

MOTHER JONES

A GYPSY FOR OUR



Inge Morath/Magnum

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Josef Koudelka/Magnum

"A feeling of having met before."

named after members of his old Gypsy family. Yoors' wife, Marianne, who had met me at the door, is Dutch-born; her sister Annebert, also a gentle-featured woman in her 50s, is working at the loom as we talk. She pushes a wooden shuttle back and forth and then packs the weft threads of wool yarn tightly into place by flicking a screwdriver rapidly down between the warp threads with a constant, gentle thud, thud, thud. From time to time she is joined in her work by two dark-haired Japanese women—Motoe and Masumi. Everyone goes by first names only. But, when required, they all use the last name of Yoors. Here, in the middle of Greenwich Village, is a miniature, patriarchal Gypsy *kumpania*.

"It is better this way," Jan Yoors says. "I don't get into those stand-off battles with my children the way most American parents do. We may get into a fight, but the showdown never comes, because the child then gets involved with one of the other adults. No, I don't think of it as a commune. A commune is a would-be thing you put together because for some idealistic reason you want to live

communally. Here, we share a common work, and so, sharing the household is a natural outgrowth of that. And on a normal commercial loom, each worker works his own square meter; here we all work together."

The tapestries are signed with Jan Yoors' name, though; he does the original design—full-scale, on a huge sheet of paper, which he calls a "cartoon," pasted up behind the loom as a sort of roadmap for the weavers; then he and everyone else pitch in to do the actual weaving. The finished tapestries hang in museums, offices and public buildings throughout the U.S. and Europe.

There is something disturbing about all this patriarchy. Finally I realize that what I am feeling about it is not so much anger as disappointment. One wants heroes whole. But they never come that way. Yoors senses my disapproval; he mentions that his daughter does not like it when, during visits by Gypsies, the men and women go to separate rooms. Yoors says this about his daughter's feelings with a distinct note of pride: he plainly values her Gypsy-like independ-

ence of mind, despite its clash with the culture he loves. One wants cultures without such contradictions, but perhaps they don't come that way, either.

WE GO BACK to the tapestries. "The Gypsies love them," Yoors says, "but they are always a bit puzzled. 'But what do you need them for?' For them, attachment to an artifact is something neurotic. They don't like photographs or monuments. You should not have to *make* something to be happy, especially something designed to last far into the future. Happiness is people—family, other Gypsies, having feasts. There is no pride in career."

Are Gypsies still traveling the world today, as they did when he started living with them more than 40 years ago?

"Of course. In Western Europe, now, the camper truck has replaced the wooden wagon, but they still call it by the same name—*urdon*. And they still park them in a circle at night. Here in America the *urdon* is usually a Lincoln Continental. In some parts of the world,



Josef Koudelka/Magnum

“No words for the names of days, months and years.”

nothing has changed at all. In 1967 I was in Uzbekistan — Soviet Central Asia. We were driving along a road (a Russian guide was showing me local art objects) and all of a sudden I saw a train of 50 wooden wagons. *Fifty* of them! Ahhh . . . ‘Wait a minute,’ I said, ‘I’m getting out here.’ I traveled with them for a whole week. It was wonderful. You might think they would have difficulty getting around in the USSR, which has internal passports, laws against nomads and so on. But they managed. Whenever we came to a village, the police would come out. The Gypsies would apologize for having no permits and then say, ‘But we are only going to our cousin’s wedding. It’s not in this village, but the next.’ ‘Oh, you mean over in Otchestvo’ (or wherever), the police would say, figuring they’d let the authorities there deal with the problem of all these unauthorized people. ‘Yes! Otchestvo! That’s it,’ the Gypsies would say, and make a big show of asking directions. And the police would say, ‘Okay, move along, then.’ They had been traveling for *months* this way, all across the Soviet

Union. The Russians have something of a soft spot in their hearts for Gypsies, after the third vodka, anyway.”

