Current Books

A Millennium on the Margins

BURY ME STANDING:
The Gypsies and Their Journey
By Isabel Fonseca. Knopf. 322 pp. $25

by William McPherson

The experience is familiar to any traveler in Eastern Europe, and increasingly in Western Europe as well. Darting from nowhere, it seems, and keening plaintively, a small, colorfully dressed woman in plaited hair and flaring skirt, a smudged, tightly swaddled baby cradled in her arms and with a couple of children dancing by her side, paws at the visitor's sleeve. The visitor, of course—subtly or not so subtly, but certainly advisedly—puts his hand firmly on his wallet and walks a little more briskly on. Or, on the periphery of one of the expensive hotels catering to the foreign visitor, a nattily dressed young man approaches, an engaging smile on his face: "Change money? Change money?" Many Western visitors to the capitals of Eastern Europe get seduced once by the surprisingly attractive exchange rate and the smile, mocking in retrospect. Few do so twice.

The begging mother, the money-changer, the thief (as well as the admired violinist) make up today's Gypsy stereotypes, caricatures but real nonetheless. More often than not, the stereotypes are the only Gypsies the visitor is aware of meeting—though in fact most of the resident beggars and black-marketeers are not Gypsies at all but unabashed nationals of their countries of origin who would vehemently resent the label "Gypsy." In addition to being "fabled, feared, romanticized and reviled" for their otherness, as the jacket of Isabel Fonseca's very good and very unsentimental book proclaims, the Gypsies are "perhaps the least understood people on earth," a lamentable condition to which Fonseca goes some way toward ameliorating.

Hers was not an easy book to write. Gypsy communities are famously difficult for outsiders to enter, yet Fonseca—a sophisticated young woman educated at Columbia and Oxford, a former assistant editor at the *Times Literary Supplement*—managed to spend most of one summer living and becoming friends with an extended family in the grotesquely named Kinostudio (Movieland) quarter on the edge of Tiranë, Albania. There were none of the amenities of running water and privacy taken for granted in the West. There were precious few amenities at all. The anarchic world of the Gypsies—or Rom, as many of them prefer to be called today—is, in fact, alien and virtually inaccessible to their more settled fellow Central and Eastern Europeans. That world is doubly alien to most visitors from the West, who regard it either with fear and suspicion or through the aura imparted by such romantic fables as *Golden Earrings*, the Marlene Dietrich film of the late 1940s. It is a tribute to the author's powers of empathy and persuasion that she marched right in and managed to become friends with and be trusted by Rom not only in Albania but in Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech and Slovak republics, Hungary, Poland, and even Germany.

Even so, there were limits to this trust. As Fonseca makes clear, distrust of the non-Gypsy, or *gadje*, is one of the group's more deeply embedded traits. After a thousand years in residence, and numbering now some 12 million, the Gypsies remain the largest minority in Eastern and Central Europe, as well as the one minority safely despised by all others, by educated and uneducated, by

minorities and majorities alike: the single universally accepted scapegoat in the fetid brew of violence and nationalism that has erupted to varying degrees throughout the region in the wake of communism's demise.

Not that the Gypsies were generally admired before. As early as 1686, they were forbidden trade or shelter in Brandenburg. By 1711, they could be shot for resisting arrest in Saxony. Three years later, they could be executed without trial in Mainz. By 1725, all male Gypsies over the age of 18 could be hanged without trial in Prussia. Nine years later, the age had been lowered to 14 in some provinces. In the principalities of Wallachia and Moldova, Gypsies were kept as slaves until 1856. The terrible story goes on until, by February 1943, the first transports carrying German Gypsies had arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where eventually half a million perished in what the Rom term "the Devouring."

