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New York Dreaming

American Romani Identity, Migration and Memory

Dalen Wakeley-Smith and Michael Ciuraru

INTRODUCTION

On July 17, 2017, infamous TV personality Tucker Carlson aired a segment entitled "Gypsies: Coming to America." In his usual inflammatory style, Carlson claimed that some forty Roma were seeking asylum under false pretenses, "saying they suffered racism in their native Romania." Having "cheated" their way past the nation's border controls, the Roma were now causing disturbances in the town of California, Pennsylvania. Carlson claimed they were defecating in the streets, beheading chickens and becoming a nuisance for residents. Carlson, without evidence, went on to claim that Roma were a threat to public life with "little regard either for the law or public decency." Worse still, they were not assimilating into American culture. Using scare tactics and fear of the unknown in a manner comparable to other propagandists, Carlson claimed the federal government had placed the "Gypsies" in Pennsylvania (something that was patently false) and urged the public to act. Carlson's segment not only laid bare the anti-Romani sentiment present in America but also aimed to convince of the incompatibility of Romani identity and American values.[1]

American Romani people do have a history in the United States, a nation where they have long interacted and engaged with immigration regimes since at least the nineteenth century. While the federal government has inspected papers, scrutinized applications and taken photographs of

[1] "Gypsy Controversy Hits Pennsylvania Town," *Tucker Carlson Tonight* (Fox News, July 17, 2017).

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Romani migrants, the immigration service has never "placed" Romani people in any particular municipality, region or state, as Carlson implied. Rather, twentieth-century immigration regimes remained ill-constructed systems designed upon often opaque federal laws which defined would-be immigrants based primarily on economic and physical factors. Importantly, those immigration regimes, which often categorized and classified Roma without their input, created opportunities for both the officials and the Roma to engage with one another in spaces which challenged the notion of hardened, contiguous American borders. This chapter shows the long history of Roma in the United States, emphasizing their adherence to American values while strategically navigating a system built on exclusion.

Although Roma have been present up and down the East Coast since the United States' inception as an independent country, scant attention has been paid to their inclusion within the nation. By the early twentieth century, they seemed like an anathema to the Progressive Era's consolidation of race, nation and concerns over fitness and belonging. Romani people challenged the notions of mobility, nationalism and race as they hailed from various nation-states, empires and locales and occupied a variety of racial positions based on the local contexts. In this piece, we highlight two Romani families, the Ciurarus and the Mitchells, to illustrate these dynamics. For example, both families engaged with immigration controls and officials but did so in places outside of the United States proper. In fact, in both cases, separated by decades, officials carefully kept Roma far away from the recognized border while deciding their "fitness" or "worthiness" or while waiting for others to "vet" them or "vouch" for them. Furthermore, in both cases, the immigration officials remained unsure of the character of Romani identity and performed some mental gymnastics to place them along a racial and ethnic scale that was dominated by American ideas around race and belonging. We argue that what sets the US Romani examples apart is the question of liberal citizenship which, while couched in the language of civic nationalism and incorporation, was shot through with ideas and histories of legal racial exclusion and anti-immigrant discourses particular to the United States.

Since Romani people were not prohibited from entering the United States based upon their ethnic identity or ascribed race, early officials and state actors had to "game" the same system to prevent their entry, a practice, as Louis Takács notes in Chapter 5 of this volume, whereby officials assumed Roma were suspect immigrants prone to falsifying

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documents. As Adèle Sutre notes in Chapter 4 of this volume, certain marked categories became legible signals that individuals may be "Gypsies," prompting exclusionary practices justified through the language of protection, "public good" and fears of economic dependence. For Romani people these interactions were captured by state actors in archives and documents which painted them as suspect Americans and "undesirable," as seen in the Mitchell case from the 1900s. At the same time, the living memories and stories of those exchanges are less preoccupied with the way officials painted Romani identity. Recollections instead focused on claims to places and transnational identities, as evidenced in Ciuraru's oral historical account of his family's migration in the 1980s. Although from different historical eras and immigration regimes, Romani people's presence at border sites in both these stories caused immigration officials great consternation and challenged the notion of immigrant and worthy citizen alike.

Aside from simply narrating two fascinating stories, this piece uses these two case studies to highlight the ways in which Roma from across the Atlantic have navigated American immigration controls and emphasized their aspirational American identity and belonging, often challenging the preconceived notions that immigration agents held. Better still, the included stories point to the ways in which stories, memories and identity overlap and converge in places on the border and beyond. Far from being a people "stuck in time" or out of place, Roma live up to the impossible ideals of being "American" and often go to great lengths to highlight their embrace of those ideologies and discourses – in sharp contrast to the ways in which non-Romani Americans paint them. Furthermore, we show that Romani individuals tethered transnational networks through what historian Donna Gabaccia called "foreign relations" – that is, Romani families' kin and non-kin connections across time and space solidified their place-making in the United States, while their very presence challenged prior assimilationist discourse.[2] Using the stories and memories of the Ciurarus and the archival traces of the Mitchells highlights the power and agency of Romani groups and communities in negotiating their American and Romani identity throughout almost one hundred years of history.