Gypsies, Yoors says, adapt their work easily to fit the needs of whatever country they are in. In Latin America, they are often tinsmiths. In Mexico, they travel in trucks with battery-powered film projectors, showing movies in small villages without electricity. In the U.S., they knock on people’s doors and offer to fix dented fenders. Everywhere the women tell fortunes.

Gypsies are divided into four principal tribes and many more sub-tribes. Some tribes Yoors has no use for—particularly those who have abandoned the wandering of the true *Rom* and settled down for good in one country, sometimes becoming heavily involved in organized crime. Others, like his own Lowara tribe, have developed an extremely strict code of honor, although it usually applies more to their dealings with each other than to those with the *Gajo* (the non-Gypsies). One American Gypsy Yoors knew, for instance, was caught without tools on a fender-mend-

ing expedition. It was a Sunday and hardware stores were closed, but grocery stores were open. So he filled in the dents with liverwurst, then painted them over.

I ask him what the survivors of the Gypsy band he once lived with do now. “Oh, they tell fortunes, and they sell rugs, for cover.” Cover for what? “Please!” Yoors holds up his hands. “They are my kin.”

YOORS WAS 18 years old and in France with his Gypsy band when the Germans invaded. He felt torn between two worlds. Gypsies have never, as a group, taken part in warfare. For Yoors the decision was doubly difficult, for Pulika wanted him to marry Djijo, a young woman of the *kumpania* to whom he was deeply attracted. “Having seen the luminous shore,” Yoors writes, “I decided not to cross over to it.” Regretfully, he left the Gypsies and made his way to German-occupied Paris, hoping to slip from there to England to join the British Army. Waiting for his underground passage out of the country, he took refuge in a



"The Gypsies' love for the heroic, perpetual present."

nunnery. One day a man knocked on the door of his room. He was an agent of British Intelligence. He had come to tell Yoors: We want you to go back and to organize the Gypsies for us.

In his second book, *Crossing*, Yoors described the events that followed. After many weeks on the road, he found his *kumpania* again and was greeted with great rejoicing. After the welcoming feast, he and Pulika talked about the war about to envelop them. Standing in a meadow at night, the fiery young idealist argued with the skeptical sage. This time, this war, Yoors told Pulika, the Gypsies would have to break with their tradition; Nazism was too terrible; in Germany itself Gypsies were being sent to concentration camps. Pulika then spoke eloquently about how the purpose of life is love; history is a record of lost illusions. "Do not accept their ideological passions," he told Yoors. "They are lies . . . more easily believed than truth, and courage about death often disguises cowardice about life. Leave to others the quest for eternal certainties . . . one day you will learn again to

open the closed fist." And then, abruptly, Pulika told Yoors he would establish liaison with the Resistance.

Pulika then hastily arranged a meeting of the *kris*, a sort of assembly of the leaders of all the major *kumpanias*. It is the Gypsies' supreme court of law and decision-making body. The traditional coming together of hundreds of wagons was out of the question because of the troops on the roads, and so the meeting took place at a provincial French tavern. To authorities who were suspicious of so many people gathering, Gypsy leaders explained they were assembling for the funeral of a venerable old Gypsy named Bengesico Niamso—Romany for "Cursed German." It is a haunting scene; instead of being in the customary forest clearing, the Gypsies are assembled in tubular chrome chairs; when an elder pours out the ritual libation to the ancestors, the brandy runs along the linoleum floor. The *kris* made the decision to join the battle against the Nazis, and in the months ahead Yoors worked with a growing network of Gypsies throughout France, who used their wag-

ons to carry arms to the Resistance. Often, hidden in metal storage bins under their wagons, were downed British pilots. In this case, the Gypsies' unaccustomed participation in a *Gajo* war felt less out of place, for they were carrying out the long tradition of helping men on the run from police.

GYPSY BELIEFS endured through the war's worst hardships. Once Yoors and Pulika were hiding out in a forest, cold and hungry. They made contact with a French Resistance group that offered them a meal of freshly cooked pheasant. Pulika refused it. Despite their love of feasting, true *Rom* will never eat wild game, "because it is wild and free like ourselves."

