

Under the Cloak of Begging?

Gypsy Occupations in Western Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Leo Lucassen

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This review of 'gypsy occupations' in the period 1815–1940 has made clear that there is no such thing. Almost all the professions mentioned (including fortune-telling) were also practised by sedentary people. Even itinerancy as such was not a monopoly of gypsies. Tens of thousands of people were itinerants, without being labelled as gypsies. Finally, all the characteristics listed in the second section (the family as working unit, mobility and self-employment) are general phenomena and can therefore in the end not be explained by reference to the 'gypsy culture'. The specific feature of gypsy occupations only lies in a combination of the three: being self-employed and travelling with one's family. People who chose such a way of life were very likely to be labelled by authorities as 'gypsy' (or similar labels) in Western Europe. This 'power of definition', that had been in force since the 15th century, was so strong that it was very difficult for people to escape from it. Moreover, it easily led to the development of ethnicity: people began to feel that they were different from others and to cultivate their own way of life and the symbols attached to it. The fact that within the general category of 'gypsies' some call themselves 'Sinti' or 'Roma' believing their origin to be Indian and often speaking some Romani dialect, does not automatically prove that this claim can be upheld in view of historical research. In order to understand the group-formation of gypsies, we have to take into account the long process of stigmatisation and labelling.

Dr. Leo Lucassen is Fellow of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Department of History, Leiden University, Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL Leiden, The Netherlands.

Introduction

Popular knowledge about the economic function of gypsies is dominated by two ideas. Perhaps the most widespread is that gypsies are workshy parasites, who always try to avoid hard labour and live from day to day. This image of the 'jolly gypsy life' has deep roots (Geremek 1989) and was popularised by the influential study on 'the gypsies' of 1783 by the German scholar Grellmann. His stereotypical account was further reproduced by many European encyclopedias and popular books on gypsies well into the twentieth century (Willem & Lucassen 1990). It was given an even

more negative undertone by the assumption that this way of life mostly led to criminal acts. Gypsies were, and still are, regarded by many as thieves and beggars who prefer illegal activities to normal and regular (wage) labour. In the event of their working e.g. as hawkers or musicians, their activities are depicted as a pretext for begging and stealing. Wandering is considered an unproductive way of life that is determined by external conditions. For the purpose of illustration, there follows a quote from the book on 'travellers' from the German author Arnold:

"The economy of travellers can be compared

with that of a poacher. [...] This also applies to hawking, because it is no more than begging in disguise or asking too high prices. [...] Clients are sources of money and for the rest nothing." (Arnold 1983: 110).

Another important element of this *criminological* image is that gypsies force the 'helpless' land-folk to accept their services or to buy their products by intimidation. Their fear is often mingled with superstition, enabling gypsies to deceit the 'simple' land-folk in many ways (cf. Fricke 1991: 101). This image is not only associated with gypsies, but can also be found in historical studies on other itinerant people, regardless of whether they travelled with their family (cf. Lucassen 1993). Seasonal labourers in France, for example, who were vital to the agricultural economy until about 1900 (Lucassen 1987), were suspect because of their forced mobility and often arrested as vagrants.

A second (*ethnographic*) idea that is often reproduced, frequently alongside the first, is that gypsies may have had social and economic functions in the past, but that these traditional crafts were made obsolete by the modernisation and industrialisation of European societies. Implicitly it assumes that gypsies are passive victims, incapable of change and that their own archaic nomadic culture is responsible for the failure to keep up with modernisation. In a recent, on the whole valuable, study on the history of gypsy persecution in Germany, the author uncritically reproduces this concept by saying:

"The gypsies lacked a 'work-ethos', as a result of which in their position as outsiders they became hopelessly caught up in the utilitarian society." (Hehemann 1987: 63).¹

The common ground which both images (criminological and ethnographic) share, is the idea that the economic disfunctionality of gypsies must be understood in the light of their own behaviour and static culture. This explanation is further reinforced by the conviction that gypsies are *one* people with ethnic Indian roots who have stuck to their own culture from the time they appeared in Europe. This notion,

however, has recently been attacked by several scholars (cf. Okely 1983: 49–65, Mayall 1988 & 1992 and Lucassen 1990).² Their studies make clear that the Indian roots cannot be proven, and what is perhaps more important, that in the course of time all kinds of people have been stigmatised and labelled as 'gypsies' and in the end have defined themselves in these terms, irrespective of their origin or cultural features. The only criterion was the fact that they travelled around with their family. An instructive example of this mechanism is offered by the Bavarian Police at the beginning of the century. In their desire to register all gypsies, a booklet was produced with 3,350 entries of persons labelled as 'gypsies'. For our argument the introduction is especially illuminating. Here the author explicitly states that 'real gypsies' no longer exist and that an important part of the people who in Germany are called 'gypsy' originate from Germany itself. Therefore he proposes to call 'gypsy' all those who travel around in family groups (Dillmann 1905). This mechanism can be discerned in other countries as well. In this paper I therefore use a sociological definition of 'gypsies': people who lead an itinerant way of life and who are stigmatised as 'gypsy' or with similar labels.³ This is not to deny 'gypsy' or 'traveller' ethnicity or that people have passively undergone this stigmatisation (cf. Svensson 1992), but simply takes as point of departure the definition used by authorities in the past (Lucassen 1990 & 1991).

Not only has the gypsy definition undergone major changes, the same is true for the interpretation of their economic behaviour. As both negative ideas are seen in a static cultural perspective, it is not a coincidence that studies which moved away from this angle and took a more sociological definition as point of departure offer a quite different picture of gypsy occupations. At this point we can limit ourselves to the main conclusions that are supported by recent historical and anthropological research (cf. Okely 1983, Gmelch & Gmelch 1987, Salo 1987, Mayall 1988, Lucassen 1990): 1) gypsies were *not* (criminal) parasites, but performed a valuable and useful economic function; and 2) gypsies did adapt to major

economic changes. In the rest of this paper I will try to elaborate on these two statements, using examples from the still limited knowledge on the history of itinerant people in general and 'gypsies' in particular in Western Europe during the past centuries. First of all, let me give a short characterisation of gypsy occupations.