The travails do not stop there. Since 1990 in Romania and elsewhere, Gypsy houses have been burned with impunity while the police stood by; Gypsies have been murdered, wrongfully accused and imprisoned, or blamed for the crimes of others. Many rushed to Germany because it was the richest country most easily within reach, only to face further harassment and misery before being deported to Romania, where the "Gypsy problem" in this difficult period of social transition is perceived as acute. Many Romanians say, and many more firmly believe, that had the wartime dictator and Nazi collaborator Marshal Antonescu survived another year, there would be no "Gypsy problem" in Romania today; they would all have been deported to camps across the Dniester River and thence to Auschwitz, like the Jews.

Unlike the Jews, however, the Rom retain no homeland in their imaginations, and until recently no written language and therefore no history, no literature, no institutional memory beyond the memory of the oldest living member of the community. Although their ancestors probably migrated from India a millennium ago—their language is related to Sanskrit and Hindi—there exists for them no promised land, either in an Edenic past or a hopeful future. Without a known past, the idea of a future doesn't extend much beyond tomorrow. Today's Rom live, by necessity and by habit, in the parlous present, taking on to a degree the religion and customs of whatever country they find themselves in while remaining determinedly unassimi-

lated and seemingly immune to force or persuasion. And their present, which Fonseca so ably describes in her part-historical, part-scholarly, and part-journalistic narrative, is thus far a miserable journey from nowhere to nowhere, from pariah-hood here to pariah-hood there and back again.

Why? What can account for such a history of horrors? The Gypsies are visible, for one thing. And visibly different—like the Amish but with far more problematic values. They are generally darker in complexion than Europeans. They speak among themselves a little-understood language. They are sometimes menacing. Gypsy behavior is normally (and, from the outsider's point of view, often correctly) perceived as antisocial, criminal. No longer nomadic, they do not appear to be quite settled either, and even the grandest of the new Gypsy palaces have an air of impermanence about them, as if they were not real houses but a kind of longer-term bivouac with the campfire burning in the courtyard.

The more flagrant excesses of some of their brethren—the 1992 kidnapping in Romania of a famous Gypsy sociologist to face a *kris*, a trial outside Romanian law, for example—and some of their putative leaders, the so-called Gypsy kings, are not easily kept from public notice or public ridicule. The self-proclaimed King Cioaba in Romania, who never learned to read or write but holds a doctorate from Texas America University, wears more gold at a sitting (some of it in his teeth) than the queen of England, as does his cousin and rival, the Emperor Iulian. Cioba was the first in Sibiu to own a television, to drive a Mercedes. He travels, he reigns, but he does not provide any real political leadership (something rare in Gypsy society). His people appear to their more traditional neighbors to be in a sense free: as unfettered and evanescent as their exquisite music, defiantly unassimilated and a bit envied for that and for the wealth they are widely believed to hold and which some few of them in fact do hold. The source of their riches is often unclear—as is the source of almost all the new fortunes in the postcommunist world, where the greatest thieves are not impoverished Gypsies but those either in or associated with the former *nomenklatura* and the present governments. The Gypsies, however, like to display their wealth, not pile it up discreetly in numbered accounts abroad. It is easier to make such people scapegoats for the ills of a society than, say, the former minister of defense or the minister of finance.

Bury Me Standing includes an annotated bibliography but unfortunately lacks source notes, and the index is inadequate. Some of the population statistics, notoriously hard to come by on this subject, may be questioned, and it is possible to find minor errors here and there. (The road from Bucharest to Bulgaria does not pass near Bolintin Deal, to cite an example, and the opposition newspaper *Romania Libera* has not yet been "subverted by tenacious nationalist political forces.") Nonetheless, Isabel Fonseca has written an indispensable, clear-eyed book, more descriptive than prescriptive, on the Rom and their terrible journey, both brilliantly rendered. It may not be so hard to explain why the Rom have become pariahs and scapegoats; it is harder to know what to do about it, and Fonseca makes no recommendations. Or perhaps the recommendation is implicit in Vaclav Havel's remark, which she quotes: "The Gypsies are a litmus test not of democracy but of a civil society." In its treatment of the Gypsies, the world has not yet passed that test.

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