After many months, Yoors and many of his Gypsy comrades were captured by the Germans. Separated from Gypsy prisoners, he was thrown into solitary confinement in La Santé prison in Paris. One night he heard a distant voice echoing out from another cell in the labyrinth, calling in Romany: "*Romale tai Shavale, Tshurara tai wi Lowara, ame*

Rom sam." (Gypsy men and youths, Tshurara and Lowara [members of two feuding tribes] alike, we are all Rom.) "The cry in the night was never identified, but it did not matter," Yoors wrote. "It brought back to me a clear and strong vision of a long single line of Gypsy wagons and horses, moving relentlessly toward the horizon."

Somehow that vision kept him alive, through six months of intermittent torture, more than a year of imprisonment and the knowledge that the Germans were trying to wipe the Gypsies off the face of Europe. After the war, he learned that half a million Gypsies, including Pulika and virtually all his family, had died in Nazi extermination camps.

Yoors himself was saved by accident, a curiously appropriate one for a man who has lived a double life. Through an administrative error, his file was evidently switched with that of another prisoner, and he was unexpectedly released. The Germans realized their mistake, and, 24 hours later, they had posters with his picture on it all over Paris. But he managed to rejoin the Underground and finally escaped across the Pyrenees to Spain. There, he regained his health while staying with Gypsies. Two of them were to visit him in New York some 30 years later.

It is eerie to think that this man sitting in front of me, in a Village townhouse in 1977, cultured, cosmopolitan, discussing what was in this morning's *New York Times*, was once under Nazi torture. He avoided the details in his book, so I ask him about it only hesitantly.

"You should understand that I was really crazy for a while afterwards. For years after the war I had nightmares. When I went to a restaurant—I had been arrested in a Paris café, you see—I always had to be facing the door and be near an exit. That was really why I came to America in 1950; I wanted to get as far away from the Germans as possible. I have only been able to even write about the experience recently; something about having the operation on my legs, experiencing pain again, although this time there were doctors and nurses there trying to make it better, not people trying to make it worse.

"What did they do to me? I was held under water for a minute, two minutes at a time. In a way it was experiencing death, the first sensations of drowning. But it showed me that above all I wanted to live. When I first went into the war I

did not know that; that had been what Pulika wanted to tell me, that I foolishly wanted to die in the fight against Hitler. But the drowning, each time it showed me I wanted to live.

"Then came the electrodes. It is not pain, exactly, but an intensity of sensation, so intense you can't stand it. But it made me realize that all our other sensations were mild. I wanted to experience a positive intensity equal to that negative intensity. I experienced despair, total despair. But if it goes that deep, it must go that high. If we never experience much despair we can never achieve ecstasy."

JAN YOORS IS rolling along the crowded Bleecker Street sidewalk in his wheelchair, weaving in and out among hawkers, dogshit and old newspapers.

"It won't be difficult to find Gypsies here," he says. "They are everywhere. They've done well here. The U.S. has the largest percentage of college-educated people in the world; that prepares them for psychoanalysis—and for fortunetelling. And then lately the Gypsies have been cashing in on being an ethnic minority, getting foundation grants and money from the churches and Small Business Administration loans. To them this ethnic minority business is just one more strange *Gajo* custom to take advantage of, like wanting to have your fortune told."

We turn a corner, and Yoors and Motoe scan the next block. "By the way," he says, "don't believe any of this stuff you read about Gypsy kings. There is no such thing. It's another thing to fool the *Gajo*. Any Gypsy who enters a hospital, for instance, is automatically a king. They get better treatment."

