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On the history of Roma schooling in the USA

Abstract: The paper comprises a retrospective overview of the educational situation of the Roma in the USA. In contrast to the European situation, efforts to establish schools for Romanies in the United States have been both few in number and – with only a couple of limited exceptions – unsuccessful. There are approximately one million Romanies in the USA, a number which is slowly growing and till now there are any schools established for Romanies to learn their mother tongue or to get integrated in the mainstream educational system of the USA.

Keywords: Roma, Roma education, schooling, USA

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The beginnings of schooling for Romanies

The involvement of Romanies with special schooling (“alternative” or parochial schooling) dates from about 1965, and began in Richmond, near San Francisco in northern California. The 1960s was the decade of emerging ethnic self-assertion, and minority programs were beginning to flourish, supported by affirmative action. Yet, the Romanies were a special case, because while the larger society was entirely familiar with the African American and Hispanic American minorities – populations numbering in the millions – it had only the vaguest of notions of the infinitely smaller Romani American presence, to the extent of being unaware of its very name Roma(nies). The concept of “Gypsies,” on the other hand – a name also used in self-reference – was widespread, though based in fictionalized stereotypes rather than in real-life experience. For this reason, the agencies which were approached and which were willing to accommodate Romani students, such as the Municipal Social Services Department, the Volunteer Bureau, the California State Service Center and so on, made no special provision for them. No permanent program was established, nor were these provisions centralized, and no school resulted. Nevertheless, this brief exposure to the classroom was sufficient to stimulate the interest of both the students involved and their

parents, who were aware that at least some formalized basic education was becoming necessary in an increasingly technological world. It was in this framework that the first successful Romani school in America was eventually established, a school which lasted for seven years.

Acknowledgment must also be made of the pivotal role played by Miller Stevens in 1968, who was then living in Tacoma, Washington. After learning of the Richmond initiative, he traveled to Washington DC to meet with officials of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to make them aware of the needy situation of the Romani American population. He saw that other minorities were getting recognition and assistance, and wanted the same for Romanies. Indeed it was Miller Stevens who was responsible for getting Romanies recognized as an official ethnic minority by the DHEW. He began a head start program for 15 Romani children in Tacoma out of his home in the summer of 1968, funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity.

Romani attitudes towards schooling

From the traditional Vlach point of view, formal schooling has not been regarded as a good thing. It requires that Romanies enter the non-Romani world, which is seen as polluting and counter-cultural. Not only is the environment unclean – particularly with regard to the toilet and cafeteria facilities, but equally unacceptable would be the seating of boys and girls in the classrooms, and the topics addressed in the curricula. It would also require formally identifying oneself and filling out paperwork, and spending a fixed amount of time in a non-Romani-controlled environment. The classroom is seen as a place to learn to become *gadžikanime* or “Americanized;” there is nothing in the schoolbooks about Romani history or contributions, and when “Gypsies” turn up in the classes they are invariably represented negatively in works of fiction – especially children’s fiction (Hancock, 1988; see also Claveria and Alonso, 2003) – and the historical figures presented as heroes in Western culture are all too frequently the same individuals who sent Romanies into exile or even to their deaths. Schools are seen not only as environments that do nothing to teach a child to be a better “Gypsy”, but which seem determined instead to homogenize and de-ethnicize that child. Stories about children’s interaction with domestic pets, for example, send a different message to the pupil from the values taught in the home. Stories about structured mainstream domestic life present a picture foreign to the Romani child, and newer, diversity-conscious storybooks, about *e.g.* same-sex parent families are completely confusing and

disturbing. School records may be used to keep track of the whereabouts of Romanies in a community by the authorities; Romani children are often targeted by their classmates once their ethnicity is known; one Romani adult remembered with bitterness “Oh God, it was murder going to school; they wouldn’t sit beside you in the seats” (Anon., 1973a:5). Nick Dimas addressed these issues most directly (Hancock, 1975, pp. 45–46):