The essence of gypsy occupations

It may seem odd, but gypsy occupations did not differ essentially from economic activities by sedentary people. One of the most confusing concepts used in this respect is 'nomadism'. This idea refers to societies of hunters and gatherers, and is often used as 'proof' of the gypsies' traditional and specific culture. 'Gypsies', however, differ as much from pastoral nomads – wandering in a certain area with their herds – as other members of Western European societies. Although 'gypsy occupations' have some specific features, on the whole the similarities with other ('normal') occupations are much greater than is often assumed. Let us have a look at the main characteristics associated with the 'gypsy economy': the *family as work unit*, in which all members (men, women, children) contribute to the family income, is a phenomenon that can be found all over the world. As a matter of fact, most people followed this model in the past and only in recent times has individualisation become more general. But even in modern highly industrialised societies, the family as work unit is still valid, especially with immigrant or ethnic groups. A second feature that is often mentioned with regard to the gypsy economy is their *mobility*. Here, again, gypsies have no monopoly. Well into the 20th century, European agriculture and industry made use of tens of thousands of seasonal workers who left their homes every year for months at a time to earn a living abroad or in other parts of the country. Irish labourers went to England, Germans to the Low Countries, French inhabitants of mountainous regions to the Basin of Paris, Italian musicians and animal tamers wandering all over Europe and even to other

parts of the world (Lucassen 1987, Zucchini 1992 and Van Tiggelen 1982–1983).

A last crucial element is *self-employment*. In many studies it is stressed that gypsies prefer to be their own boss. Wage-labour is looked upon as unfavourable and is considered to have a lower status. Most anthropological and sociological studies explain this preference in cultural terms (e.g. Gronemeyer & Rakelmann 1988: 126). Gypsies are assumed to be self-supporting because thus the necessary boundary between their own culture and the world of the non-gypsies can be upheld. As Okely put it:

"Self-employment is bound up with Gypsy identity. There is shame attached to a wage-labour job; one Traveller said: "If we Travellers took regular jobs it would spoil us"." (Okely 1983: 53; cf. also Svensson 1992: 8).

This may be so at the moment, but it remains to be proven whether the choice for independent occupations was culturally motivated. Moreover, the ideology expressed by many 'gypsies' does not deviate much from the arguments put forward by most self-employed people. Apart from the disputable ideas on origin and group formation, it can be argued with as much plausibility that the preference for self-employment has economic roots and that the present, extremely negative attitude of gypsies towards wage-labour is a *reaction* to discrimination and stigmatisation. One argument in favour of this interpretation is the fact that gypsies were not the only self-employed itinerant people in the past. From the Middle Ages onward many took to the road, as hawkers, pedlars, musicians etc. The reason for this was mainly economic: a living could be earned by filling up the gap between supply and demand. Especially in the rural areas it was difficult for people to buy products because of the lack of stores. Besides, there was a need for entertainment. The possibilities these economic niches offered were not only used by gypsies. In all Western European countries a class of people specialised in independent itinerant functions. The only exception being that – as in the case of the seasonal wage-labour migrants – in most

cases they did not take their families along with them.

The *specific* character of gypsy occupations consisted of a combination of these three elements: a mobile way of life in family groups aimed at self-employment. Unlike the seasonal migrants or itinerant traders and craftsmen mentioned above, they took their families along with them in carts or caravans. Therefore there was little necessity of having a house, although in practice a combination of house and caravan occurred (Mayall 1988: 16 ff). Having thus defined the character of occupations of people who have been labelled as 'gypsies' through time, I propose to take a closer look at the different specialisations and their function within society.

The main gypsy occupations

For the purpose of analysis I have divided the several economic activities into four different categories. Subsequently I will deal with trading, crafts, entertainment and seasonal wage-labour.

A: trading, hawking and peddling

Trading was perhaps the most important economic niche for gypsies and within this category hawking, that is, going from house to house trying to sell products, seems to have been the principal activity. As we saw before, gypsies did not have a monopoly on hawking; on the contrary, many people tried to earn a living in this way. In particular, members of the working class undertook itinerant activities, among other things, in order to increase their low wages. For these 'penny capitalists' retailing continued to be popular for a long time. The low costs made street-selling or hawking attractive to the ambitious and destitute alike and could provide a possible escape route for the ambitious working man (Benson 1983: 100).

Especially in the first half of the nineteenth century we see predominantly single hawkers operating in the countryside selling light hardware toys and other goods. Only in a few instances are 'gypsies' mentioned in this respect

(exceptions are Fricke 1991: 81 and Vaux de Foletier 1981: 95). The 'gypsy-awareness' of authorities increased after the middle of the century when more people started travelling in families and took their own housing with them. In Great Britain the most well-known groups, the 'princes of the itinerant trade' (Alexander 1970: 78), were some thousand pedlars known as 'Cheap Johns'. They travelled with their families to fairs, markets and towns all over the country, selling cutlery, firearms, saddlery and other sorts of manufactured goods (Benson 1983: 108). The transition of single hawkers to hawkers who took their family with them was stimulated by the 'invention' of the caravan. This made family-travelling not only easier and more comfortable, but also more visible. In most countries many of them were quickly stigmatised and often 'gypsified' by the authorities. The Dutch caravan dwellers, for example, only emerged in the 1880s and did not exist as a group before that date (Cottaar et al. 1992). The same mechanism can be observed in other countries as well. Many of these 'gypsies' took to hawking. Due to industrialisation the demand for cheap items such as brooms, baskets, fancy goods, earthenware etc. increased enormously. This was not only a result of population growth, but also of proletarianisation and urbanisation. Consumers became more and more dependent on wage-labour and neither had the time nor the possibility to manufacture many of these goods themselves. The niche for hawkers and street-sellers was created by the jerky development of modernisation. Especially the increase in stores did not keep pace with the growth of the population, purchasing power of the masses and urbanisation. As Mayall has argued, the importance of hawkers and pedlars must not be underestimated, because many customers were dependent on them. By means of illustration, he cites the autobiography of Alexander Somerville, published in 1848:

"We lived inconveniently distant from shops and towns; and they supplied us with many things, such as spoons, crockery, tin-ware, and sieves, and repaired so many things at prices exceedingly moderate, that my impression of their usefulness was, that we should have had



Fig. 1. Female hawker from Matzenbach (Palatine) around 1890.

Source: Arnold 1983: 297.

to do without some articles of use, or pay very dear for them elsewhere, if the tinklers had not come round periodically to supply us." (Mayall 1988: 49. He adds that the term 'tinker' or 'tinkler' was synonymous with 'gypsy' in the Border regions.)