[2] Donna R. Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 2015), ch. 2; Leonardo Piasere makes a similar claim to Gabaccia in relation to the state's "Roma policies" being constructed partially in response to Romani sociality and internal "policies," which in turn led to new state and internal Romani responses. Thanks to Martin Fotta for pointing this out. For more see Leonardo Piasere, *Roms: une histoire européenne* (Bayard, 2011), 131.

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STORIES

The earliest immigration stories narrated by various ethnic communities coming to the young United States often revolved around Ellis Island in New York City. Ellis Island, aside from being the location where many immigrants entered the United States, was also where federal immigration policy was created and tested by officials vetting thousands of potential Americans. Yet, within the first decade of the twentieth century, a fairly robust configuration of federal and international immigration stations also processed the thousands of immigrants crossing into the United States from land and sea each day. The early twentieth century was an era when American officials were still actively formulating a cohesive immigration policy, and the Romani people who arrived in those years proved particularly vexing to a nascent federal bureaucracy – none more so than the family of Louis Mitchell. On May 15, 1905, the US Immigration Service Station in Montreal Canada sent a report to the Federal Bureau of Immigration involving this family of would-be immigrants.[3] Five days prior, three immigration inspectors, Martin J. Gorman, Terrance Conaty and Charles A. Shields, had chaired a Board of Special Inquiry hearing with the patriarch Louis Mitchell and his eldest son Tom Mitchell to determine their eligibility for entry. The inspectors subjected the Mitchells to a battery of questions about their immigration and citizenship status.[4] Their answers reveal how the character of their traversal through the immigration regime and strategic use of citizenship shaped their identity as American Roma. Their responses stimulated an internal conflict for immigration officials dealing with "Gypsies" at the US borders.

The showdown between the Mitchells and the Federal Bureau of Immigration opened with a grilling by the inspectors. Inspector Gorman began by asking Louis Mitchell his name, age and birthplace. Mitchell responded that he was 47 years old and born in Brazil. Gorman then questioned Mitchell about his children and their ages and birthplaces. Louis attested that he had seven children, including Tom (the eldest), Joe, Maria, Frank, Demetro, Avdocha and Mary.[5] Louis Mitchell reported

[3] Immigration and Naturalization Service, "RG 85 Entry 7-Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787–2004" (Washington, DC, n.d.), fol. 48690, National Archives.

[4] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

[5] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

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that he originally left Brazil in 1885 and traveled to New York City, and that most of his children were born in the United States. In New York City, the Mitchells had lived near Castle Garden, which had served as an immigration depot prior to the construction of Ellis Island, where he worked as a coppersmith repairing items at candy, dye and varnish factories, or "wherever they had copper stuff."[6] Working as a coppersmith while his wife tended to the children, Mitchell and his family then traveled to various locations throughout the East and West coast over the course of twenty years. In 1901 in West Virginia, Louis Mitchell stated, he and his eldest sons, Tom and Joe, had filed citizenship paperwork, since all three had been born in Brazil.[7] Inspector Gorman, however, was suspicious of Louis' testimony about citizenship even with appropriate documents submitted to the board. Gorman repeated similar questions to Louis Mitchell, often asking about his travels and the length of stay in certain areas. He also asked repeatedly about his children's names, hoping to catch Louis in contradictory testimony.[8]

Why was inspector Gorman questioning this family so intensely? As it turned out, Gorman had a theory that Mitchell was not who he claimed to be – or more precisely, that those traveling in his party were not his family. Gorman was determined to reveal the conspiracy; Louis Mitchell, however, would not back down. His determination to reenter the United States clearly evidences this attitude. According to Gorman's report, Mitchell and his family had been denied entry by US agents when they took the steamboat from Prescott, Ontario, to Ogdensburg, New York, on April 7, 1905, over a month before the hearing. When asked if they were citizens, Louis Mitchell stated that he told the immigration officer who had refused his initial entry into Ogdensburg that, "I have a citizenship paper you have no right to put me back. If you want to prove that those are not my papers that will be right. If you want arrest me and send me there where I got the papers, and the witness will prove that I was the man that got the papers."[9] Despite his claim to citizenship, the inspectors informed Mitchell of his denial to enter the country where his children had been born and where he had lived as a naturalized citizen for the prior twenty years.

