

# Commission on Nomadic Peoples

“East European Gypsies in Western Europe: The Social and Cultural Adaptation of Xoraxané”

William G. Lockwood

Nomadic Peoples, Number 21/22, December 1986

The Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) is collaborating with the Ford Foundation to digitize, preserve and extend access to the journal of *Nomadic Peoples*. For more information regarding the journal *Nomadic Peoples* visit the Commission on Nomadic Peoples website at [www.nomadicpeoples.info](http://www.nomadicpeoples.info) and the Berghahn Books website at [www.berghahnbooks.com](http://www.berghahnbooks.com)

## EAST EUROPEAN GYPSIES IN WESTERN EUROPE:

### THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ADAPTATION OF THE XORAXANE<sup>1</sup>

by William G. Lockwood

For as long as there have been Gypsies in Europe, the greatest population density has been in the Balkans. This remains true today. Over these 500 years or so, the Balkans has served as a staging area for wave after wave of Gypsies who moved into western Europe and beyond. As groups of these nomads dispersed and became separated from one another, each adapted to different social and cultural contexts thus producing the kaleidoscope of Gypsy cultures that exist today.

The most recent of these waves began 15-20 years ago and, because of frontier regulations elsewhere in eastern Europe, has come almost entirely from Yugoslavia. Even so, this has been a very heterogeneous movement including both settled and nomadic Gypsies of a variety of different tribal and linguistic groups. I will be speaking of just one of these: nomadic Xoraxané from Bosnia-Hercegovina and Montenegro.

I have argued elsewhere (Lockwood 1985a:96-97; 1985b:21-22) that some Balkan Gypsies are the most traditional anywhere in Europe. The later existence there of a viable peasant society provided a niche, even a need, for Gypsies and the services they could provide through a traditional peripatetic lifestyle. Unlike the other East European states, Yugoslavia did not force nomads to settle down in the post World War II period. Consequently, this traditional lifestyle survived in Yugoslavia even after it had been largely destroyed throughout most of the Balkans. And among the most traditional of the groups to be found in Yugoslavia are the nomadic Xoraxané of Bosnia-Hercegovina and Montenegro. I should add here parenthetically that these more persistent Gypsy lifestyles have persisted in Yugoslavia at the same time that Yugoslavia has been, arguably, the most progressive of states with regard to treatment of Gypsies. Laws prohibiting discrimination, including use of the term Cigan instead of Rom, are rigorously enforced. State resources are used to support Romani language publications and a weekly radio program, and there is a relatively large number of Yugoslav Gypsies who are well educated and who have entered the professions, including anthropology.

When I first became acquainted with the Xoraxané in 1966, they lived in tents transported by packhorse or, most often, by open horse-drawn wagon. During winter months they would camp indoors in a rented room or sometimes in a house which they had purchased for this purpose. The men worked as coppersmiths, making, repairing and, especially, retinning the copper cooking and eating utensils that were common in the area until very recently. This was supplemented by fortunetelling by the women. The usual pattern, since they worked in a peasant economy without much ready cash, was to accept in payment old clothing or raw wool, which was then sold in the periodic market system. There were also some institutionalized forms of begging, most often of foodstuffs rather than money. At church festivals, for example, or at Serbian Orthodox graveyard memorial feasts, Gypsies - either nomadic Xoraxané or local sedentary Gypsies - would inevitably appear to beg food from picnickers.

The decline of this way of life came about as a direct consequence of the

transformation of the Yugoslav peasant economy to which it was symbolically linked. The copperware has now been sold to tourists and replaced by cheap enamelware. It became more and more difficult for fortunetellers to find customers among rural women whose sons and daughters were off studying at the University. As the occupational niche eroded, some Xoraxané in Yugoslavia settled down, most in the small market towns in which they previously had wintered over or sold their wares. Many of those that remained nomadic have now acquired automobiles or vans in which to transport their tents. They continue to do what copperwork they can find, now confined primarily to cleaning up discarded pieces from Bosnia and Hercegovina and taking them to Dalmatia to sell to tourists. But buying and selling has become the most important source of income. Gypsies have taken over the extensive market in used clothing in Yugoslavia. Others sell various kinds of mill ends and factory seconds. Still others specialize in whatever happens to be in scarce supply at the moment - razor blades, coffee beans, toothpaste. There is a saying in Yugoslavia: "If you want to know what's going to be scarce next, look at what the Gypsies are selling".