And even when a sufficient number of stores was established in the countryside, people in the poorer parts of town often preferred buying from hawkers, among whom many women (see fig. 1). Most of them had a regular circle of customers and were therefore trusted. Moreover, they offered cheaper goods and did not show the contempt that many workers were confronted with in middle class stores (Asmus 1898). For that reason sedentary shopkeepers

were not all that popular with the working man, as can be illustrated with a German quote from 1898:

"The [shopkeeper] very often put single products in his shop-window at very moderate prices. Once customers enter the shop, however, he tries with all kinds of excuses to keep the customer from buying these, but instead tries to sell much more expensive wares. Pedlars, however, showed all their wares so that customers could make their own decision. [If they decided not to buy] they know the pedlar would return next payday." (Klein 1898: 371).

Not only the demand-, but also the supply-side stimulated itinerant trade. Wholesale businesses in particular used hawkers for the distribution of their wares. Thanks to the development of modern transport (railways), many pedlars had goods sent to places in their market area from where they started hawking. For some time hawking and industrialisation therefore went hand in hand and performed a retailing function among the rapidly growing urban population (Benson 1983: 102). Itinerant traders were not an anomaly, but a buffer and a stimulus to the industrialisation (Benson 1983: 134).

The accusations that these hawkers were workshy and only sold products of inferior quality and thereby deceived the simple country folk were mainly uttered by sedentary shopkeepers who were afraid of competition. Many historians in this field argue that these allegations were false. Most hawkers operated also in larger places, where people could compare the quality with that offered by shops. Moreover, in the smaller villages they returned regularly so that they could not afford to cheat (Demetz 1987, Höher 1985). A contemporary German researcher writes:

"Otherwise it would not have been possible, for many pedlars to again and again visit the same areas, villages and customers." (Matheus 1898: 411).

Only with the emergence of large department stores did the function of urban hawkers grad-

ually diminish. In the countryside modernisation sometimes took much longer, so that hawkers, among whom gypsies, were able to earn a living for a long time. See in this respect also Benson (1983: 100–105), who rejects the idea that peddling decreased after 1850.

A good illustration is the protest in 1941 of the French Minister of 'Industrial production and labour' against the internment by the Germans of travelling groups, with the argument that the provision and distribution of food, clothing and utensils in the small villages would be endangered.⁴ Some industries were even entirely dependent on hawkers. This was the case with products that could not easily be distributed by regular shops because there was not enough demand and the value was too low, so that the costs of keeping them in stock were too high. An instructive example is the sale of gunny-carpets, manufactured in the German province of Silesia. From the beginning of the twentieth century the manufacturing company decided to employ Romanian hawkers (who brought their wives and children with them) to ensure a constant market. Only in the course of the 1930s, after the coming to power of the Nazis, did the company receive complaints by German officials who accused these Romanians, whom they suspected of being gypsies, of dishonesty and cheating and therefore urged the company to replace them by 'honest' Germans. The dependency of this particular Silesian industry on the activity of hawkers is well illustrated by the reaction in 1929 of the local authorities and industrialists in Silesia to a more restrictive policy towards foreign hawkers:

"The carpets are mainly produced by handweavers and during the last thirty years 90% of them have been sold by Romanian hawkers. An interdiction would have consequences for hundreds of families. [...] Hawking is necessary because the demand by regular trade is too small. Without Romanian hawkers it would not have been possible to keep this industry at the present level. An interdiction would hit the town and the industry severely."⁵

Other examples of a complementary relation-

ship between industry and itinerant professions are the rag-and-bone business and the trade in animal and human hair in the nineteenth century. In the former case industries were dependent for a long time on travelling groups who collected old rags, needed for the production of paper. In Germany these collectors were among the few for whom an exception was made in the very restrictive policy on itinerant occupations (Vogt 1921). Animal hair was collected by men travelling great distances. They visited butchers and after some time returned home, their sacks entirely filled and worth hundreds of German marks. Their women then would sort out the hair, which subsequently was sold by the men to factories (Keller 1898). Some industries not only needed itinerant traders to ensure a constant supply of raw materials. As we shall see in the next paragraph, the emergence of many new industries also created a demand for repair and maintenance work for which the specialist experience of itinerant occupations was sometimes used. Hawkers could play a role when they offered specific (traditional) articles needed for the cleaning of new machinery. This was particularly the case in the food sector, which regularly required brushes for the cleaning of kettles, casks and dips in which the beer, milk, jam etc. were manufactured. Only when other cleaning techniques were introduced (in the 1930s) did the demand for brush-hawkers diminish (Seebach 1990).

Gypsies and others not only traded from door to door, but also on streets or at fairs. One of the best-known activities is the horse trade, which together with kettle-mending and the making of music is regarded as a typically gypsy profession. What role gypsies played in this field is made clear by the history of gypsy horse-dealers in The Netherlands (Lucassen 1990: 137–146). The first horse-dealers appeared around 1900 and came from various parts of Europe, especially from Scandinavia. Although it was only a small group (at most some 500 people), it quickly managed to get a firm grip on the at that time expanding trade in cobs, small but tough horses which were indispensable for commerce and transportation until World War II. At horse fairs these

gypsies were very much at home and during the first World War they almost managed to monopolise the important trade in cobs, as can be figured out from a comment in the Dutch review 'The Horse' in 1917:

"The trade in cobs has slowly been dominated by gypsies, who know better than many others how to get good food for these animals."

The trade was in the hands of the men, who sometimes left their wives and children for days to exercise their profession. For the buying and selling of horses they used small carriages in order to be more mobile. An animated picture is drawn by the Dutch horse-dealer Johan Grünholz, who in 1979 looked back on his life in the 1930s:

"O boy, before the war we always travelled. In caravans with grandparents, uncles and aunts we came to every part of the country. When I was a boy I always joined my father at the important fairs. We set off in a small carriage on two wheels. My father used to have 5 to 8 horses. That was our business, the horse trade." (Beckers 1980: 34–35).

Their operational area covered The Netherlands, Belgium and the northern part of France, for which they had to pass the national borders frequently. The authorities interpreted these movements invariably as an 'invasion' of their country by 'hordes' of gypsies. In fact, it only concerned relatively small groups (30 people)⁶ whose business required constant travelling.