[6] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[7] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[8] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[9] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

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Upon his denied entry into Ogdensburg, a sympathetic fellow passenger advised that, should he be returned to Canada, he ought to hire a lawyer. Sent back to Canada, Mitchell did just that to secure confirmation of his citizenship from West Virginia and to locate a witness. Then he waited. After a month and $200 in room and board without a word from his lawyer, Mitchell grew desperate. Mitchell told Gorman at his hearing that out of desperation, he was fooled by an American man who promised US passage by crossing the St. Lawrence River at night in a rowboat. So it was that Mitchell's second crossing was made exactly one month after the first. He arranged with the man for three boats to bring his twenty-six family members from Canada into the United States. After landing in Ogdensburg, Mitchell and his family embarked on a wagon to DeKalb Junction, New York. Here they encountered inspector Conaty, who demanded they return to Montreal via Ogdensburg for detainment and questioning.[10] Louis Mitchell stated forcefully that he had told inspector Conaty after being told to return to Canada again:

> Mr. Conaty you have no right to put me back, I am a citizen, lived nearly 20 years in the United States, my children born and raised in the United States, if I go back you will have to go back. If I do something you put me in the courthouse like the laws of the United States. You have no right to put me back to Canada. *I do not belong to Canada but belong to the United States*.[11]

After Louis recounted this statement to Conaty, Gorman changed his line of questioning about the circumstances concerning Mitchell's entry and instead abruptly asked: "What relation are you to Emilio Mitchell?"[12] Louis, taken aback, stated, "He is not relation." When Gorman asked if he knew Emilio [Emil] Mitchell, Louis replied, "I know the man but he is no relation."[13] Gorman finally got to the heart of the matter: "Now are any of the people who are in this party, of those who are now at DeKalb Junction, the same persons who came with Emilio Mitchell on the boat and who were sent back?"[14] When Louis replied that none of the individuals were part of that group and that none had been on a boat, Gorman kept pushing, asking if his sons had been in contact with Emilio Mitchell and if they had ever been to Boston (where Emilio Mitchell was rumored to be). When Louis continued to answer Gorman's questions, stating that

[10] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[11] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690. Emphasis added.
[12] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[13] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[14] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

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indeed his son Joe had been to Boston but was not in contact with Emilio, Gorman pressed him further, asking, "Do you know where Emilio Mitchell is at present"? Louis again replied that he did not know. Eventually, after this grilling, the Mitchells were denied entry.

Reading this report over a hundred years later, one finds it difficult to resist the inclination to invert the interrogation and ask Gorman a simple question: Why *were* Louis Mitchell and his family detained and questioned? After all, if Louis Mitchell was properly documented as a citizen, then officials like Gorman had no grounds to stop him. Initially, the Mitchells had been told by US officials that their detention was due to an issue with Louis' paperwork presented at his first crossing in April. That inspector had claimed that Louis' papers looked tattered and well used, and this wear was enough to deny them admission. Rather than evidence that the paperwork had been handled multiple times and was many years old, the inspectors believed it was proof that Louis Mitchell had forged them. Despite Louis Mitchell's protests, he and his family were forced back into Canada, where they had to hire a lawyer and wait for confirmation of his citizenship status from West Virginia. Weeks of waiting and financial pressure prompted Louis' covert crossing. Only upon meeting inspector Conaty at DeKalb Junction (whether by chance or after self-declaration as was required) did his second illegal deportation ensue. What must Louis have thought?

What Louis did not know was that for months before his arrival, American immigration officials like Gorman and Conaty had been on the lookout for "Gypsies." They had been placed on alert after several Romani groups had attempted to immigrate to the United States first through Ellis Island (such as the Estevanovichs, as described by Louis Takács, Chapter 5, this volume). When word got out about the risk of entry through Ellis Island, families such as Emilio Mitchell's adapted by crossing the northern and southern US borders, something which had already been done many times in previous years. Louis Mitchell was therefore walking into something of a trap. Regardless of the merits of Louis' case, immigration officials primed to intercept Romani people would not so easily permit him or his family to lay claim to the category of "citizen."

On May 15, 1905, the report of Louis Mitchell's case was forwarded to the Commissioner General of Immigration, Frank P. Sargent, in Washington, DC. "There are so many suspicious circumstances in connection with these persons and with the issue of the papers they hold, that it was thought best to forward the papers to the bureau for such

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investigation as may be deemed proper, the owners having been given a proper receipt to insure the papers return should they be found valid," the inspector's justification read.[15] Even after Louis Mitchell and his sons comprehensively accounted for their time spent in each location and justified their movements with specific and concrete rationales, the inspectors painted the Mitchells as "careless" and "wandering." Never mind that Louis Mitchell and his family had lived in some places for several years and had provided witnesses and character references related to their citizenship; as far as these immigration inspectors were concerned, they were still "Gypsies" attempting to enter the United States by falsifying their claim to citizenship. Unsatisfied with denying their entrance and convinced that the Mitchells were cheating their way back into the country, officials had sent this missive to their superiors in Washington, DC to encourage further detainment. They emphasized that due to "the irregular procedure pursued in taking out the citizenship papers presented, and the fact the holders were willing to pay such a large sum to effect a surreptitious entrance into the United States, goes far, in the opinion of this office, to show that they have no legal standing as citizens."[16]

The Montreal inspectors would have to wait twelve days for a response from Washington, DC. When it finally arrived, the report must have shocked the inspectors. The Acting Commissioner General, Larned, admonished the officers for their continued harassment of the Mitchells, stating: "You were instructed to release these persons together with their families. The Secretary of Commerce and Labor made certain inquiries into the case and was satisfied that the certificates are bona fide."[17] The Montreal officials were overruled by their superiors in Washington, DC who had found Louis Mitchell's citizenship claim satisfactory. But even this did not end the Mitchells' saga.