Another response to the changed economic reality in Yugoslavia was to leave and to seek new opportunities in Western Europe. This was stimulated by the large scale migration of Yugoslav workers to the industrialized West. It is important to note that the movement of Xoraxané (and other Yugoslav Gypsies) to western Europe has not only occurred contemporaneously with that of non-Gypsy migrant workers from Yugoslavia but has occurred for the same reasons, i.e., the search for new economic opportunities. Around 1968, Xoraxané from the Sarajevo and Jablanica areas began to cross the border into Italy. As they sent back favorable reports and word spread, more and more began to take part and from wider and wider an area. Life in Italy was very good at first; the extended family I am working most closely with did very well for a couple of years hawking seconds of factory made "folk art" obtained in Yugoslavia. As competition within the new niche heightened and as the response from Italian officials and the public became more hostile, some Xoraxané began to move into other western European countries.

The extended family mentioned above was typical. They first began to go to Italy only in the summer, when they found tourists to buy their wood wares. Eventually they came to live year-round in Italy, even renting an apartment for the three months requisite for legal immigrant status. After six years in Italy, they moved to France. By a few years later, they were in the Netherlands. They even made a six month tour of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Eventually, they settled in Hamburg. As of last year, they are on the move again, back in Italy after a quick trip to France. In the West, they have become urbanized, semi-sedentarized, and have developed new relationships to the State (whichever one they happen to be living in) and to both non-Gypsies and other Gypsies.

The new Xoraxané economy is based on eclectic sources. Among the more important is welfare and various other forms of state and locally provided social services. The Xoraxané have very quickly learned to work their way through the complicated bureaucracies of the various states in which they live and travel. They perceive and treat the welfare system as just another resource to be exploited, much as they might regard a market for fortune-telling or copper-smithing.

The nature and extent of the services offered varies widely from country to country. West Germany, presumably out of a sense of guilt for having butchered one-half million Gypsies during World War II, has provided relatively comprehensive assistance (though this sense of guilt has not been strong enough that they have

paid reparations to Gypsies for their wartime sufferings). The Netherlands has been particularly generous and sensitive, but can extend its help to only a very limited population. The Dutch government, in an attempt to establish a model for other western European countries with regard to the so-called "Gypsy problem", decided in 1977 to accept 500 stateless Gypsies as Dutch inhabitants (Hovens 1981-82:41). Prominent among these were Xoraxané. They were provided with semi-permanent, then permanent housing in eight different Dutch cities. Special schools were established for both children and adults of the community, though those for the latter proved less successful. This exemplary program is very well regarded by Xoraxané. Those who had not established residence in the Netherlands prior to the cut-off date, and so did not number among the chosen 500, lament their bad luck.

Reliance on welfare has meant the same bind as it has for some Americans. Gypsies can usually obtain only those jobs which pay the very least. Yet, if they are caught working at all, they lose their welfare payments. So it hardly pays to look for a legitimate job. Most, then, take whatever welfare they can get and supplement this by whatever pick-up jobs they can covertly obtain on the side.

There is still some work in copper but this is very different from what they were doing in Yugoslavia. Instead of repairs and making utilitarian ware, they now produce highly ornamented decorative pieces which are un-tinned. These are hawked at flea markets and other public gatherings to people who presumably put them on their mantlepieces. This activity might well be expanded, except for fear of getting caught and losing welfare payments. One coppersmith in Hamburg stamps his pieces on the bottom "Made in Albania", though he says this is to increase the "antique" value rather than to avoid being identified as the maker.

So far as I've been able to determine, Xoraxané have not been able to find work as coppersmiths serving the restaurant business. This niche seems to be monopolized by Kalderash who came to western Europe generations ago. But Patrick Williams in a recent article (Williams 1982:319), describes how Kalderash in Paris sometimes sublet their work to those he calls "Yugoslavs". I suspect these are Xoraxané, whose only access to customers is through the already established system.