Apart from the recurring difficulties at the borders, they also had to face other kinds of opposition. This had to do with the well-known stereotype of the ever-cheating gypsy, especially where horses are concerned (Willems & Lucassen 1990: 40, more elaborate in idem 1988: 28–29). They were accused of transforming old and worn horses into elegant ones by a process of clipping, singeing and beautifying. A good illustration of this image is the account of an alleged conversation at a horse fair as given by the English reformer George Smith of Coalville at the end of the nineteenth century:

"I heard some gypsies chuckling over the 'gingered' and 'screwed' horses and ponies they had sold during the fair, and arranging which of their party should hunt the customer out the next day, to buy back for a five-pound note their palmed-off 'brokenwinded' and 'roaring old screws' which they had sold for seventeen pound or twenty pound during the fair... Many of the horse-dealing gypsies are dressed nowadays as farmers, and by this means they more readily palm off their 'screws'." (Mayall 1988: 53).

Apart from the fact that this conversation, as Mayall argues, probably only took place in the mind of the writer, who was an avowed opponent of the gypsy life style, there are more powerful arguments against the impression that gypsy activity at horse markets was characterised by deceit. To begin with, it does not explain why customers kept dealing with people with such a bad reputation. Trading between gypsies and others suggests a relationship of trust and respect rather than intolerance and abuse. Or, as the saying goes: 'You can fool some people all the time, you can fool all people some time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time'. Although there can be no doubt that 'trickery' formed part of horse trading (and trading in general), it was not peculiar to gypsies, nor can it have been a general phenomenon. Nevertheless this stereotype was used to incriminate gypsies and obstruct their profession. In Germany we know of attempts of sedentary traders to protest against what they regarded as unfair competition, in itself already proof that gypsies played an important role. In 1911, for example, Hannoverian horse-dealers asked the authorities to exclude gypsies from their trade because they only aimed at deceiving their customers (Günther 1985: 31–32). Their plea was not met, but authorities shared their opinion and promised to hamper gypsy horsedealers. A circular of 1903 in the German state Württemberg, for example, ordered local officials to prevent gypsies from attending horse fairs as much as possible (Höhne 1929: 170–171). In Bavaria, finally, gypsies were in 1921 indeed excluded from horse-dealing because of their dishonest com-

petition (Strauss 1986: 112). Despite the restrictive and even repressive policies pursued by many countries, making it more and more difficult for 'gypsies' to practise their trades, most of them managed to earn a living until World War II. In The Netherlands as in Germany they were known for their riches. Especially after the first World War many German authorities depicted them as wealthy. They possessed expensive caravans and impressive amounts of cash money (Strauss 1986: 119, Hehemann 1987: 203, 205, 364–365, and Bott-Bodenhausen 1988: 27).

This short survey of the role of gypsies at European horse fairs not only contradicts the idea that gypsies were parasites and poor, but also shows their economic adaptability and rationality. To clarify this we have to keep in mind that for most of these gypsies the horse trade was a new occupation. Their fathers, working in the second half of the 19th century, were predominantly copper- and tinsmiths. The transition around 1900 was caused by the decreasing demand for mending pots and pans and the growing importance of the horse trade in the period 1870–1940 (Barker 1983). Industrialisation replaced animals more and more by artificial means of power, but we have still to keep in mind that this was a very gradual process; due to the impressive growth of the population and the economy in Europe, the demand for horses in transport, agriculture and industry increased dramatically. Numerous carts for the transport of vegetables, petroleum, milk etc., trams and omnibuses were for an important part dependent on horse power until the second World War. In agriculture the use of horses was stimulated by the introduction of machines that were drawn by horses. Tractors only appeared in great numbers after the war. It is therefore no exaggeration to put forward that in Western Europe more horses were used in the period 1870–1940 than before. Although in Great Britain and the United States the horse was gradually replaced by lorries, automobiles and busses after World War I, this process took place much slower on the continent.

B: crafts

A second important economic niche was itinerant crafts, especially repair work. For most people professions as kettle-mending, chair-bottoming and knife-grinding will come to mind when gypsies are concerned. It would be wrong, however, to depict these professions as 'traditional' and belonging to the pre-industrial world. As with trading we see that industrialisation could also be a stimulus to services, itinerant services in particular. As a result of the increase in population and spending power, the demand for mending and renewing commodities increased accordingly and new crafts emerged. Good examples are the mending of umbrellas and the fabrication of artificial flowers, skewers and cloth-pegs; crafts that became more popular in the course of the nineteenth century (Mayall 1988: 58–59). Furthermore, we must again be aware of the very gradual shift to an industrial society. In the agricultural sector, for example, many 'traditional' crafts, such as sieve and basket-making and rat-catching, stayed functional until well into the twentieth century. Finally, history teaches us that many crafts were constantly adapted to changing circumstances and demand. This can be illustrated by the history of gypsy copper- and tinsmiths, known in the literature as the 'Kaldarasch'.

Coming from Hungary the first groups appeared in Western Europe around 1860 and were immediately stigmatised as gypsies (Vaux de Foletier 1981: 115 ff; Lucassen 1990: 63, Fraser 1992a, Fraser 1992b: 226–235). In contrast with the popular image about gypsies ('workshy', 'living from day to day', 'thievish') their economic behaviour appears quite regular. These tinkers were well organised in companies of some 40 people (men, women and children). Before coming to a certain country, they first sent a few men ahead to explore the possibilities and make arrangements for camping places and residence permits. When the authorities made objections, they frequently used the services of their respective embassies and consulates, which in some cases pleaded their case with the authorities. According to the clients of the Kaldarasch – and local authorities as well – their skills were impressive,



Fig. 2. Encampment of gypsy coppersmiths in France around 1900.

Source: Vaux de Foletier 1983: 135.

and despite regular price-fixing problems, they often were asked year after year by the same customers. Sometimes even authorities with the most negative gypsy-image, and whose task it was to get them out of the country, e.g. the gendarmerie,⁷ were impressed by their skill, as a letter of the Chief of police of the city of Breda from 1868 shows:

“Their work enables them to support themselves, as they are very well paid for their handicraft. According to the captain of the Gendarmerie, who has seen the work of the gypsies, no coppersmith in the country would be able to carry out these sorts of repairs in the same way, and therefore their work can almost be characterised as art. They do not beg and have enough money.” (Lucassen 1990: 41).