Seemingly freed from the bureaucratic limbo into which they had so capriciously been placed, the Mitchells were allowed to enter the United States per the Commissioner General's memo. However, the agents at the border did not give up their attempt to pursue and expel them. On June 7, 1905, the Commissioner received another letter from the US inspector in charge of the Prescott, Ontario station attempting to appeal the Mitchells' release.[18] This time, the inspectors had a new argument: the Mitchells had

[15] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[16] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[17] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[18] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

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also been traveling with a second family with the surname "Zurka." The border agents believed that this family had previously attempted to enter the United States via Saint John, New Brunswick, and had been denied on December 6, 1904, on the grounds that they were "Likely to Become a Public Charge" (LPC).[19]

The inspector in charge at Prescott continued with his account by stating that "the Mitchells are determined to get [Mrs. Zurka] and her entire family into the United States." The inspector then laid out his suspicions that, in fact, the Mitchells and the Zurkas were both repeat offenders and had devised ways to circumvent immigration controls by passing papers off as genuine and then claiming false kinship. The inspector intended to apprehend the Mitchells and the Zurkas for this deceit. He wrote Commissioner General Sargent for permission to pursue them: "If in your opinion these matters are worthy of your consideration, I would respectfully ask for authority to proceed to Watertown, N.Y., and if necessary, to Syracuse where, I am informed, the Mitchel family are at present and apprehend the entire party."[20] Sargent was not convinced, replying:

> In regard to the Zurka band of gypsies [*sic*], you are advised that as it would be very difficult to show that these aliens are likely to become public charges and as they [are] furthermore subject to deportation on that ground at any time within the next two years, the Bureau does not believe anything would be gained by causing their arrest, and the matter may be considered closed for the present.[21]

With that letter, the file on the Michells and Zurkas seems to have been closed – at least in the eyes of the Commissioner General. If nothing else, it proved sufficient to silence the overzealous American inspectors at the wayward Canadian stations, who seem to have finally backed off their pursuit of the families. Yet the letter from the Commissioner also highlights the possibility of future action by immigration officials, as the Mitchells and Zurkas could be classified as "likely to become a public charge" at any point up until 1907. Such a designation would mark them for deportation should they ever run afoul of immigration officials. The "Gypsies" who had "so greatly annoyed [the] officers for several weeks past in the vicinity of Prescott, Ont., and Ogdensburg, N.Y." were allowed to enter the United States, but had to live under the threat of

[19] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[20] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.
[21] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

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deportation by the seemingly paranoid inspectors who had proved more than willing to spend vast resources and overstep their authority to rid the area of their presence.[22]

MEMORIES

Almost a hundred years after Louis Mitchell and his kin claimed American citizenship and challenged the young immigration bureau, another Romani family also made claims to aspirational American citizenship and belonging. The Ciuraru family, however, made use of the welcoming Cold War state to ensure their legal entry was not challenged as the Mitchells had been. Yet to get to the United States, the Ciurarus too would have to navigate not only international bureaucracy and policy, but also the experiences and memories of dealing with racist authorities.

Michael Ciuraru has few memories of his great-aunt Iulia. Yet there is one Michael remembers well. Even when she was busy taking care of her grandchildren, Iulia tended to leave doors open, face open spaces and insist on clear lines of sight toward exits. In 2022, years after she passed, Michael and his cousins reminisced about her life. They fondly remembered their great-aunt spending time with them while their parents were off at work, playing with them on the floor – and always keeping her eye on the door. Amid this reminiscence, one of Michael's uncles broke the levity, for he knew the reason Iulia acted this way. The origins of this odd behavior could be traced back to her childhood in Romania. It was there, during the latter half of World War II, that Iulia was captured. Michael's uncle relayed what he had been told of Iulia's trauma: While the exact identity of the perpetrator was unclear, Iulia had been seized as a young girl by the Nazis, or (more likely) by Romanians aligned with the Nazis, near the western border of Romania. As David Crowe and other historians have noted, Romanians under the Antonescu regime were complicit in transporting thousands of Roma to Transnistria. Antonescu himself was known as "Hitler's favorite ally" due to his fascist and genocidal views.[23] Petre Matei further shows that although Antonescu and his followers in the state government were responsible for much of the decision-making, it was local officials and the local populace who made

[22] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

[23] David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (St. Martin's Press, 1994), 132–34.