“In the United States, the continuing internal solidarity and resistance to acculturation of the American Rom is a phenomenon that merits closer attention. Although the underlying social dynamics of this cohesion are as yet obscure, one of the prime techniques which maintains this cohesion is not. They avoid the school system like the plague. While most other U.S. minorities are boycotting, busing and organizing to obtain better education for their children, the Rom are, by any means at their disposal, keeping their children at home. As a result of this mass truancy, the majority of adult Rom in the U.S.A. are illiterate or, at best, functionally illiterate (fifth-grade reading level). If the origin of this practice of education-avoidance is rooted in custom and tradition rather than in a consciously organized group policy, the results of the practice are no less effective in maintaining the solidarity of the group. And if we use the tolerance of marriage outside the group as an indication of group solidarity, they are solid indeed. The school-avoidance tradition and its resulting illiteracy acts in five specific ways to maintain the non-acculturation of the Rom:

1. The minimalization of time at school reduces proportionately the influence of the teacher’s value system on the Roma child, and effectively eliminates the peer-group pressure of the other children, two of the tremendous forces in the socialization process;
2. Illiteracy prevents any socialization in the direction of the majority culture through the written word. It forestalls identification with historical and cultural heroes in books and novels;
3. Illiteracy ensures that Romani will remain the first language of the individual Rom, with the resulting reinforcement of group values which occur when he speaks mainly to and in the company of other Rom;
4. Illiteracy limits the defection to the majority culture via the occupational route, as only the most physical, menial and low-paying jobs are accessible to an illiterate in the U.S.;
5. Illiteracy tends to discourage intermarriage between Romani males and non-Romani females since the husband’s income is severely limited, and tends to remain so.

It is plain that the integrity of the American Romani community is maintained in great part, by severely circumscribing the options of the individual Rom. It goes without saying, however, that any socialized member of the Romani community does not himself feel oppressed or deprived by his lack of reading and writing ability—rather he feels ‘liberated’ from the ‘craziness’ of the gadjo community, much of which he ascribes to reading and writing.”

Sometimes the singling-out of a Romani pupil can be for other reasons, motivated not by animosity but by paternalism, but discriminatory all the same. I can relate an anecdote concerning my own daughter Melina who some years ago at the age of about eight, came home from school one day terribly upset. She was hurt and confused because one of her teachers, of whom she was very fond, had told a boy in the class who was misbehaving that if he didn’t settle down she would “sell him to fifty Gypsies.” Melina wondered why a teacher she admired so much would have such negative feelings about Gypsies. I called the woman at her home that night and explained to her that Melina was a Romani girl, and that she had been very upset by the remark. The teacher was embarrassed and profusely apologetic, claiming that she did not know “Gypsies” were a real ethnic population. The next day, however, she told the class that she had a “surprise” for them; that they had “a little Gypsy girl in the class; Melina is a little Gypsy.” From that point on schooling became increasingly difficult for my daughter, and we eventually removed her for placement in a different school. When I asked the principal in that second school to remove certain children’s books from the school library which presented Romani characters in a damaging stereotypical way – this was prompted after receiving a self-congratulatory circular from the school announcing that in the interest of sensitivity to ethnic diversity numbers of books (such as *Little Black Sambo*) had been taken out of circulation – I received a letter telling me that the characters in the books were Gypsies, not Romanies, and that Gypsies were fictional beings, distinct from Romanies who were an actual ethnic people. The books remained.

Attempts to accommodate Romani culture

The Richmond school was fortunate to have as its first principal Anne Sutherland (then Louis, and later to author Sutherland, 1975). Ms. Sutherland recognized the importance of incorporating the priorities of the Romanies, which were both culturally and pragmatically determined. Culturally, Romanies needed to be on the school board itself, to oversee behavior, meals,

class topics and so on. Boys and girls were to sit separately for instance. Pragmatically, they wanted such topics as reading and writing to be taught, but were not interested in history (of no practical value) or mathematics (already known) or gymnastics (inappropriate culturally). Because this school, which materialized in 1970 out of the various earlier programs, was initially unfunded and wholly supported by volunteers, the school board was not subject to control by any funding body. Ms. Sutherland had the wisdom to sit back at the board meetings and let its Romani members make the decisions. In 1972 the new principal, Janet Tompkins, was able to obtain the first state funding for the school, which lasted until 1977.