As specialists they earned a good living and some tinkers possessed impressive amounts of money. More detailed descriptions of the professional activity of this group are offered by

members of the English Gypsy Lore Society (founded in 1888). The American Eric Otto Winstedt in particular has given accurate and detailed accounts. His information is based on a visit by these ‘Hungarian coppersmiths’, as they called themselves, to Great Britain and France during the years 1911–1913. One of the remarkable conclusions from this ‘petite histoire’ is the economic flexibility of these craftsmen. Due to a lack of demand from private consumers, they concentrated more and more on the industrial sector. In Great Britain they therefore tried to get assignments from breweries, and jam, biscuit and chemical factories. To overcome suspicion and distrust they often offered to repair a kettle for free and when the client was satisfied, the ice was broken and a contract signed. Later they nevertheless often asked a higher price and in some cases a mediator was called in to reach a compromise. Notwithstanding this bickering, both parties most of the times came to an amicable agreement and it did not prevent clients from asking the same company back another time. The

quality of their work apparently was of such a standard that clients put up with the conflicts about the price. In contrast to indigenous coppermiths, these 'Hungarians' mastered a technique that was highly valued by industrial clients. A reporter of the Times, quoted by Winstedt, wrote the following about this:

"They [the joints] are distinguished from others by the entire absence of overlapping seams or patches, and rivets are not used at all. Patching operations are carried on as follows. The hole or work spot is opened out, by cutting and filing, into a star shape, and a piece of copper is then cut to template so that the serrations of both hole and patch fit well together. The patch thus lies flush with the surfaces of the vessel inside and out, and by judicious tapping the edges of the serrations are brought practically into contact with each other, the patch by this operation being firmly sustained in place. Spelter is then melted into the minute interstices, the complete union of the edges being comparatively easy on account of the intimate contact produced by the hammering. The job is finished off with a file, the inside of the patch in the case of fruit pans being tinned. A repair thus carried out presents a remarkably neat appearance, and close examination is necessary in order to locate the mend." (Winstedt 1913: 287–288).

This method was closely connected to the traditional craftsmanship of these Hungarians: their tools were modest and consisted mainly of a big vertical anvil (the 'dopo') on which the kettle balanced, as can be seen in fig. 2.⁸

By patiently and skilfully hammering the entire surface of the kettle, a time-consuming activity, the strength and durability was greatly increased. Furthermore they made use of an old-fashioned pair of bellows, by which (in contrast to modern ones) the power was regulated so that the temperature could be kept under control at all times. A good description is offered by a Dutch review in 1909:

"Their work consists of tin-plating. They make a hole in the ground for a small fire and fix a bellow aside of it, just like the old Phoenicians

and Egyptians must have hammered their iron. The result is nevertheless impressive, because the numerous orders [...] show that they are excellent craftsmen." (Lucassen 1990: 78).

Although this equipment was only suitable for relatively small kettles, it did not keep these Hungarians from carrying out bigger projects. During their stay in Great Britain, for example, they made a bottom of two metres in the main, in which case they hired mechanical bellows. From this Winstedt concluded that these groups were not prejudiced against modern methods as such, but only kept to traditional (smaller) equipment because this fit their itinerant way of life better. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that they bought most of their materials (hammers, pincers, files etc.) in shops and thus did not differ very much from their sedentary British colleagues.

The shift from consumers to industrial clients can also be observed in The Netherlands. Whereas in the second part of the nineteenth century they predominantly mended kettles for domestic use, in the course of the twentieth century they specialised more and more in industrial work. Tinsmiths from the German province of Silesia who visited this country after World War I, for example, mainly worked for dairy factories, bakeries and laundries. For bakers they plated tin for their troughs and dough mixers and for dairies they repaired milk cans. As in Great Britain problems often arose about the price clients had to pay. An instructive description of such a conflict is offered by the chief of Police in Rotterdam in 1929:

"Most of the times they offer their services to bakeries for the repairing of troughs. In order to get assignments they often offer prices that are much too low. The other day a group that had finished its job demanded a price that was four times as high as the original price (400 guilders instead of 100). After arbitration by the police a price of 300 was settled upon, which was reasonable according to an independent craftsman. Although we cannot approve of such methods, some blame can also be assigned to the clients, who should understand

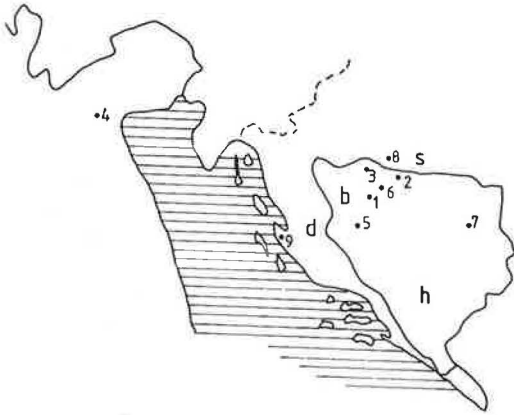


Fig. 3. Principal places of origin of Bosnian bear-leaders.

Legend: b = Bosnia; d = Dalmatia (Austrian); h = Hercegovina; s = Slavonia; 1 = Banjaluka; 2 = Dervent; 3 = Orahovo; 4 = Posina; 5 = Sitnica; 6 = Slatina; 7 = (Dolnja) Tuzla; 8 = Vocin; 9 = Zara.

Source: Lucassen 1990: 84.

that such work cannot be done for such a low price.” (Lucassen 1990: 79).

These incidents caused the Administrator for Border and Aliens Control to demand severe measures against these ‘gypsies’, but the letter from the Rotterdam chief of Police makes it clear that the activities of the tinsmiths cannot be seen as fraud or deceit. It was rather a consequence of the prevailing anti-gypsy sentiment. To overcome suspicion the offering of a very low price could be one of the means.

These highlights from the occupational history of Hungarian and Silesian itinerant metalworkers once again show that gypsies were perfectly able to adapt to changing economic circumstances and did not stubbornly hold on to their ‘traditional’ ways. The biggest threat to their position was not industrialisation, but the authorities who did everything they could to get rid of foreign gypsies, developing in the long run a very restrictive alien policy. The constant surveillance of the police was particularly damaging to the confidence of potential clients. The coppersmiths therefore were not very pleased with such attention. In 1868, for example, they left a Dutch town saying that

‘there was too little work and too much police’ (Lucassen 1990: 81). The stigmatisation increased in the twentieth century, when official messages were issued by the police in local newspapers warning bakeries against these gypsies.

In the course of the 1930s these copper- and tinsmiths disappeared from Western Europe. Most of them took up other professions and emigrated to the United States and other parts of the world.

