original, but spelling errors are corrected.
[70] Personal Letters, Box 655, 1937, Lewis, Anna Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, National Archives and Records Administration, Hyde Park, New York, USA.

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moving from place to place, and to seek (as Bercovici had observed in the 1920s) more permanence in one place or community.

## ACCULTURATION OF AMERICAN KALDERAŠ

One additional example of documentation that reinforced the previous discourse on transatlantic Romani acculturation from Europe to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century is a dissertation in political science completed by Rena Cotten in 1951 at Columbia University, titled "The Fork in the Road: A Study of Acculturation among the American *Kalderaš* Gypsies." Unlike Bercovici's lamentations or Kaslov's ambivalence, acculturation is here seen as a neutral taken-for-granted reality. Based on fieldwork conducted among members of a Kalderaš community in New York from December 1947 through March 1949, the dissertation identified three distinct historical periods of acculturation in the twentieth century:

(1) The "pre-acculturation base" from 1910 to ca. 1925, when "Families wandered freely over the United States; tents pitched in out-of-the-way places. This period is, more or less, a direct continuation of the life in Europe and South America."
(2) A "transition" period from ca. 1925 to ca. 1933, when there was a "Gradual decrease in the frequency of pitching tents and increase in the tendency to stop in cities and towns while traveling."
(3) A "period of crisis," from ca. 1933 to the present, marked by an "Inability to leave the city at will."[71]

Confirming the same changes with regard to housing noted by Bercovici and Kaslov in earlier decades, Cotten observed:

> The *Kalderaš* housing patterns have changed from an encampment of tents in a secluded rural location in Period I to a store in a large city in Period III, Period II being a combination of a Period-I-type of summer existence and a Period-III-type of winter settlement. The nomadic habit has been altered both as a result of post-1933 Relief and of World War II's gasoline rationing in that the families do not wander as often or as far as in Periods I and II, but there is still a considerable amount of individual mobility and store-locations are changed very frequently within the same city and neighborhood.[72]

[71] Rena Maxine Cotten, "The Fork in the Road: A Study of Acculturation among the American *Kalderaš* Gypsies" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1951), 26.
[72] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 241.

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Similarly, Cotten confirmed earlier observations about changes in attire:

> In Period II, the men abandoned their distinctive costumes and adopted American suits, hats, coats, and shoes. At the same time, the children were prevented from going naked although no sex differentiation was observed in their clothing, dresses being used for out-of-doors attire and slips for within the home; Period III saw an increased insistence on being clothed at all times.[73]

Likewise for the changing ways in which Kalderaš men might earn a living:

> In Period I, they did their coppersmithing as a group in camp; in Period II, they tended to work on their employers' premises or at least away from their stores; in Period III, they were forced to abandon coppersmithing and turned to fender- and furnace-repairing to be done on the employers' premises and without much assistance from the other members of the extended family or *vitsa*.[74]

Just as Kaslov complained to the Roosevelts about members of his community being on relief, Cotten noted that "The Gypsies themselves say that they came into the cities in order to reap the benefits of relief checks. Now relief is something all the Bigbys [pseudonym used by Cotten] desire and which many need. In order to receive it, the Gypsies will do almost anything, even to the point of sacrificing their most cherished traditions."[75]

Cotten's conclusions pointed to "modern American civilization with its emphases on industrialization, commercialism, and urbanization" as the primary forces behind the transitions and acculturation of the Kalderaš in New York.[76] She observed "forks in the road" ahead, even though acknowledging that "it is difficult to see which path will be chosen."[77] However, very few of Cotten's conclusions would have surprised anyone who had read the earlier observations of Bercovici and Kaslov about Romani communities in New York, including the American Kalderaš themselves.

## CONCLUSIONS

One final observation is to note that the lamentations about acculturation from observers such as Bercovici in the early twentieth century ran counter not only to the dominant historical theories, but also to many

[73] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 242.
[74] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 242.
[75] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 178.
[76] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 249.
[77] Cotten, "Fork in the Road," 249.

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of the popular attitudes and beliefs of the time. Rather than mourning the loss of European customs and traditions, proponents of the prevailing social and political forces argued the opposite – that acculturation and assimilation were unequivocally desirable, and the quicker the better. For instance, the leading arguments behind passage of the paradigm-shifting Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson–Reed Act) were that "a sufficient reduction in the volume of immigration [would] give assurance that the country would not admit more annually than it can accommodate" and most importantly that it would "give assurance of the more rapid assimilation of those admitted."[78] Also in 1924, Georgia Governor Clifford Walker, "advocate[d] for a 'wall of steel, as high as heaven' to keep America for Americans and keep immigrants out."[79] Exactly 100 years later, similar rallying cries for acculturation, assimilation and Americanization seem eerily reminiscent, when proclaiming that "America is for Americans and Americans only."[80]

Starting with two *New York Times* articles that expressed concerns over Romani acculturation and identity in the United States in the early 1920s, this chapter has explored and analyzed some of the varying views expressed by individuals representing diverse groups over the course of three decades. The perspectives of anthropologists, Gypsylorists, journalists, literary figures and members of Romani communities in New York have revealed both tensions and contradictions in assessing the benefits and detriments of deciding if and how transatlantic Romani migrants should change. Some of those figures lamented a loss of identity in the process of acculturation; others saw acculturation as a necessary if not inevitable path to advance economically and socially. Not surprisingly, many of those same tensions and debates remain defining features of Romani American immigrant lives today.

[78] A. Warner Parker, "The Quota Provisions of the Immigration Act of 1924," *American Journal of International Law* 18, no. 4 (1924): 737–38.

[79] Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia R. Diner, *Immigration: An American History* (Yale University Press, 2022), 145.

[80] Maggie Astor, "Misogynistic, Bigoted and Crude Rally Remarks Trump Hasn't Disavowed," *New York Times*, October 30, 2024, A15.

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