

Gypsies in the City. By Rena C. Gropper. Pp. 243, charts, maps, index, glossary, annotated bibliography, 8 illustrations, Princeton, N.J.: The Darwin Press, 1975. \$9.95

Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers. Edited by F. Rehfisch. Pp. x & 299, glossary, index, London: Academic Press, 1975. \$15.25.

Reviewed by Greta Swenson

For those of us "naives and innocents" who must depend upon written material for our acquaintance with the world's Gypsies, both Gypsies in the City and Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers are welcome additions--welcome with reservations. The reader (particularly the folklorist) offers himself up to frustration and skepticism when reading these works. Simplistically, the frustration can be assigned to the fact that Rehfisch's work is a collection of essays done by sociologists and Gropper is an anthropologist.

Rena Gropper's Gypsies in the City is the result of a 28-year association with the Rom in New York City, and although the theoretical basis of the work is "to give higher predictive power on the social research of small groups living in a hostile environment," the human contact and sensitivity of her experiences are of ultimate value. This analysis of the structuring of society includes a background sketch of Gypsies in the United States and New York City; chapters dealing with the group's social structures, rites of passage, and religion and philosophy; and of course, an introduction discussing the origin of the people in India--an investigation that was more or less laid to rest in the early years of the Gypsy Lore Society. Gropper distinguishes two types of Gypsies on the basis of their "settlement patterns": Sedentary and Nomad; the most important point being that even among Sedentary Gypsies the identity in language and culture has been maintained. This is old ground. Gropper's contribution is to illustrate how Gypsies dealing with a specific contemporary situation, i.e., New York City living and economic necessities, have managed yet to retain their identity as a group. She outlines four cultural stages of Gypsies in the United States following lines of the settlement pattern. Thus, she outlines a Camp Period (1880-1925, summer wandering, winter camp); Transition Period (1925-33, more cars); Crisis Period (1933-45, flocking to the cities); and the Plateau Period, a recent period during which Gypsies have been forced to split into smaller groups due to growing anti-Gypsy feelings.

Gropper offers the history of a particular band to support her cultural outline. From this point on she deals with general topics such as "The Economics of Being a Gypsy." Readers must take it upon themselves to remember that she is offering information about the economics of being a Rom Gypsy specifically in New York City. She addresses herself to all topics, from kinship and sex roles to foodways and spiritual matters. Most valuable are her treatments of these topics in relation to the Gaje (non-Gypsy) world--an aspect of cultural studies of Gypsies and Gypsy groups.

Of necessity, such a treatment of the entire range of cultural structures (economic, socio-political, spiritual, historical) is general and brief—else it must be voluminous. This makes the work, however, a rudimentary, general introduction to the Gypsy culture and ethnic group which is distorting in its simplicity.. The group of people who dispersed from Northern India sometime between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 100 to most, if not all, corners of the earth, did not, as Clébert claims, migrate "without even having consented to any alterations as regards the originality and singleness of their race . . ." ¹ They have maintained their identity, but have also to some extent incorporated into that identity aspects of the cultures wherein they reside or through which they have passed (as they have left elements of their culture in those cultures). Spanish Gitanos are not culturally equivalent to the English Gypsies, nor are the English to the New York City Rom. For this reason, Gropper's Chapter 10 which deals specifically with the cultural survival of the Gypsies in New York City is of the most concrete value and the section "Reinforcement: Gypsy Arts and the Kris" (178-80) of most interest to the folklorist.

Such generalized information has value for an introduction to Gypsy studies, but 28 years of obviously sensitive and human one-to-one contact with a group leaves one pleading for more than a general picture of social organization patterns. How often do people perform an archetype ceremony? Needed is a description of the means by which an individual copes, not only with his or her own social-cultural structures, but within these with the "hostile environment" of the majority culture. There are hints of such a focused view in Gropper's work—providing a great deal of frustration as well as proof of the author's intimate knowledge of her subjects.

A helpful Glossary and fairly complete annotated Bibliography of material available in English are provided.