C: Entertainment

A third important economic sector for itinerant people and gypsies was entertainment. Wandering musicians, animal-performers, acrobats, owners of freak shows, showmen and the like have played a role in European history (e.g. Burke 1978: 94–96). Although they have always been treated with a good deal of suspicion, their activities have been valued too highly for them to vanish. Not only did they bring distraction, they also introduced all kinds of novelties. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the telescope, cameras and cinema were made popular by itinerant entrepreneurs (Benson 1983: 68). Others brought in strange animals, such as bears, camels, lions etc. Many of them were not labelled as gypsies since they did not travel in family groups. Very mobile groups were Italian (child) musicians and organ-grinders, French bear-leaders from the Pyrenees and German itinerant music orchestras (e.g. Zucchini 1992, Van Tiggelen 1982–1983, Lucassen 1990: 367–375 and Seebach 1990).

In this section I will discuss three groups in particular: bear-leaders from Bosnia, musicians from various countries and animal-performers from Parma (Italy).

At the same time as the coppersmiths from Hungary moved West, small family groups of bear-leaders from Bosnia (at that time part of the Turkish empire) appeared. The labelling of them as gypsies was not as general and quick as with the ‘Kaldarasch’, but in most countries they were stigmatised as well. These bear-leaders are known in the literature on gypsies as ‘Ursari’, from the Romanian word ‘urs’



Fig. 4. Animal leaders from Italy, probably in Germany around 1890.

Source: Private collection of the author.

(=bear). Most of them came from the area around Banjaluka (e.g. Winstedt 1955: 76–78, Salo & Salo 1986), as can be seen on the map, fig. 3.

Like the 'Kaldarasch' they travelled great distances and did not restrict themselves to Europe. In the 1880s many emigrated to the United States.

The occupation of bear-leader required a lot of experience and training. To begin with, the bears had to be caught in the Balkan mountains and taught all kind of tricks. Not only the bear dance (called *oursareasca* or *tânânâ*), but also imitations of human behaviour belonged to the standard repertoire. The performance began with the singing and the jingling of a tambourine to attract the attention of the public. After this the bear would start performing. A Serbian author from about 1900 gives an interesting description of the repertoire: the bear acts as a newly-married woman and holds his paw to his head. The bear rides a horse and uses for this the bear-leader's stick. The bear moulds dough and hits his paw repeatedly on

the ground. The bear sifts flour and moves his bottom. The bear lies on his back and spreads his paws as a bride for a groom. After this the bear collects money with the tambourine (Gjorgjevic 1903, Vukanovic 1959). In the United States, finally, we know of bear-leaders who offered money to people who thought they could beat the bear in wrestling (catch-as-catch-can or Greek-Roman). In the twentieth century more animals were added and small circuses were created with horses, monkeys and camels. Another alternative was barrel organs and street pianos on cars, as described by Ferguson in 1937. Why bear-leaders began to disappear from the streets in the course of the 1930s is not clear. It may have been the result of competition from other forms of entertainment, but there may also be a link with the growing opposition of authorities and private societies for the protection of animals against (alleged) cruelty. In Germany the profession was forbidden altogether in 1933 (Hehemann 1987: 209–211).

Their income was not as impressive as that



Fig. 5. German gypsy orchestra.

Source: Geiggis & Wette 1979: 291

of the 'Kaldarasch', but most Bosnians nevertheless seem to have earned a good living. Many of them who left the continent had considerable sums of money and were able to buy houses in England and the United States (Salo & Salo 1986). The Dutch sources agree with this observation. The Bosnian Peero Geergovitch, who was expelled in 1887 from The Netherlands, for example, carried over 2000 francs, at that time three times the annual wage of a skilled worker. Another piece of information was found in the archives of the Dutch *gendarmierie*. It concerns the bear-leader Giovanni Nedilk, whose working book was preserved, listing 229 performances between April 1923 and August 1924, most of them authorised by local authorities. This unique source shows that a bear-leader without competition from others could stay a considerable time in a relatively small area, visiting some places more than once. When the military police (charged with the supervision of aliens) 'discovered' him and immediately la-

belled him as a 'gypsy', however, he was soon expelled because he was considered to be without a means of existence.

A second group of bear (and animal) leaders came from Parma in Italy, in particular from Bedonia (Zucchi 1992). More often than their Bosnian colleagues they also travelled with other animals, especially camels and goats, as is shown in fig. 4.

Not much is known about these groups, but according to a French author some of them created famous circuses such as Bouglione and Amar (Vaux de Foletier 1981: 134–138). They are especially of interest because their being labelled as gypsies was far from consistent. In The Netherlands, for example, they were considered unwanted aliens, but never gypsies. German and French officials, however, were of a different opinion, as the following short excursion makes clear. In the afternoon of the 4th of July, 1905, in the Bavarian municipality Mühldorf, a group, described as 'gypsies' carrying monkeys, a bear and a camel, was stopped

on the road. The five men had no identification and were arrested for begging and mistreating animals. Only the leader, Luigi Sozzi⁹ from Bedonia, had been given a license to practice his itinerant profession. On grounds of the Act on itinerant occupations from 1896, which did not allow permits to be issued to 'gypsies',¹⁰ this was taken from him.

The second profession, which we will go into in more length, is that of gypsy musicians and performers. It is probably the profession that is most associated with 'gypsies'. On the continent especially, many people who were labelled as gypsies worked as musicians, often in combination with other performing professions: acrobats, comedians, showmen, magicians, puppet theatre etc. With these occupations many wandered through Western Europe. In contrast to coppersmithing these professions were not monopolised by men, for women are also regularly found in historical sources as independent professionals. After the turn of the century we can discern an occupational specialisation. Whereas in the nineteenth century many gypsy performers combined music with other showmanlike activities, trading and crafts, in the twentieth century they began more and more to concentrate on the making of music. This shift was caused by the professionalisation within the world of showmen. From the end of the nineteenth century we see in all countries the emergence of more capital-intensive attractions, such as carousels, merry-go-rounds, cake-walks etc.¹¹ At the same time the policy toward the 'small' street performers turned increasingly repressive and since they lived in caravans these people were marginalised as 'gypsies'. This combination of economic and socio-political developments caused the more successful exploitants, who also lived in caravans, to organise themselves into guilds and thus try to escape from the gypsy stigmatisation (Acton 1974: 111, 116–123, Vaux de Foletier 1981: 31, 188, Lucassen 1990: 203–204).