Some Xoraxané are turning to the scavenging and sale of scrap metals, an occupation which allows continued nomadism. Though scavenging metal has long been a principal occupation of some Gypsies elsewhere (e.g. England), this is a recent development among Xoraxané.

There is some hawking of goods, more often opportunistically than on a regular basis. One will buy a supply of merchandise found at a particularly good price and will sell it on the streets until it is gone. Often these are goods which were originally stolen by non-Gypsy thieves.

The Xoraxané are not one of those groups who traditionally served as musicians in the Balkans. But a few play the accordion and pick up work from time to time, usually in restaurants and clubs serving the Yugoslav migrant worker population.

These various sources are supplemented by fortunetelling and begging. Both of these activities have been inhibited by authorities and by the frequent lack of knowledge of the local language. Begging is now more commonly done by children than by women<sup>2</sup>, though this varies somewhat from country to country according to the laws and the stringency of their enforcement. In Italy, for example, children

below the age of 14 are not prosecuted. Their mothers, if caught begging, would very likely be sent to Yugoslavia. If beggars don't yet know the local language, they will usually get someone literate to print out the plea on a piece of cardboard which they will then show to prospects. Fortunetelling has greatly declined as a source of income. Now it is often a subsidiary activity to begging; a woman begging on the street will first ask for money; if successful and if the donor looks like a possible customer, she will be asked if she wants her fortune told for an additional contribution.

There has also been a development of criminal activities among some Xoraxané - shoplifting, pickpocketing, burglary, and auto and trailer theft. This is a natural consequence of the situation in which they have found themselves. All of a sudden, the Xoraxané have discovered that they are poor. Though they had far fewer material possessions in Yugoslavia, they would never have thought of themselves as poor there. Now, however, caught up in the high powered cash economy and conspicuous consumerism of the West, they have become all too aware of their relative deprivation. Those that would like to work - and I found many who told me they would - cannot find employment. Because many are illiterate and uneducated, because frequently they don't speak the local language, and especially because they carry the stigma of being Gypsy, no one is willing to hire them. Given this situation it is surprising that even more have not turned to petty crime as a solution.

This new wave of Xoraxané has ranged throughout western Europe but they have become concentrated in Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands. Place of settlement had depended on where an individual, family or extended family could find a viable niche. They will stay there as long as it remains viable and no other location appears to be better. This decision depends not only on economic opportunities but on the living situation, relations within the local Xoraxané community, and the laws enforced by and the services provided by the separate states and local governments. All - without exception - want to come to America. Western Europe has not yet provided them the security they sought; they think America might. United States consulates in western Europe, however, have thus far managed to hold the line. I know of no Xoraxané who have managed to immigrate, despite the determined efforts of many.

Nomadic in Yugoslavia, except for winter months, the Xoraxané in western Europe have become semi-sedentarized. It is now common to remain in one camp or in an apartment provided by the state for a number of years. In a few cases, families have purchased urban lots on which they camp so that they can be reasonably sure that the police will not move them off. In time of need or discontent, they hit the road again and travel - with shorter or longer stop-overs - until a situation is found to hold them again for a longer period. The appraisal of possibilities elsewhere is a constant topic of conversation. People are always sitting around a camp speculating on what might be their chances at some other location.

"Niche" used in conjunction with Xoraxané economy really carries the wrong connotations. The term implies a more or less stable situation, a structured symbiotic relationship with people occupying other niches. The reality is much more fluid than this. The Xoraxané, at least at this stage of their integration with west European society, are constantly on the look-out for new, either long or short term, strategies to better their economic advantage. Each new strategy is but a holding pattern, until something better (or something which at least appears better) comes along. "Niche" will become an appropriate concept only when a greater proportion

of Xoraxané settle into the same strategy for a comparatively longer period of time.

The new adaption has also meant that the Xoraxané have been urbanized. In Yugoslavia they roamed the countryside camping usually either near villages or, more commonly, at the outskirts of market towns. Now they have become inhabitants of the great European cities. Housing varies from state to state, city to city, and family to family. In Germany, for example in Hamburg, most now reside in slum housing provided by the state. In France, many stay in a regular system of camp grounds reserved for the use of Gypsies at which are provided water, toilets, washing facilities and a place to park a caravan. In Italy, only Torino has such a scheduled Gypsy campground. In Rome, the other big Xoraxané community in Italy, there are only small rough camps scattered around the periphery of the city and always in danger of being broken up by the police. Typical was the camp where I did fieldwork for a while: a gully sandwiched between a junk yard and an army camp, crowded with crude shacks and trailers, some of the latter no longer movable.