This reminds me of other *Gajo* misconceptions about Gypsies that Yoors has talked about in his books. For example, novelists who've written about Gypsy life from the outside, like D.H. Lawrence in *The Virgin and the Gypsy*, often imagined that Gypsy freedom included sexual freedom as well. But in real life Gypsies are highly Puritanical and monogamous. Even those writers who visited Gypsies firsthand usually came back with the image Gypsies wanted to give them: of a sinister and mysterious tribe, engaged in exotic rituals and possessed of supernatural intuition. It is an image Gypsies have been cultivating for centuries, because it is

good for the fortunetelling business and helps scare off the police. Among themselves, Gypsies tell no fortunes.

"Stop," Yoors says suddenly. "Here's one." We are in front of a storefront with a sign: READER/ADVISOR. PALM READINGS. TAROT. COFFEE GROUNDS READ. Motoe steps inside and talks to a young, dark-haired, unsmiling woman who puts her head through a bead curtain. Then Motoe comes out to the sidewalk: "She says it's closed now. Nobody is here. We must come back later."

But Jan calls out something in Romany through the open door, and the woman comes out. She is perhaps 22 or 23, with olive skin, jet-black hair and eyes and high cheekbones. As she and Yoors talk, she quickly relaxes, crosses her arms and leans smiling against the doorframe. Their talk is formal-sounding; no interruptions, no short yes or no answers. Part of it, by each of them, involves reeling off a list of names.

The sound of spoken Romany is full and sensual. It is not precise, like French, or businesslike, like German, but full of deeper, rich tones, rather like a mixture of Italian and Russian. Every once in a while the woman uses an English phrase, but only in relation to time: "six months ago," "three, four months ago." Suddenly I realize that the list she is giving is of Gypsies who have died.

(Yoors confirms this later. "When a Gypsy man and woman talk, if they are not husband and wife, the talk is tribal talk, not personal talk. She was a Rusuri. They are a tribe that left Russia right after the Revolution and came to New York via France in the '30s. They 'own' New York now, and they're having a feud with the Bimburas, who came here via South America and Chicago.")

At one point the woman nods her head at Motoe, and Yoors says something in which I recognize the word *bori*, Romany for daughter-in-law. ("That made it all right for her to be with me," he explains afterwards. "She is obviously not my daughter, and she is too young to be my wife. If she was not a relative of some kind, it would not be proper for us to be on the street together.")

While they are talking, a very small boy, perhaps one and a half, looking too young to talk, emerges from the shop. The boy has the same dark hair and olive skin as his mother. He seems very sturdy and healthy. He looks us

over carefully, then begins riding a bright red, blue and yellow tricycle in circles. Unexpectedly, it seems sad: how will this child riding his plastic fluorescent Creative Plaything on New York sidewalks ever feel any sense of Gypsy identity?

Suddenly he rides right up to where I'm standing next to Yoors' wheelchair, and whacks me boldly on the calf with the back of his hand.

"Rom sin?" (Are you a Rom?) His saucer eyes look straight up.

I shake my head.

He thumps his fist proudly on his chest. "Rom sam!" (I am a Rom.)

AT THE HEART of Gypsy freedom is the ability, when trouble looms in one country or opportunity beckons in another, to slip across national borders. Yoors describes one such incident in *The Gypsies*:

"I clearly remember," he writes, "stealthy long marches into unknown countries, by night. On one such march the horses' hoofs were padded with straw and bound with strips of colored dress material. Rain fell steadily. For days Gypsy wagons had been massing near the border. One night they all converged and fell in with the long line of other moving wagons, to punch through the border en masse. Leaving the roads, we traveled cross-country through rugged terrain. The caravan plodded through the flailing rain. At times it slowed down to a crawl and we waded ankle-deep in the slippery mud, pushing, shoving, urging the horses on with low clicking sounds. At other times the wagons would suddenly hurtle forward, pitching and swaying. Unrelentingly, the Rom pushed onward, leaving behind a trail of deep mud mashed by numerous horses, wagon wheels and people on foot. A low, repeated whistle came from the direction of the lead wagon and slowly passed down the staggered line of wagons. The sound was deep and low and strangely reassuring, in contrast to the unrelenting howling of the wind, the splash and suck of horses and men wading through the mud and the occasional wail of an infant quickly hushed. Suddenly the startling sound of loudly pounding hoofs told that we had reached a paved road. The oncoming wind smelled of smoke from wood fires. We had finally caught up with other Gypsies camping nearby, probably waiting for us at this spot. We were met with

subdued joyous greetings. We tethered the horses at the backs of the vans, rubbed them briskly and covered them with blankets, tarpaulins or pieces of carpet. The wind whipped the many-layered skirts of the women."