The 'losers', however, cannot simply be depicted as passive victims. A number of them still found a modest niche as a small showman, but others decided to concentrate on music. In The Netherlands and Germany (and probably

France), string instruments (violin, guitar, harp, and lute) dominated, as can be seen in fig. 5.

A number of them managed to earn their living quite sufficiently by forming small orchestras and some even became famous. The numerous cafes and restaurants offered enough possibilities for this. Apart from making music, many gypsies became skilled in the building and repairing of musical instruments, especially violins (see also Weltzel 1938: 37 and Dollé 1980: 168 ff). An inside view in this craft is offered by the former Dutch racing driver Henk van Zalinge, at the moment a well-known contrabass builder, who lived very close to some gypsy families during World War II. They taught him how to build a contrabass and told him about the restoration of violins. Van Zalinge remembers how they were masters in imitating famous brands, such as Stradivarius and Amati. He adds that this was a general phenomenon in those days and not peculiar to gypsies. Therefore no secrecy was needed:

"They were very open about it and made the brand names (with type, brand and year) themselves. They didn't assure the buyer that it was a famous brand. They just said, 'Well maybe it is a Amati, I'm not sure, but, well, the price is the same, maybe you're lucky.' That is how it went." (Lucassen 1990: 206).

Others were less successful and had to content themselves with playing music from door-to-door and on the streets, combined with other activities (mostly hawking).

In a survey of occupations within the entertainment field, fortune-telling is probably the most 'gypsy-like' of all. It has been associated with 'gypsies' since the 13th century (Fraser 1992b: 46–48). In 18th century French encyclopedias, it was even part of the definition of 'bohémien' (Vaux de Foletier 1961: 183–184). This is not to say, though, that it was a monopoly of gypsies. Others (sedentary and itinerant people alike) also engaged in this sort of activity, often combined with magic and sorcery (Thomas 1984: 282–291, De Blécourt 1992: 357–361, Burke 1978: 106–107). Although many gypsy-women have earned money in this

way up to the present day, little is known about this activity except that there was a regular demand from all classes in society and it was often combined with hawking or entertainment. Some inside views are offered by the study on nineteenth century England:

“Although fortunes were sold throughout the year as an adjunct to hawking, it was a trade also subject to some seasonal variation. Come the summer, with its succession of fairs and race-meetings and with the parks, gardens and resorts filled with holiday-makers, the Gypsies sought to mine this potential gold field.” (Mayall 1988: 51–52).

D: seasonal wage-labour

From the preceding overview one might have had the impression that most professions were sole occupations. For some this is true (the coppersmiths and bear-leaders), but most gypsies used to combine all kinds of crafts and trades in order to react to seasonal changes in demand and supply. In 19th century England, for example, many gypsies settled down during the winter months and made all kinds of products (artificial flowers, skewers, pegs etc.). At the beginning of spring they started to travel and sell their manufactured wares, as well as offer all kinds of services; during the summer many of them were hired as seasonal labourers, whereas during the autumn fairs were visited and trade was resumed.

Seasonal labour in agriculture was one of the few occupations that did involve wage-labour. Thanks to Mayall's study we are now well informed about Great Britain as far as this activity is concerned (Mayall 1988: 63–64). Agricultural employment was found chiefly in the South and the East. Seasonal workers, among whom gypsies (men and women) formed a minority, used to go from farm to farm following the ripening of the crops: hay-making, turnip-hoeing, pea-picking, wheat-fagging and strawberry-picking. The cycle was completed with the picking of hop. How big the number of 'gypsies' within the seasonal work force in England was, is not clear. According to a government report of 1907 between a quarter and

a third of those picking peas in England were 'gypsies'. For hop-picking this number seems to have been much lower and here gypsies were only a small minority; whereas the bulk of the workers were Irish. Hiring gypsies, especially women for fruit, could be advantageous for farmers because they brought their own accommodation with them. Remarkably enough the same report states that gypsies had a standard of living and level of health far above that of the ordinary seasonal labourer. In Germany and France gypsies are also reported as 'hoppers' (Strauss 1986: 111, 118). In a letter from the Bavarian community of Pfaffenhofen in 1913, we can conclude that every year in the months August and September an 'international army' of hop-pickers visited the area. Among them were many people with carts and caravans, generally labelled as 'gypsies'.¹² A number of these gypsies were also basketweavers, as can be seen in fig. 6. They arrived some weeks earlier, not only to assure themselves of a spot to put their caravans, but also to make the baskets that were needed for the harvest. In other cases (potato harvest) farmers depended on (gypsy) basket-weavers as well. They even used to save twigs so that the gypsies would have enough material for the baskets needed and therefore not lose time (Arnold 1983: 113).

It is noteworthy that authorities and farmers alike changed their attitude while gypsies were employed as seasonal workers. United hop-farmers in the vicinity of Nürnberg, for example, pleaded in 1910 for the admittance of gypsies:

“The hop is doing well and promises a good harvest. It must be feared, however, that lack of labour will be a cause of delay. During a meeting of the hop production society, farmers therefore asked the representative of the government to admit gypsies and to withdraw the existing ban on gypsies.” (*Nürnberger Anzeiger*, no. 222, 15 August 1910).

Wage-labour apparently was one of the few gypsy occupations that was associated with 'normal' work, and only within this scope were



Fig. 6. French basket weavers around 1900.

Source: Humbert 1980: 136–137.

gypsies accepted and valued to some extent by authorities.

Conclusion

This paper ends with a paradox. The review of 'gypsy occupations' has made clear that there is no such thing. All the professions mentioned were also practised by sedentary people. Even itinerancy was not a monopoly by gypsies. As we have seen, tens of thousands of people were itinerants, without being labelled as gypsies. Finally, all the characteristics listed in the second section (the family as working unit, mobility and self-employment) are general phenomena and can therefore in the end not be explained by reference to the 'gypsy culture'. The specific feature of gypsy-occupations only lies in a combination of the three: being self-em-

ployed and travelling with one's family. People who chose such a way of life were very likely to be labelled by authorities as 'gypsy' (or similar labels) in Western Europe. This 'power of definition' (Lucassen 1991), that has been in force since the 15th century, was so strong that it was very difficult for people to escape from it. Moreover, it could easily lead to the development of ethnicity: people began to feel that they were different from others and to cultivate their own way of life and the symbols attached to it. The fact that within the general category of 'gypsies' some call themselves 'Sinti' or 'Roma' at the moment, believing their origin to be Indian and often speaking some Romani dialect, does not automatically prove that this claim can be upheld in view of historical research. In order to understand the group-formation of gypsies, we have to take into account the long process of stigmatisation

and labelling into account. As regards this point as well gypsies do not differ a great deal from other Europeans: most ethnic and nationalist claims of a common origin are highly questionable and in many cases outright nonsense (e.g. Anderson 1983, Hobsbawm 1990). Modern nations are the result of a long history of migration and deliberate and artificial state and nation building from the end of the eighteenth century onward (Tilly 1990).