Most often, the settlements in Western Europe are ethnically mixed. An extended family in Hamburg shared their apartment house with migrant workers from Ghana. When they moved on to France, they were often the only Xoraxané in camps of French Gypsies - Manush and Gitanos - who considered them as exotic and as unruly as did the French themselves. Later they shared a campsite in Rome with non-Gypsy squatters from southern Italy, settled non-Romani speaking Gypsies from Yugoslavia, Romanian -speaking Gypsies from Yugoslavia, and even a Serbian refugee. The new life, then, has meant relationships with new kinds of people, both Gypsy and non-Gypsy.

Except for those few who have been provided with apartments, residence is now in caravans, usually older caravans of the type used for summer vacations by non-Gypsies. The preferred beast of burden is a Mercedes. Tents are now used only for emergencies, as when a family has sold one caravan and not yet acquired another. When they do use tents, these are not the rough A-shape tents that they used in Yugoslavia - and which nomads still use there - but manufactured camping tents.

Although widely disbursed and constantly on the move, the Xoraxané manage to maintain close contact with one another. They form a tight-knit network extending throughout the western European nations and back into Yugoslavia. This is accomplished primarily through the very frequent use of the telephone. Those who are more permanently situated and who have their own phones, serve as important nodes in the communication network. Others, from all over Europe, will call once a week or so to check in, to find out about the doings of family and friends, and to leave word of their own whereabouts and activities. Each family will have several such contacts and seldom does a day go by when a family does not make at least one long distance call. Frequent use of the telephone by Gypsies is not uncommon, of course. American Rom do much the same thing though perhaps not to the same degree. Obviously this is related to the extreme dispersal of the community and to the high incidence of illiteracy. What is interesting here is how quickly the Xoraxané adopted the telephone when the need arose.

The new situation has had some social repercussions as well as economic and material. For one thing, there has been an erosion of the kinship bond within the extended family. Friction has developed both between brothers and between fathers and sons. This seems to result from the alterations of economy and the greater involvement in consumer society. In one example a son who, because he has nine

children of his own, receives a larger welfare payment than the others of his extended family is harshly criticized by the others for not sharing the spoils equally. He responds by travelling more and more on his own and, even when in the same camp, will camp on the opposite side if possible.

There is also growing friction between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law. The common complaint is that daughters-in-law will no longer help their husband's mothers as they once did. The reasons for this seem to lie in the new living arrangements. Once each nuclear family has its own trailer with its own cook stove, there is a strong tendency to concentrate more time and energy on their own space. The consequence of all this is that there is growing emphasis on the nuclear family and a weakening of the bonds of kinship.

Changes in the structure of leadership are also apparent. Leadership in Yugoslavia had been quite stable. The most influential member of the nomadic Xoraxané community in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro had held that position for the entire 25 year period following World War II. In the West the emerging leadership is of "the Big Man" type (Sahlins 1963) with competition between a number of individuals. Influence is based on control of channels of communication and assistance from the non-Gypsy community. A friend in the Yugoslav embassy who can help with certain kinds of paper work, a contact in the Italian police department who can help in other obvious ways, all enhance a person's prestige and increase his influence. By dispensing favors, one creates patrons. Competition can be very intense between different members of this hinge group.

By looking at Xoraxané responses to their new social and cultural environment in western Europe, we can better understand what took place among American Rom 50-70 years ago or, perhaps, among Gypsies in England 400 years ago. Many have written or spoken of the Gypsy propensity for adaptation. But in our discussions of this, we have been considering for the most part the results of adaptation rather than the process. The Xoraxané now dispersing throughout much of western Europe provide the special opportunity to do the latter.

