

More than once we have received information about the teaching programme which the District of France has been running for Gypsies. The latter are also called travellers, camping for a short time outside some of the larger cities. The programme has been named "Mobile Classrooms".

The authors of this article are closely associated with this experiment.

We print the information below as a sample of educational work which can be set up for one of the poorer sectors of our present-day society.

THE GYPSIES (1/2)

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How many of us can say that the sight of these "travellers" has never made us think? We find them parked on the outskirts of our towns, several dozen caravans together, staying for a couple of days in a car park, relegated to a cul de sac, near the town rubbish dump. Others stop out in the countryside, in a field, near a noisy motorway interchange, with no water, electricity and no school. We are quite ignorant about them: we don't even know what to call them: Gypsies? Bohemians? Romanies? etc. The article that follows attempts to describe with a certain amount of detail what characterises this Gypsy population which for centuries has been rejected and marginalised because of widespread misunderstanding on the part of most people.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

Although this itinerant people has never "kept a journal of its childhood and adolescence", as Claude Levi Strauss puts it so well, there is material in archives and one can map out the wanderings of the Gypsy population across the globe. And so we know that the Gypsies first came to Paris in 1427, a fact that explains how whole dynasties of them have genealogies more firmly rooted in France than many of our ancestors.

Moreover, by carefully examining their dialects, linguists have been able to discover that they are Indian in origin. Almost 500 words of the Gypsy vocabulary are related to modern Indian languages and to Sanskrit from which these languages come. The presence of Iranian, Greek, Slavonic, Germanic and Italian words enables us to retrace the long journey of these Gypsy nomads who, it would appear, left North India in about the 8th century.

Their presence was noted in Persia in the 9th century and in the Byzantine Empire in the 10th. It seems they were mistaken for a heretical Manichean sect from which possibly they derive their name "tzigane". From the 12th to the 15th century, they continued to wander across central Europe, through Germany, Italy and France where their presence was noted for the first time in 1419. They reached England, the Scandinavian countries and Russia some 30 years later.

REJECTION GOING BACK CENTURIES

In 1504, Louis XII told them to leave the kingdom on pain of being banished. Later, under Louis XIV, they were made galley slaves. In 1802, in the Basque country, measures were prepared to deport them.

Nearer our time, a law dated July 16th 1912 made it obligatory for nomads to carry about with them a document giving their personal details, which had to be stamped on arrival at a town and on departure.

In April 1940, an official ban came into force forbidding nomads to move about in France. The Vichy government in France put them into camps. Under German pressure, a great many interned Gypsies were turned over to the Nazis. Between 16,000 and 18,000 died in concentration camps together with the Jews. During the Second World War, between 200,000 and 400,000 Gypsies died in the camps.

Even today, the Travellers, as they are commonly called, are not issued with identity cards, but instead carry a travel document which the must get stamped regularly at the Prefecture.

A RIGHT TO TRAVEL THAT IS FLOUTED.

Although having French citizenship in all respects - he has to do his military service like everybody else - the Gypsy is not allowed by law to park anywhere in the same place for more than 48 hours. Moreover, he is forbidden to use camping sites. So, where can he stop just to have a rest and enable his children to go to school if, as is known, very few areas have been set aside for the Gypsies by the public authorities? For example, at present, Seine St. Denis has nowhere for Gypsies to stay, and yet, for many years now, more than a thousand itinerants have been living in the Département. The only places where they can stop is in the disused factories in Plaine St. Louis and in Gennevilliers, on the Aulnay sous Bois and Blanc Mesnil industrial estates, on the sides of motorways, in the fields around Roissy Airport, in parking lots in suburbs mostly populated by immigrants.

WORK AND THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM

What is striking is the variety of activities they are involved in. With regard to business, they sell textiles, clothing, seasonal flowers and fruit. Their crafts include basket making, upholstering and cane-bottoming of chairs, carpet making, boiler making, tin and copper work, tool sharpening, knife and scissors grinding, chimney sweeping, the collection and sorting of

scrap metal, seasonal work.

In the Paris region, they are involved mostly in selling clothes in markets in multi-ethnic and economically depressed suburbs. Wives, despite having numerous children, are often obliged to go around touting for business, looking for individual customers for their wares: chairs, baskets, cloth, handkerchiefs, lace, etc. This is not an easy job, because householders are naturally suspicious of door-to-door salesmen. Certain textile or lace factories, and even chair manufacturing firms, are dependent for business to a certain extent on these Gypsy door-to-door salesmen.

In fact all these activities have a certain similarity because of their independent nature and suitability for people who travel a lot.

It can be said, therefore, that Gypsies, whatever the name they go under, are workers, despite the prevalent tendency among people to condemn their inactivity and wonder about the source of their income.

This income is never very high, and Gypsy families are sometimes reduced to a state of poverty and precariousness that borders on destitution. The sight of a beautiful caravan pulled by a powerful car is misleading. In reality, these vehicles rarely belong fully to the Traveller who never manages to pay completely for his mobile home which is his only wealth.

To close this part of the article one thing has to be said: Gypsies have a different attitude from other people like us towards work and the person who does it. We look upon a job as something to boast about every now and then. The Traveller considers us all as "peasants" because we think our profession somehow enhances us as persons. For him, the family comes first and only then does he think of relating to a system or economy. He earns his living because he has to live, but first and foremost he is a Traveller and does not feel classified by his job.