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on-the-ground decisions on whom to transport without German input.[24] Iulia and her mother, along with other Romani people from their small village outside of Recaş near Timişoara, were taken and loaded onto a train, well aware of the possible fate which could await them. Huddled together and frightened, the villagers whispered among themselves as the train began to move. At some point on their journey, Iulia and her mother decided to throw themselves off the moving train under the cover of darkness. Bruised and injured, Iulia and her mother trekked through the Romanian woods back toward their village, terrified of every sound emitted from the woods. When they arrived at their village, they found their home pilfered and abandoned. Decades later, long after Iulia had become a grandmother and great-grandmother, she continued to fear confined spaces, spaces which were reminiscent of the train car that almost sealed her fate.

Michael's uncle proudly told this tale of Iulia, emphasizing her courage and tenacity, traits that allowed her to survive the horrors visited upon her and countless other Roma within Nazi-aligned territories. But Iulia's story is more than just one of triumph and resilience: it is also a story of silence and trauma, a story of untold experiences and unspoken fears born out of countless generations of persecution in Europe. Countless Roma in Eastern and Western Europe were destroyed by the Nazis and their willing allies who had spent generations trying to rid their lands of "Gypsies."[25] Today, heroic efforts to remember and commemorate the Romani struggles during the war years remain hampered. Much of the history has been lost due to a lack of documentation and political will to face the continued effects that structural racism has had on Romani inclusion in Europe. Yet, many of these Romani stories survive in the United States. In the aftermath of World War II and the ensuing years of communist rule, Iulia, her husband Bustian and their kin made the monumental decision to relocate. They left their old homes to find new ones across the Atlantic. They were not alone in dreaming of a place free

[24] Petre Matei, "Roma Deportations to Transnistria during WWII: Between Central Decision-Making and Local Initiatives," *S: I.M.O.N. Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation* 9, no. 2 (December 18, 2022): 26–50, https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0122/art_gste01.

[25] See more about this history in David Crowe, *A History*; Becky Taylor, *Another Darkness, Another Dawn: A History of Gypsies, Roma and Travellers* (Reaktion, 2014); Ari Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2023); Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft, eds., *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2023).

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from the memories of the past. Now, her oral history and memory are a part of Michael's American Romani identity.

The Ciurarus' long journey to the United States, however, provided its own tribulations. Michael recounts how Iulia and her family faced many obstacles. One of Iulia's in-laws, a man named Costa, worked to provide for his extended family by buying and selling anything he could. Roma throughout the region of Recaş were skilled tradesmen whose ancestors had been enslaved and produced many of the trade goods and home items for use by non-Roma before emancipation in the middle of the nineteenth century. After World War II, the Romanian government aligned with the Soviet Union and worked to create a communist state. Under the communist regime, the government restructured the rural economy, and demand for the skilled trades of the Romani diminished.[26] Costa, Michael's great-grandfather, had spent his early life collecting and trading in scrap metal, glass and feathers, and repairing pots and pans. Eventually, Costa and his family began to establish themselves as capable traders and businesspeople providing goods often not available through official avenues. Over time, Costa and his extended family became well-regarded gold traders and managed to live a comfortable life with land and a large home in Recaş. Michael recollects that much of the story he had heard about his great-grandfather's epic fortunes came from not only his grandfather, but through various family members who often proudly repeated the tale.

Sometime after Nicolae Ceauşescu took control of Romania in 1965, however, Costa and his family ran into trouble. Ceauşescu, who styled himself as a nationalist hero, implemented various policies which aimed to increase the population of the country, increase industrialization and repay loans from the West.[27] As a result, significant economic growth and distance from Soviet policies made Ceauşescu's Romania walk something of a tightrope between Western aid, Soviet-style politics and Romanian nationalism. By the 1970s, Ceauşescu's cult of personality and repressive policies made Romania one of the most totalitarian and oppressive places in Eastern Europe. Austerity measures in the early 1980s also produced their own challenges. Costa and his family were not immune to such

[26] The dramatic changes that were seen elsewhere in the Soviet bloc were also implemented in Romania with Gheorghiu-Dej's government beginning collectivization and industrialization throughout the country. These changes in social and economic arrangements also affected the long-standing Romani artisan communities once copper and other metal work was replaced by industry and increased aluminum production.

[27] David Crowe, *A History*, 138–42.

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difficulties. Although they had managed to protect most of their wealth, matters took a turn for the worse. Allegedly, Costa's brother was mistakenly identified by the police as a person who had committed a crime – an eventuality that the family assumed was either due to their common name, or perhaps simply due to his Romani identity.[28] Either way, Costa was warned that the police were coming. Costa took his life savings of gold and other valuables and somehow managed to trade, bribe or otherwise secure passage out of Romania into Western Europe. The lack of details and specificity of the arrangements that Costa made is why the story endures and has made his shrewdness legendary among family members and the community. No matter how it had happened, Costa, his family and the extended community of kin (including Iulia and her family) had become the much-feared "nomadic Gypsies" in Western Europe. The irony was not lost on them, considering they had been happily settled in Romania for generations.