Other programs

A year after the Richmond school closed down John Ellis, the leader of the Portland, Oregon, Romani community went to the State Governor to ask for a community center for the Romanies in his area. Ellis wanted a building for social events, but which would also incorporate a classroom, in which traditional Romani values, as well as literacy, would be taught. There were 250 school-aged Romani children in Portland at that time. The response was positive, though the Portland School District's relations officer was adamant that such a project could only be transitional-set up to prepare Romani children for their eventual entry into the public (i.e. state) school system. A compromise was reached, after other Romani leaders were brought into the debate, and a three-part program developed: first, a summer school at Portland Community College for young adults over the age of 18, secondly a vocational training program for younger children, funded by the State Welfare division, and lastly afternoon and evening classes for Kindergarten through eighth-grade. These were held in the Romani business district of the city, and began in the summer of 1978, supported by funding from the Portland School District, the State Fund for Disadvantaged Children, Federal Impact Aid, and Title One. But it was always made clear that the intent was clearly to prepare the children to enter mainstream schools as quickly as possible. While John Ellis enrolled his own three children in school (the Vestal School), he was in a distinct minority; most Romanies in Portland were just not interested. Others pulled their children out of the classes because they were being ridiculed and bullied. This was worse for the older children, those who were unable to read, since the rest of their non-Romani classmates could. Their non-native command of English also made them stand out from

the rest of the class. At the point of its greatest enrollment, there were only 30 children attending, and then sporadically.

The problem was tackled by the school district's decision to put two Romanians on the payroll as "Special Gypsy Counselors;" they acted as liaison between the parents and the administration, and worked with a non-Romani American who specialized in "disadvantaged" pupils. While the Romani children, as young as four and five, attended regular school, they only stayed for two or three hours at a time, following the wishes of their parents and the recommendation of the Counselors. The school board was happy to comply.

Some of the children in Portland still go to school, but most do not. The Vocational Training School program foundered after the second year, and died (Rubin. 1980, pp. 72–73).

In the same year (1973) that John Ellis approached the Oregon State Governor, in Seattle in Washington State another Romani leader, Ephraim Stevens, was attempting the same thing. Like his brother Miller similarly civic minded, he worked during the early 1970s as a community organizer for the King County Economic Opportunity Board, which he asked for funding to establish a "Gypsy" Multi-Service Center, a move stimulated in part by John Ellis' action, and by the fact that Seattle's Chicano community had just received over \$130,000 for such a center. He was initially refused, being told that the Romani population was too small to qualify – it didn't exceed 500 at its maximum – to which it was countered that to favor one minority over another on grounds of numbers was discriminatory. Bowing to criticism the response was that the "Gypsy" Community Center was set up in the city, headed by Stevens and funded by the Urban, Rural, Racial and Disadvantaged Education Program, which contained a day school for young children and an evening literacy class for adults. There were six children to begin with, a number which quickly grew to 25. Stevens hired a female university student to teach, and according to his own testimony, she took over the program and gradually eased him out. She was followed by three more non-Romani directors in succession, Lesley Easton, Barbara Cemenio and Carolyn Hall. By 1981 the Gypsy Alternative School occupied two buildings and had two teachers, with 40 students registered, though only 26 came regularly to class. By 1983, there was just one teacher employed there because of lack of funding (Whistler, 1983, p. 14). The Culture Center eventually closed down, but the school continued to exist, for many years with the involvement of the late Dorothy (Bora) George, a local Romni, and later Paul Stevens, brother of Kaiser Stevens of Tacoma. It was the longest running Romani alterna-

tive school in the country, but it has been closed for over three years now. Dorothy George spoke often to me of re-opening it, but was not successful in finding the means to do so.

At the same time, another Romani leader, James Marks, in Spokane, Washington, obtained funding from the Spokane Work Exchange Program for Young Adults, and established the “Gypsy” Cultural Center in a disused army barracks. For a short time it offered an evening class for small children, though no day classes, and very quickly it transformed to a community and sewing center for women, eventually closing down altogether after about six months. Marks’ three children attended both state school by day, and the “Gypsy” school in the evenings. James Marks cannot himself read or write. The existence of a similar venture in Tacoma, Washington, began by Kaiser Stevens and funded by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, was more successful-though stimulated by a 1975 juvenile court ruling that Romani children not attending school were liable to be placed into foster homes. This led to a proposal entitled the “Gypsy” Educational Development Program’s being submitted, which asked for \$152,000. Its authors are not specified, but the proposal is flawed in its understanding of the Romani American population, and its design suggests strongly that it was meant at least in part to provide a framework for somebody’s doctoral thesis. What did survive in Tacoma was an evening school program in which the students were able to earn a General Education Diploma (GED), a high-school graduation equivalent. The three other school projects which have received attention were in Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore, though there have been short-lived ventures in Boston, Fort Worth, Austin and elsewhere. The Chicago project was initiated by Tom Nicholas, supposedly motivated by Ephraim Stevens who went from Seattle to that city to spread the word. Miller Stevens obtained travel money from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to visit Romani leaders around the country to tell them about Romani schools and to try to establish new ones; but his greatest success had been several years earlier, when he visited Washington in 1968 with Stanley Stevens, a Romani leader from Baltimore, Maryland. In Chicago, a grant of \$26,000 from state bilingual funds was initially provided for the 1973–1974 school year, during which time refinements were made to the program and a proposal drawn up for submission for further funds. It required, among other things, that:

- a) A Rom be named director and be given full authority in the selection of personnel;
- b) An equal number of Romani and non-Romani teachers be employed;

- c) No distinction be made in salaries received by the teachers, whatever their academic credentials;
- d) Equal time be given to the teaching of Romani language and culture by the Romani teachers, as to literacy and computational skills, taught by non-Romanies;
- e) All classes were to be held at night;
- f) Students of all ages were to be admitted equally;
- g) No attendance or enrollment records were to be kept;
- h) Students were not to be required to identify themselves;
- i) Classes were to be small, and acquisition of any skill was to be achieved by repetition;
- j) There was to be no formal discipline;
- k) Male and female students were to be seated separately, and females were never to be placed in competitive situations with males;
- l) Non-Romani teachers were to leave the room when sessions on Romani language and culture were taking place;
- m) The program was to admit the students regardless of their place of residence, and with no reference to the actual school district to which he or she belonged (Kearney, 1981, pp. 50–51).

The Chicago School District rejected the proposal, which was then picked up by the Northwest Education Cooperative which provided \$13,000 for a three-month pilot bilingual program. This was entitled *Gypsy Village Hindsight* and was located at the Halsted Urban Progress Center; it had 75 students to start with and eight teachers, half of whom were Romanies, and it seemed to be off to a good start. The evaluation at the end of this period was positive enough to obtain an extension of a further three months. The Chicago School Board was asked to sponsor a permanent school but, despite the success of the pilot, it declined. Other agencies approached by Nicholas, including the various urban colleges throughout the city and the University of Chicago, were not in a position to sponsor projects requiring bilingual funding. Different agencies such as the Small Business Administration, the Right to Read Program and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation were all solicited, but none was willing to underwrite a Gypsy project. The school closed down.

In Philadelphia in 1970, Kalderash Romani leader Johnny Thompson got together with city officials to work out a compromise with them, because they had begun to withhold payments from those Romani families having children who were not attending school. A highly effective leader, Thompson was not only able to obtain a \$50,000 grant from the federal government to

establish a Gypsy school, but he was also able to persuade newly-arriving Romani families that, as the *forosko baro* (community leader) he would only help them find homes and establish businesses if they agreed to enroll their children in the program. He even went so far as to arrange for regular mini-bus transportation for the children to and from their homes. The school was located in the basement of St. Rita's Catholic Church at Broad and Rittner Streets. With the help of diocesan Cardinal Crowe, and later one Father Bevelacqua, classes for as many as 200 children lasted for more than ten years. All of the teachers were the nuns associated with the St. Rita's Convent, and their main focus was literacy skills and religious training. When Thompson died in 1982, no one was equipped to take over the work of this dynamic man, and the school closed down. Waning interest on the part of the government also ensured that here, as elsewhere, no particular effort would be made by the authorities to urge school attendance. The impetus of the sixties and seventies was a thing on the past. Today, Thompson's sister Barbara Nicola has plans to re-institute the school on the premises of her own church outside Atlantic City in New Jersey, but the problems of finding teachers and funding have yet to be overcome.

In August, 1968 in Baltimore, Miller Stevens met with Stanley Stevens after responding to a telephone call asking how a Gypsy school might be established on the East Coast. Together these two men visited a professor in the Department of Social Relations at Johns Hopkins University, and Maryland State Senator Joseph Tydings. Senator Tydings wrote to the Mayor of Baltimore strongly recommending that social services programs be established for Baltimore's Romani community; this in turn led to the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Baltimore City Community Action Agency organizing a joint discussion of the situation.