This question of ethnicity and group-formation is inextricably bound with 'gypsy occupations'. For it was the economic choice of an itinerant profession *with* the family that set off the stigmatisation. As we have seen, it was not the cultural characteristics as dress and language that were decisive in this respect, but solely the 'overt nomadic way of life'. This stigmatisation can partly be explained by the mistrust towards itinerant professions in general. Most accusations against gypsies were similar to those against hawkers, entertainers and craftsmen who left their family at home. The driving forces behind this general occupational stigmatisation seem to have been authorities who were afraid of people who travelled around without a proper 'alibi' (Geremek 1980: 68–70), unlike emigrants, soldiers, seasonal workers and pilgrims. Their fear concerned in particular the 'vagrants', who by their criminal acts were thought to threaten regular society. Furthermore, their parasitic way of life could easily persuade others to abandon wage-labour, in the opinion of many authorities, and if no severe measures were taken this would lead to the social and economic disruption of society (Geremek 1974: 348). These ideas were from time to time reinforced due to negative stereotyping of itinerant occupations by sedentary economic organisations such as the guilds, that tried to defend their privileges and monopoly. The combined stigmatisation, however, never led to the disappearance of itinerant professions. Notwithstanding their distrust many authorities realised that they fulfilled a necessary economic function and they therefore restricted themselves to fighting the alleged abuses.

These abuses were especially associated with people who took their families with them: 'gyp-

sies'. Invariably this category is put forward as *the* example of people who took undue advantage of the legal possibilities for itinerant occupations. The only way to escape the gypsy stigmatisation and labelling was by stressing one's distinctive character as a professional group. The most successful in this respect were the showmen, but the same process can be discerned with German organisations of hawkers from the beginning of the 20th century onward, who in all Western European countries managed to be excluded from stigmatisation. Their organisation and lobbying convinced the authorities that they were 'honest' businessmen, who could not be compared with the 'dishonest' gypsies. Occupations where the need for organisation was less pronounced, however, did not lose the gypsy-label and faced many legal and social difficulties.

The relation between stigmatisation and group-formation brings us to the two assumptions on which this paper is based. The first had to do with the economic function. On the whole we can say that the restrictive and often outright discriminatory policy towards 'gypsies' did not make their economic activity impossible. Although gypsies did not play a key role in the sectors discussed in this paper, their work cannot be disposed of as 'parasitic' or 'begging in disguise'. Even the most repressive authorities from time to time admitted that gypsies *could* be useful and in some cases (seasonal work) indispensable. As a matter of fact, in economic terms 'gypsies' can very well be compared with the lower and middle classes: there were outright beggars and criminals among them, but most of them earned a modest living, whereas – notwithstanding the stigmatisation – some groups were rather successful. The examples of the coppersmiths and horsedealers have made that clear.

For the second assumption we also found enough evidence. Itinerant occupations in general and gypsy occupations in particular could only exist if they adapted to the changing economic situation. The widespread ideas that industrialisation caused the decline of itinerant occupations and that gypsies always hold on to their traditional professions can both be dismissed. To begin with, the process of industri-

alisation and modernisation had divergent effects and its development was far from uniform. Industrialisation may have made a lot of (itinerant/'traditional') occupations obsolete, others emerged instead and 'gypsies' as well as 'non-gypsies' reacted accordingly. Only after World War II do we see that in many countries 'gypsies' are forced into a rather hopeless social and economic position. The issuing of explicit legislation on gypsies (Cottaar et al. 1992), e.g. the Dutch Caravan Act of 1968 that made travelling virtually impossible, combined with a strong anti-gypsy feeling and attitude in the surrounding society have created a dead-end street. Deprived of their itinerant occupations, discriminated in the regular labour-market and unable to escape their own group and thereby their stigma, it has become very difficult for many gypsies to cope with the situation in economic terms.

Notes

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1. For a critical review of recent German studies on the history of gypsies in Germany, see Lucassen 1992.
2. For an early example see Beynon 1936.
3. In Great Britain: travellers, didikois, mumpers etc.; in France: nomades, ambulants; in Germany: Landfahrer, Jenischen; in Sweden: tattare; in The Netherlands: woonwagenbewoners.
4. See the circular of January 23, 1941 to the prefects: R. Bazin, 'Les camps de Montrieul-Bellay (Maine-et-Loire)'. Report made for the Commission d'histoire de la 2ème Guerre Mondiale (Angers, September 1952). Consulted in the Belgian Archive of the *Ministère de la Santé Publique et de la Famille*, section 'Administration des victimes de la guerre' in Brussels, p. 4.
5. *Hauptstaatsarchiv* München, MWi 802. Statements of 1) the 'Landrat' in Leobschütz, dated 3-6-1929 and 2) of the Chamber of Industry of the province of Upper-Silesia in Oppeln, dated 6-6-1929. Both statements are attached to the letter of the carpet company in Berlin/Katscher, d.d. 10-6-1929 to the Foreign Office of Bavaria.
6. Based on the average size of the horse-dealer group (6 caravans) in the period 1924-1937 (Lucassen 1990: 351-352). The total group size in The Netherlands probably did not exceed 500 people in the inter-war years.
7. In Dutch 'Marechaussee'. This corps had a double task: 1) military police and 2) ordinary police

charged with the supervision of aliens and public disturbances (e.g. strikes).

8. See also the photograph in Winstedt 1913: 288.
9. It may be the same person as mentioned by Vaux de Foletier (1981: 137) who describes a Sozzi who travelled through the Vosges in 1895 and also came from Bedonia.
10. *Hauptstaatsarchiv* München, MWi 839.
11. Benson 1983: 65. In this book they are described as 'Lalleri' (descendants of gypsies who had come from the former Austro-Hungarian empire around 1900, and in particular from Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia: Fraser 1992b: 260).
12. *Hauptstaatsarchiv* München, MIInn 72576.

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