The large Ciuraru family was placed over the years in asylum housing in Italy, Germany and France. Life in those camps was difficult; the Ciurarus were often reliant on aid workers for information about where to go next. Housed in small apartments, long group shelter blocks or small rooms, they attempted to gain temporary asylum in each country. However, their ethnic and racial identity as Roma, to say nothing of the size of their party, meant that each country only ever offered Costa's immediate family temporary asylum. Unwilling to leave behind relations such as Iulia, the Ciurarus kept moving on to the next country to claim asylum again. While doing so, the family would take trains to the end of the line before finding a place to stay; sometimes, the station bathrooms were their only resting place. Throughout their time in Central and Western Europe, the Ciurarus were often housed with diverse other European asylum seekers. And so, their network grew as they conversed and interacted with others also seeking reprieve. During these years their mobility, represented as an inherent racial trait by outsiders, became their most powerful currency, keeping the family together and dreaming of the West.

Their travels finally bore fruit in the late 1980s. In France, Costa's kin met missionaries who were helping refugees from the communist bloc

[28] According to David Crowe, by the late 1970s "Gypsy" crime and Romani prison rates were fairly high and Romanian officials outlined several solutions to ensure "Gypsies gave up their parasitic way of life and gradually settled down to activities that benefited society." See more in Crowe, *A History*, 140–41.

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immigrate to the United States. Costa was told about the possibility of getting sponsorship from a US church that would ensure his people received visas and assistance to naturalize as US citizens. Costa and his kin decided to take the missionaries' offer and began the visa process. Eventually, a church agreed to sponsor the large family, and Costa, Iulia and his family – including Michael's mother Angelica – crossed the Atlantic. After the violent death of Ceaușescu in 1989 and the uncertainty and turmoil during the end of communism across Eastern Europe, extended family members began to utilize the same church and whisper networks that the Ciurarus had established to gain entrance to the West; sometimes this was done legally, and sometimes not. As anti-Romani violence began to increase in Romania, many of Iulia's and Costa's kin remained in close contact with each other, building their transatlantic nodes of communication. Starting in the late 1990s, some Roma who had made it to the Americas eventually returned to Romania, hoping to rebuild what they had been forced to leave behind.

The memory of Iulia's and Costa's journeys to the United States has been repeated within the family for many decades yet supporting details about the events are often missing from the retellings. Partially, this is because both of the individuals who anchor these stories are no longer alive to tell or correct the tale. Nevertheless, each successive family member remembers and narrates the story based upon their own memory, building the story from multiple perspectives and imbuing it with multiple meanings. Michael's uncle remembered that Iulia had barely escaped the ravages of the Nazi regime, while other cousins and uncles proudly told the tale from the triumphant perspective of Costa and the prestige and wealth the family possessed. Each complicated piece of the tale is thus a part of everyone's memory, coalescing into a story which expresses many different themes and characters. In Iulia's and Costa's memory, long after their passing, the family strove to fulfill the hopeful aspiration of becoming "American" while remaining Romani. Their claims to Americanness are tied, in part, to the memory work performed by the family, retelling the story of their immigration, struggle and hardship while proudly asserting their tenacity, creativity and survivance. Opaque immigration controls and the memories of the individuals who traversed these regimes function as the central force through which the Ciurarus claim their American status and Romani identity. The Ciurarus' memory-filled story of immigration triumph also highlights the "right way" to immigrate as Roma. They arrived with documentation verified by an outside party willing to vouch for their worth. Being placed into the category of dependents of the compassionate

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state that highlighted their work ethic, unfair treatment and victimhood under communism, provided a recognized path to the United States.

IDENTITY

Placing the stories of the Ciuraru and Mitchell families together across time is generative and allows for comparison of the nature of American Romani identity formation in response to immigration policies and practices. Each of these stories elucidates both the cultural and legal categories into which Romani people were forced to conform as they immigrated to the United States, and the persistent memories that this negotiation might have produced. Of course, there are many differences: The memories and stories about the Ciurarus are from the viewpoint of the Romani individuals carried forward in oral accounts from the 1980s, while the Mitchells' story comes from the perspective of 1905 immigration officials. Each tale is full of contradictions and archival and "objective" weaknesses – each is based either on outsider perspectives or second-hand accounts and retellings. But both accounts are linked through the pragmatic choices that were made by individuals and families who sought to make a new home in the US by utilizing their mobility, kinship networks and American discourses around citizenship to assert their belonging. In their telling, each story illustrates Romani people asserting their identities as desirable "Americans-in-waiting" pushing back against their representations as fraudulent or potentially unworthy citizens.[29]

Each family also chose to highlight aspects of their Romani identity to navigate American immigration regimes intent on keeping them out. For the Mitchells, the documented claims to citizenship and the emphatic cries of "belonging" in the United States confirmed their American identity and rights under the law, while in the Ciuraru case the claim of social persecution and the reformulation of American Cold War discourses led to their sponsorship and classification as asylum seekers from communism. Yet in each case, the individuals were identified and self-identified as "Gypsies," albeit with different national origins. While it may have been more difficult for the Mitchells to "hide" their identity due to the directive that went out in 1904, they still chose to be open with their identity.

