

Sway, Marlen. **Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America.** Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Pp. iii + 155, glossary, chapter notes, bibliography (references), index. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Danny Rochman

For most people today the gypsy conjures up images of wild, lustful rovers who sleep in caravans under the stars, tell people's fortunes at fairs, and steal horses. According to Sway, the Gypsies themselves have used the dominant culture's romantic notions about Gypsies to keep non-Gypsies at a distance. In *Familiar Strangers* we perceive how Gypsies have been able to resist assimilation in the 1200 years of traveling.

Sway's main thesis states that Gypsies have resisted assimilation by always behaving as a middleman minority. Middleman minorities occupy economic niches between the masses and the elites. While their occupations vary, they tend to fill a necessary societal need no one else is willing to assume. In contrast to previous studies on middleman minorities, Sway argues that the gypsies remain middlemen regardless of the radical economic and social changes occurring in the host society; previous studies argued that middleman minority groups require stability and no changes in the social structure.

Two main factors have helped Gypsies maintain their cultural traditions over centuries: economic adaptability and the Gypsy laws that stem from their religion.

Primarily illiterate, Gypsies (*Rom* is the Gypsies' name for themselves) have had to depend on their creativity to avoid having to work for meager wages under a non-Gypsy (*gajo*) employer. So, in addition to business and demographic patterns common to other middleman minorities, Gypsies use five other strategies for economic survival. In the summer, they may handcraft out of wood and clay (Yugoslavia), collect rags or reshape scrap metal (Britain and Sweden), or serve as cowboy extras in movies (Spain). In the winter, they journey from Spain to Latin American, from California to Belize, to sell various goods, run old movies, tell fortunes, or fix bent fenders. In the past, their nomadism was also essential to escape from persecution. A second strategy, besides nomadism, is their exploitation of natural resources (such as wood or clay) or resources seen as worthless by host societies (such as scrap metal, wrecked cars, rags). The third and fourth strategies have to do with everyone helping in economic survival for their territorial group. There is an avoidance of gender-typing and age barriers in dividing up the labor. Women are often—but not always—fortunetellers, men mend and sell used cars, children bring welfare money by being in school until age twelve, and the elderly collect welfare or disability funds. While these are their primary roles, the families as a whole work to ensure that the fortune-telling parlor does well. Sway argues that the Rom's reliance on a variety of occupations for subsistence, and not just fortunetelling, is in fact a fifth strategy which has served the Gypsies well. All of these strategies allow the Rom to serve as independent workers who hold minimal contact with their host societies.

The Rom's desire for minimal contact with non-Gypsies stems from their strict religious beliefs. Here Sway briefly notes the similarities between Orthodox Jews' and Rom's main practices. For the Rom, everything above the waist is pure (*wuzho*); below the waist all is impure (*marime*). Non-Gypsies are *marime*, and any dealings with them outside the socio-economic realm are dealt with severely. Not only the offender but also his/her whole extended family for generations could be ostracized for years when the Gypsy court has judged. Furthermore, any Gypsy who interacts with them in any way after the family has been called *marime* will be considered *marime*, and this also applies to his or her own family. The Rom also adhere to two of the Seven Laws of Noah, so they will never kill an animal for sport or hunting, only for food or as an offering. Nor will they kill another person. The few times feuds occurred, the Gypsies were ashamed. In addition, they are incredibly afraid of ghosts. Sway suggests this belief might have been introduced to reinforce Gypsy notions of what is and is not taboo.

The importance of *marime* laws for the Rom should not be underestimated. It is for this reason that Gypsies are far from promiscuous, with dating and/or premarital sex prohibited. Marriage does not result from romantic love or physical attraction. Instead, it is seen as a way to increase one's Gypsy status by group alliance. The Gypsy woman can refuse several offers but must eventually accept one. Just as she cannot choose whether or not to become a fortuneteller, so she cannot choose to remain a single woman. Those Gypsies who have become *marime* may be ostracized only for several years. Those who are permanently seen as *marime* may threaten the community. In such cases, the Gypsies may find ways to have non-Gypsy officials, such as the IRS, or welfare agencies, punish these renegades.

Though Sway is a sociologist, her methodology is through anthropological fieldwork. While she includes for comparison experiences she had in Britain and Yugoslavia, as well as in Virginia, her deepest insights are with the Gypsies in California. This is not surprising, as her father was friendly to Gypsies who came to his store, Sway and Sway Company in Los Angeles. As a friendly outsider, Sway had often attended their Gypsy weddings. Those Gypsies who had never known her as a child or who had never known her father were more suspicious and wary of a non-Gypsy studying them.

A possible weakness of Sway's study is that its brevity does not allow much room for Sway's fieldwork observations. If a lengthier analysis had been undertaken, more of her data from interviews and observations could have enriched and solidified her main argument that economic adaptability as a middleman minority and religious beliefs keep the Rom from ever becoming too familiar with non-Gypsies.