

“The Gypsies” After Thirty-Five Years



My Informant Biga, ca. 1970

The Czech translation by Marek Jakoubek and Lenka Budilova of my thirty-five year old work gives me the opportunity to reflect briefly on what I did back in 1973.

My little booklet “The Gypsies” was published by the Addison-Wesley Publishing Company as one of its “modules” in anthropology with an intended audience of undergraduate students. Such “modules” were meant to be very brief introductions to what social scientists knew about a given subject, together with suggestions for further reading. These were my aims in this publication. (For a

survey of more recent literature, see “Gypsies and Travelers in North America,” by W. G. Lockwood and S. Salo, Gypsy Lore Society, 1994).

But the publication of this little booklet also meant for me the conclusion of some five years of field work with Gypsies. As I explained in the beginning of the work, I depended heavily on my principal Gypsy informant. In my booklet I used the pseudonym Stevano to protect his privacy. But now, some forty years after my work with him – thirty-eight years after his death – there no longer is reason to keep his name hidden. His name was Biga, and I write these lines to pay tribute to his contributions to my work and to Gypsy studies more generally. There is a complete record of all of his conversations with me in 181 audio tapes, available to researchers at the Archives of the University of British Columbia, Werner Cohn Fonds.

Biga was a paid informant, and our relationship was always, from his side, first and foremost a business relationship. But as far as I could judge then or now, his answers to my questions were always thoughtful and thorough. He was, in fact, my teacher, not only in the Gypsy language but also in Gypsy culture. When he

died, some three years after we started to work together, I mourned the loss of a valued mentor.

Was he also a friend ? I would have liked him to be a friend, but that he never was. Perhaps mentors cannot be friends, I don't know. Reflecting on the question now, I don't think that Gypsy-GaZo relations could reasonably be expected to involve friendship, at least not for Gypsies who were fully integrated, as Biga always was, in the culture and cultural network of Gypsy life. As Biga himself explained to me occasionally, Gypsy concepts of purity would forbid close relationships with outsiders.

I have heard other researchers claim that they enjoyed close friendships with Gypsies, but to me these claims always appeared to be wishful thinking. Of course there are many different types of Gypsy groups, both in North America and elsewhere, and the purity ethos elsewhere may be quite different from what I describe here. Insofar as I take my relationship with Biga as indicative of Gypsy-researcher relationships and their limitations, I must emphasize that I can only talk about the Rom Gypsies with whom I worked some forty years ago.

Werner Cohn

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