#### Notes

1. The following is more of a progress report of on-going research than a presentation of conclusions. I first began work with the Xoraxané in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1966-68 during the course of another field project (Lockwood 1975, see especially pp. 30-31). We have maintained contact since, both in Yugoslavia and in their new homes in western Europe. In 1984, I spent several months travelling and camping with them in Germany, France and, especially, Italy. I hope to return in the near future for a longer period of intensive fieldwork.
2. Xoraxané men from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro do not engage in begging. This contrasts with the Italian community of sedentary Xoraxané from Kosovo and Macedonia as described by Piasere (1986:6).

children of his own, receives a larger welfare payment than the others of his extended family is harshly criticized by the others for not sharing the spoils equally. He responds by travelling more and more on his own and, even when in the same camp, will camp on the opposite side if possible.

There is also growing friction between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law. The common complaint is that daughters-in-law will no longer help their husband's mothers as they once did. The reasons for this seem to lie in the new living arrangements. Once each nuclear family has its own trailer with its own cook stove, there is a strong tendency to concentrate more time and energy on their own space. The consequence of all this is that there is growing emphasis on the nuclear family and a weakening of the bonds of kinship.

Changes in the structure of leadership are also apparent. Leadership in Yugoslavia had been quite stable. The most influential member of the nomadic Xoraxané community in Bosnia-Hercegovina and Montenegro had held that position for the entire 25 year period following World War II. In the West the emerging leadership is of "the Big Man" type (Sahlins 1963) with competition between a number of individuals. Influence is based on control of channels of communication and assistance from the non-Gypsy community. A friend in the Yugoslav embassy who can help with certain kinds of paper work, a contact in the Italian police department who can help in other obvious ways, all enhance a person's prestige and increase his influence. By dispensing favors, one creates patrons. Competition can be very intense between different members of this hinge group.

By looking at Xoraxané responses to their new social and cultural environment in western Europe, we can better understand what took place among American Rom 50-70 years ago or, perhaps, among Gypsies in England 400 years ago. Many have written or spoken of the Gypsy propensity for adaptation. But in our discussions of this, we have been considering for the most part the results of adaptation rather than the process. The Xoraxané now dispersing throughout much of western Europe provide the special opportunity to do the latter.

#### Notes

1. The following is more of a progress report of on-going research than a presentation of conclusions. I first began work with the Xoraxané in Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1966-68 during the course of another field project (Lockwood 1975, see especially pp. 30-31). We have maintained contact since, both in Yugoslavia and in their new homes in western Europe. In 1984, I spent several months travelling and camping with them in Germany, France and, especially, Italy. I hope to return in the near future for a longer period of intensive fieldwork.
2. Xoraxané men from Bosnia-Hercegovina and Montenegro do not engage in begging. This contrasts with the Italian community of sedentary Xoraxané from Kosovo and Macedonia as described by Piasere (1986:6).



References

Hovens, Peter

1981-82 "Roma in the Netherlands." ROMA, 6(2-3):40-42.

Lockwood, William G.

1975 BOSNIAN MOSLEMS: ECONOMY AND ETHNICITY IN WESTERN BOSNIA.  
New York: Academic Press.

1985a "Balkan Gypsies: An Introduction." In PAPERS FROM THE FOURTH  
AND FIFTH ANNUAL MEETINGS, Joanne Grument, editor. New York:  
Gypsy Lore Society, North American Chapter.

1985b "An Introduction to Balkan Gypsies." GIESSENER HEFTE FUR  
TSIGANOLOGIE, 2(1):17-23.

Paisere, Leonardo

1986 "In Search of New Niches: The Productive Organization of the Peripatetic  
Xoraxané in Italy." In THE OTHER NOMADS: PERIPATETIC MINORITIES  
IN CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE. Aparna Rao, editor. Koln-Wien:  
Bohlau Verlag.

Sahlins, Marshall

1963 "Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief: Political Types in Melanesia and  
Polynesia." COMPARATIVE STUDIES IN SOCIETY AND HISTORY, 5:285-  
303.

Williams, Patrick

1982 "The Invisibility of the Kalderash of Paris: Some Aspects of the  
Economic Activity and Settlement Patterns of the Kalderash Rom of the  
Paris Suburbs." URBAN ANTHROPOLOGY, 11:315-346.

William G. Lockwood  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109