The essays in Rehfisch's Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers provide similar and even more intense frustrations. This is a collection of essays which, for the most part, are based on one to three years of fieldwork (not 28!). This, despite the statement in Rehfisch's Preface: "Valuable studies are available primarily on their /the Gypsies/ language, history and folklore. Unfortunately, reliable studies on their social structure and social organization are few and far between. This is not surprising since it is now widely recognized that to achieve this requires long-term contact and intimate interaction with the groups concerned, . . ." (vii). One immediately wonders why such long-term interaction is needed for social structure studies but apparently not for language, history and folklore studies. The second "wonder" is where those "valuable studies . . . on language, history and folklore" are -- it seems that they are not so profuse. One must assume that the reference is to those folklore (mostly folktale) studies undertaken by such scholars as Francis Hindes Groome during the first years of the Gypsy Lore Society--studies which deal primarily with English Gypsies.

The other source of studies is European studies. There are, indeed, valuable studies, but these are all "few and far between," recent studies being primarily personal experience accounts.

Preface and premises aside, the merit of the collection as a whole is the view given of various Gypsy groups, thus illustrating the fact that, for instance, Gypsies in Southern England do not have an identical culture to that of urban Gypsies in Spain. The essays do yield valuable information, though contradicting each other at times and leaving gaps. For instance, Anne Sutherland in her chapter about the American Rom does not indicate that the slava (Saint's day feast, 18) is an Eastern European custom—which would illustrate the cultural interaction. Carol Miller does, however, make this connection (47). These two articles, by the way, are useful in conjunction with Gypsies in the City for further information, comparison and contrasts concerning Gypsies in the United States. The "Anonymous" article written about Gypsies in North Britain from fieldwork done we-know-not-when is a bit confusing. A pattern of migrations is described and followed by the statement: ". . . during the period of fieldwork, there was no identical recurrence in any particular family migration." Is this, then, the "pattern?" Adaptations to environment are the primary message of this article and are illustrated in several others. William Kornblum's article, "Boyash Gypsies: Shantytown Ethnicity," which examines a family of Boyash Gypsies in the Parisian Region as a minority but dominant group in the minority ghetto also illustrates the influence wrought by adaptability and ease with "rootlessness" which aid survival. Kornblum describes the various groups which occupy (more or less) the shantytown and illustrates the position of advisor and supporter which is assumed by the family head of the minority Gypsy group. Illustrations of particular instances and individuals are offered—a very good work. Aparna Rao touches upon many topics in his article, "Some Manus Conceptions and Attitudes." One thing lacking in Teresa San Roman's article concerning urban Gypsy settlements in Spain is a description of the interaction (or lack of) with the enfolding Spanish culture. Evident in her article are customs and beliefs which differ from those of other Gypsy groups treated in the collection and the special problems in the cities.

The perspective that Willy Guy urges when approaching the problems of nomadism and persecution is most welcome: ". . . to probe rather the variety of Rom experience in specific historic situations rather than stressing its universal nature . . . under what conditions did Roms settle? In what circumstances were Roms persecuted in certain ways" (203)? He takes this approach when looking at the Czechoslovakian situation.

In chapter 9, Bettina Barnes finally gives us the distinction between "Gypsies, Tinkers and Other Travellers." Of the latter two, Tinker is more derogatory /emically/. These are not Gypsies, but a social minority in Ireland and Scotland, possibly of Celtic /Pict?/ origin.

The Rehfish's illustrations of personal experiences while living with the Scottish Travellers are refreshing. The honest statement from Fredrik Barth ("The Social Organization of a Pariah Group in Norway") that the quality of his "field work" is low, as he made brief visits and had difficulty establishing rapport is also refreshing. One wonders if the other researchers also had such personal difficulties, and if not, why.

NOTES

1. Jean-Paul Clébert, The Gypsies, trans. Charles Duff (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1961), pp. 17-18.

2. Defined by the author as Gypsies speaking a dialectic version of Romanian, traditionally working as animal trainers and circus performers, and famous as bear tamers throughout the Balkans (125).