From this meeting it was determined that a survey of the Romani American population of Baltimore be undertaken, to assess needs and numbers. This was not successful. Most of the community refused to participate, and only members of Stevens' extended family seemed interested. It was decided nevertheless to proceed with a proposal to establish a school since the parents who were interviewed were unanimously supportive of such a program. This was put together in 1968, and it asked for \$14,300. Its requirements were that:

- a) One teacher having sufficient background in linguistic skills and with sympathy for cross – cultural problems be appointed to be an effective instructor and innovator;

- b) a female aide be selected from the Romani community to assist the teacher as an interpreter and control link;
- c) Space for a classroom be located within the Romani community and be provided by the Romani leadership;
- d) Educational materials and equipment be held in the custody of the teacher between classroom sessions.

The evident Romani/non-Romani imbalance of authority, the biased wording in parts of the proposal, and its one-family focus combined to assure that the project would not succeed.

Institutional resistance to Romanies and Romani culture

Fear of Romanies in the classroom in America is mild compared to reactions in Europe; a British parent told a newspaper reporter that “[i]t came as a tremendous shock when we heard that Gypsy children were to be taught at the school. They smell, I’m afraid, and have the educational standard of retarded children” (Anon., 1965, p. 5), while in Italy, car tires were heaped in the middle of the road and set on fire to prevent Romani children from reaching the school; in Spain, local residents pelted Romani children who were attempting to attend school in Zaragoza with bricks (Anon., 1984, p. B7). In Hungary, at least in the mid-1980s, about 15% of Romani children are put into schools for the mentally-deficient (Satory, 1986, p. 5). Although the Western US schools for the most part received positive support initially from the surrounding non-Romani community, their establishment was not entirely free from elements of antigypsyism. In Seattle, for example, when non-Romani parents learned that there would be Gypsies in their schools, they became alarmed, and demanded meetings with the PTA. “In addition to the fear engendered by the prejudiced view of the Rom, there was also a feeling of resentment at having school territory impinged upon” (Kaldi, 1983, p. 21). Both Ephraim Miller and James Marks were angered by the lack of enthusiasm and concern they encountered from the establishment once the initial fascination with the Gypsy schools had passed. While other minorities continued to receive attention and financial support, the administration and the funding bodies simply lost interest (Tyner-Stastny, 1977, pp. 32–34; James and Marks, p.c.).

Conclusions

We may trace the initial impetus for creating alternative schooling for Romanies in America to the mid and late 1960s, when it was stimulated by the general increase in interest in the civil rights of American ethnic minorities; and we may trace its decline to both internal and external factors—externally to declining available funds and (eventually) changing governmental policies towards minority support, and to general ignorance on the part of the establishment of who and what Romani Americans are. Internally, schools failed to maintain themselves because of fundamental cultural and social differences separating the worlds of the Romanies and the non-Romanies, and the lack of trained personnel within the Romani population to serve as administrators and educators. The Reagan administration (1981–1989) severely curtailed minority funding, blocking the Texas Proposal just weeks before it may have become a reality (Appendix, below); the Hopwood Decision which brought an end to affirmative action (1997) has further ensured that federal and municipal funds for parochial schools are out of reach.

Some classes have been created informally in different cities attached to the Charismatic Christian (“born again”) churches which have proliferated since the 1970s. While Romani community life is shrinking in terms of numbers because of changes in family structure and distribution, “Gypsy” churches are now providing locations in which Romanies still gather in considerable numbers, and on a regular basis. Indeed, this may be one overriding reason for their popularity. But such classes still lack trained teachers, or appropriate workbooks, or accreditation, and they tend to focus on literacy centered upon Bible stories in English, to the exclusion of anything else.

There is a thirst for education among young Romanies, but satisfying it means making it available in an accessible and attractive way. It must hold their attention, it must be compatible with everyday life outside of the classroom, and it must be reassuring to the older generation. Ideally this means an all-Romani environment, with trained teachers who are themselves Romanies, who can not only teach various subjects but oversee the behavior and wellbeing of the students. A start has been made in New York with the informal weekly classes organized and run by Gregory Kwiek, significantly a *themengo Rom*, i.e. from a European rather than American-born family. American Vlach Romanies came here following emancipation from slavery,

and have not experienced the Holocaust and other events in Europe which have politicized and educated European Romanies.

The New Wave Romanies are already bringing innovation with them, but the extent to which it will spread into the American Romani population remains to be seen. A greater sense of ethnic unity, bringing all Romani populations to an understanding and acceptance of shared origins and unity, is itself something which will have to be learned in the classroom.

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