

The gypsies and their journey

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The problem of gypsies presents an almost unique set of ethical and political challenges for Europe. Though many in Europe dismiss the problem as localized and personalized conflict, while simultaneously denying the impulse to systematically destroy the Gypsies and their way of life; it is Vaclav Havel who suggests, " To allow this for the Gypsies is the litmus test for civil society" (Wallia). Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, offers as a locus of analysis in his *Civilization and Its Discontents* this notion of aggression towards an out-group as a major obstacle to civilization, " the inclination to aggression is an original, self-sustaining instinctual disposition. It constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization [sic]" (81). The treatment of the Gypsies in Europe is paradigmatic of the deleterious effects on civilization as a result of this instinctual disposition toward violence and aggression. There has been a paucity of recognition regarding the plight of the Gypsies, even after the Holocaust, when Hitler and his Nazi minions were responsible for the destruction of 1. 5 million Gypsies (Wallia). The forgetting and abnegation of this tragedy in stark contrast to the attention given to the then concurrent predicament of the Jews has allowed for a continued and nearly unchecked level of violence against Gypsies. One work that has attempted to uncover the current attitudes and treatment of the Gypsies in Europe is Isabel Fonseca's *Bury My Heart at Gonesse: The Gypsies and their Journey*. This paper will briefly examine how Freud's thesis regarding aggression is exemplified by Fonseca's presentation of Gypsies in Europe.

In a chapter entitled " A Social Problem," Fonseca examines the nature of conflicts and the uneasy existence between Romanians and Gypsies. She begins to note however, interesting and oddly similar social phenomena occurring in both cultures, namely, getting swindled. Fonseca surmises, " But <https://assignbuster.com/the-gypsies-and-their-journey/>

in truth swindling was so common in Romania that it was remarkable that the Gypsies, or anyone else, had managed to gain a reputation for dishonesty" (158). The subtle differences between Gypsy-swindles and Romanian ones are emblematic of the type of conditions that are sufficient for engendering racial hatred and conflict. In situations where adjoining territories or in this case, plots of land, are populated by different communities with some other similarities besides geographical, constant feuding, ridicule and violence is easily promulgated by what Freud terms, "the narcissism of minor differences" (72). By tenaciously holding on to what makes various communities different allows a convenient ostracization to be neatly transformed into a pretext for violence. Freud suggests that this pretext offers an advantage for society, in a manner of speaking, since men cannot so easily abandon this disposition towards violence. "It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (72). The Gypsies and their peripatetic lifestyle insures in Europe, at least for the time being, the presence of "left-over" people. As they are reticent to "settle" and unlike the Jews, there is no analog Zionist desire to establish a Gypsy homeland, they are convenient scapegoats for further chastisement and harassment.

Analogies between the Gypsies and the Jews are frequent especially in the wake of the Holocaust, illustrated by the frequent used descriptor of the Gypsies as the "new Jews of Europe." Fonseca attempts to show that this description is misguided, and moreover, indeed along with the Jews, the Gypsies are ancient targets of hatred and violence. While the systematic elimination of the Jews is considered unforgivable genocide, the motivations

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for killing Gypsies are always attributed to less sinister or less systematic exculpations. While the Nazis concluded via their infamous eugenics research that Gypsies were congenital criminals and needed to be eliminated, their inclusion in the U. S. Holocaust Museum was fought by Elie Wiesel and was absent, as Fonseca notes, until he resigned from the governing council in 1986 (276). The monumental project of remembrance engaged by the Jewish people worldwide, whose sense of nationalistic identity lies in stark contradistinction to the fragmented, whimsical and occasionally cynical attitude of the Gypsies as regards their own historical plight. This lack of deep association is often noted as Fonseca reprints an excerpt from an adopted Bulgarian into a tribe of Gypsies who remembers a saying from his adopted Gypsy father, " Too often the courage about dying is cowardice about living" (277). These particular attitudes: the unwillingness to settle, a peculiar lack of interest in their history, a fragmented identity at best consistently leaves Gypsies on the outside, where " the liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization" (Freud 82). The one gift that Gypsies seem to most want is the one that is most stridently abrogated by civilizing impulses, thus leaving them the targets of the opposing destructive impulse lying in the human death-drive or thanatos. 1 It is this unwillingness of Gypsies to participate in traditional civil procedures as a Romanian public prosecutor complains, " They [Gypsies] never have the documentation...They have no proofs" (Fonseca 157), which leaves them vulnerable to attacks and reprisals as their lack of " proofs" constructs them as " civilizationally" invisible and thus expendable. However, in order to pass the litmus test of civil society, the ability to manage this situation without exploiting this invisibility as an excuse to legitimize the animalistic release of aggression is

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the only mark of evolution and development from our violent past. These meager rationalizations regarding their status as non-citizens only further underscore our continued inability to tame this destructive aggression highlighted by Freud, which prowls in and haunts the psyche of civilized society.

Works Cited

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