[29] See more about this liminal status in relation to Asian Americans in Hiroshi Motomura, *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

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In fact, Louis Mitchell stated several times that he "did not want to tell a lie" in response to questions he did not know and highlighted that his people were "good Americans" and productive "Gypsies" who had money and skills to contribute.[30]

The cases of the Mitchells and the Ciurarus further highlight how immigration controls and policy have changed over time. In the case of the Mitchells, the immigration policies were still in their infancy. When they were detained by US officials, inspectors such as Gorman were using procedures created to enforce Chinese exclusion and to reject the poor and racially undesirable. Agents and immigration inspectors employed by the Department of Labor and Commerce were often working together on cases which blurred the lines between departmental authority and complicated federal oversight. Consequently, these policies were prone to broad interpretation by inspectors on the ground. In 1905, when the Mitchells and Zurkas tried to cross into the United States, the language around exclusion was largely aimed at Chinese and Asians, with some later additions to this 1882 act concerning anarchists, poor folks, disabled persons, diseased persons, paupers, felons, prostitutes or those convicted of a crime of moral turpitude.[31] As Margot Canaday has argued, inspectors wielded great power to classify all manner of people attempting to cross into the United States. In so doing, they made conceptual categories socially real – Romani people were no exception to this practice.[32] When immigration inspectors encountered the Mitchells, they were primed to be on the lookout for "Gypsy" fakers; when they harassed Mitchell, they made real the expectations of Gypsyness. Subjecting Mitchell and his family to that experience must have shaped their subsequent interactions and complicated the ways in which their American identity was legible.

When the Ciuraru family entered the United States, they did so as asylum seekers sponsored by a church. Immigration controls did not cast them as fraudsters, but as homeless, dependent and piteous individuals

[30] Immigration and Naturalization Service, fol. 48690.

[31] See more in Motomura, *Americans in Waiting*, ch. 2; Erika Lee, *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* (Basic Books, 2019), ch. 4; Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), ch. 1.

[32] Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton University Press, 2009), ch. 1.

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escaping the dreaded communism of the East. Laying claim to American identity in both cases, then, was a way for these families to counter these meanings ascribed to them – a kind of refusal hidden in an otherwise assimilatory American embrace.

However, the Mitchell case also reveals how inspectors at the Canadian stations drastically overstepped their authority to exclude a Romani family from the US. In Sargent's intervention, we see not only the maturation of a federal hierarchy in immigration bureaucracy, but also the institutionalization of the more informal means by which inspectors had grown accustomed to excluding families like Mitchell's. Two years after the Mitchells encountered the immigration inspectors, Congress acted and passed a more comprehensive immigration act that further excluded people and broadened the authority of inspectors to determine if immigrants were *likely* to become a public charge (LPC).[33] The added language around "likely to become a public charge" lowered the threshold for inspectors and allowed for broader-based exclusion. Several cases involving Roma in the subsequent years show inspectors' disingenuous or outright racist attempts to target Roma for exclusion based on LPC.

By the time the Ciurarus successfully navigated the US immigration regime, the system had been reformed several times over. By far the largest change was the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which reformed racial restrictions and quotas. The new act introduced new categories. As historian María Cristina García highlights, Cold War policies around refugees, asylum seekers, "defectors" and "parolees," combined with the United States' signature on the United Nations Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, symbolically tied US immigration policy to a moral authority which protected the world's persecuted.[34] By 1980, Congress was concerned about judicial overreach and possible loopholes in the refugee system and passed the Refugee Act which clarified and standardized a pathway for refugees. García notes that the symbolic power of the refugee arrangements also had a substantial impact on the acceptance of those individuals as potential Americans. Many of these immigrants were educated and skilled workers who were seen as

[33] Douglas C. Baynton, "Defectives in the Land: Disability and American Immigration Policy, 1882–1924," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24, no. 3 (2005): 35, https://doi.org/10.2307/27501596.

[34] María Cristina García, *The Refugee Challenge in Post-Cold War America* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 4–5.

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utilitarian additions to the American experiment.[35] This political economic value was further supplemented by the appeal of defectors and asylum seekers from communist countries. The Ciurarus utilized their status as potential refugees from Communist Romania in the later 1980s, and their persecution based on their ethnic identity and religious beliefs to maximize the strength of their case. Yet in doing so, they gave up much of their generational wealth, left their home country behind and chanced finding a sponsor to help them navigate a brutally complex and opaque system.

Neither the Mitchells nor the Ciurarus navigated these immigration regimes alone. The Ciurarus and Mitchells had networks, connections, kin and nodes of information to rely on which aided their immigration to the United States. Romani families and groups who crossed into the United States – whether from a land border or an ocean port of entry – often had been in contact with others already in the Americas about their journeys. They shared knowledge about how to circumvent immigration controls that aimed to keep them out in everyday practice. While inspectors might interpret this knowledge as deception, it was a survival strategy employed from long before their US arrival. However, Romani people also proved adept at leveraging citizenship claims to pass through immigration controls. When his citizenship was called into question, Louis Mitchell was ready to emphasize his honesty and adherence to an imagined American virtue of moral citizenship at a time when immigration inspectors had great latitude to exclude individuals. In claiming he "did not want to tell a lie," Louis Mitchell was challenging the inspector's ability to exclude him and his family based on his character; he pushed the inspectors to justify their claims and asserted his belonging to the United States. Moreover, his strategy illustrates that he knew the machinations of the immigration system and was willing to point out its incongruences. The Ciurarus did not have to point out the inherent issues with the system, but instead had to rely on the narrative of the state to compel their case as worthy potential-Americans immigrating legally.

Nevertheless, officials both in 1905 and the 1980s were *surprised* by the Roma. Their stranger status and unknown national allegiances appeared contradictory to prevailing ideas about the moral white majority. Indeed, Roma challenged the notion that families could be connected in kinship and relations outside of the properly documented nuclear

[35] García, *The Refugee Challenge*, 6.

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family; at times, their hidden networks seemed tantamount to criminal dealings. Yet both the Ciurarus and the Mitchells used their networks to assert their belonging. What would become American Romani identity was asserted through those networks and stories, and often anchored by their experiences with immigration regimes. The barriers constructed by non-Roma facilitated those meaning-making connections between Romani groups and helped establish America as the ideal place for the "Gypsies." Over time, however, American Romani identity became tied to not only their histories, stories and memories of these immigration trials, but to their adherence to a discourse about the United States which cast worthy individuals as hardworking, loyal and contributing to the social and economic well-being of the nation.

CONCLUSION

> The number of Gypsies in the United States is increasing yearly. Their cunning enables them to outwit the immigration officers; and they come here repelled by increasing restrictions against them in several countries of Europe, attracted to our shores by enthusiastic reports from friends and relatives in America. Once here, they increase with characteristic prolificness.[36]

In 1929 when Irving Brown rendered this judgment, Roma originally from Eastern and Southern Europe had indeed been coming to the United States for many decades – the Mitchell family was just one example. Brown and other early "Gypsyologists" associated with the Gypsy Lore Society (GLS) saw Roma in the United States not as problems but as fascinating exotic people among the masses of immigrant populations. Of course, the same "Gypsyologists" also romanticized and racialized the Roma they wrote about, often slipping into problematic and downright racist commentary about the differences between groups and individuals. At the same time Brown, like many others interested in "Gypsies," highlighted their "foreign relations" and often observed their strategic maneuvering around immigration restrictions placed on their nationalities. Those "foreign relations" also aided in their ability to negotiate American citizenship laws and overzealous inspectors as evidenced by the Mitchells, and immigration statuses and policies as shown with the Ciurarus. While these "Gypsyologists" often interpreted Romani

[36] Irving Brown, "The Gypsies in America," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society; Edinburgh* 8 (January 1, 1929): 146.

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strategies to navigate immigration control as pathological, they were mistaken in their meaning. Roma are not static individuals or groups, nor are they, as another GLS member classified them, "the last primitive people."[37] Instead, the long history of Romani groups migrating to the United States includes countless examples of their dynamic and pragmatic choices which shaped their subjectivities as Americans.

While the cases of the Mitchells and Ciurarus allow for a more thorough reckoning of American Romani identities, memories and stories, more work needs to be done to uncover the transnational connections between Roma; these have only continued to solidify throughout time. At the same time, American Romani identity is diverse, heterogeneous and hybrid. For each Romani community, American identity is something different and emphasized or deemphasized in certain settings and for specific audiences. Similarly, there are also a multitude of ways to be "American." For the cases included here, we aimed to highlight not only that diversity across time and space but also the continuum of groups, no matter where they hailed from, carving out their own spaces. Even though the efforts of pundits like Tucker Carlson, "Gypsyologists" like Brown and overzealous inspectors like Gorman decried an incompatibility of Romani lifeways with American values, we see another path forward. This path is lined with stories, memories and dreams of a more expansive and inclusive America, and therefore a more complex Romani Atlantic.

[37] Konrad Bercovici, "New York a Gypsy Capital: Last Refuge of Civilization-Hunted Tziganes in Abandoned East Side Stores," *New York Times*, July 29, 1923, 6.

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