Back in Yoors' house, I ask him about the border he crossed in his own life. Does he have any regrets about crossing back, into the Gajo world?

"No." He shakes his head emphatically. He is holding a bobbin of red wool weaving yarn for Masumi, which she winds deftly into a ball. "The Gypsies have a saying—*yekka buliasa nashti beshes pe done grastende*—with one behind you cannot sit on two horses. I had to choose. I could not see making my life with them. For all its beauty, it was a limited world. After all, if I had stayed I would now be an itinerant horse dealer." He stops and smiles. "But you know, if my parents had ever tried to stop me, I would still be a Gypsy today."

In the room where we talk, his tapestries surround us. I am struck again by their size and by the large, bold shapes on them: visual pulses of color two and three feet high. In most tapestries you see a pattern; here you see vigorous, active motion.

"In some ways I am more of a Gypsy than ever," he goes on. "If I cannot work on a grand scale, I do not work. I like to think of that as an equivalent of the splendor of Gypsy life." As he nods at them, I realize for the first time that he is also the maker of three or four large bronze sculptures that sit on wooden pedestals in various corners. He points also to a striking charcoal drawing of a headless nude, black on a brown background, that fills an entire space, her legs and shoulders butting against the frame, as if trying to break free. "People ask me: 'Why not make a bigger drawing? Then you could fit the head in.' But if I made a bigger drawing, I'd make the body bigger too. It is what is unseen in a person, or a drawing, that makes them interesting."

How does Yoors feel about young Americans of recent years—hippies, runaways, people who have figuratively considered themselves Gypsies?

He tips his head and frowns slightly, as if I have not asked quite the right question. And now that I think of it, I know what he means: he has thought of his own life in terms not of defiance but of affirmation. His story is not of running away but of coming home.

Finally his face relaxes. "I answer you . . ." (his hands, palms together, make a swerving motion) ". . . Gypsy fashion. Once in Elat on the Red Sea I met an American hippie, as far away from anything familiar as he could get. He lived on a mountain cliff—an open cliff with only the stars overhead. He had the shortest shorts and the longest hair I have ever seen. I stayed for supper. He was fussing around, opening cans: 'I'm putting my kitchen in order,' he said. Then he took me to his 'library,' a single board with a row of books on it, and took out to show me an issue of *Esquire*, which had an article that mentioned him. And then, worst of all, he began talking about his mountain." Yoors leans back in the wheelchair and smiles. "So. You see?"

THE CENTRAL RITUAL of Gypsy life is the *patshiv*, the great feast. It can celebrate a birth or marriage, but most often is unplanned, given to celebrate the chance meeting with a caravan of friends, relatives or fellow tribespeople that luck has brought to the same crossroads. Great *patshiva* become a part of Gypsy legend. Pigs and chickens are "borrowed" from local peasants, and hedgehogs caught in the field; all are cooked over an open fire, highly seasoned with black pepper and wild garlic, and served with fried onions, tomatoes and red peppers. The guests pick out choice morsels to feed each other, sing songs to each other. Even the dead are included; drink for them is poured on the earth, and the living speak and sing to them.

At the end of *The Gypsies*, Yoors tells how Pulika's caravan was journeying across Europe in 1940 when one day a French horse dealer made a casual remark about having bought a horse from another Gypsy a few days before. Without appearing curious, Pulika asked a few questions. Early the next morning, all the young men of the camp were sent out in *taligas*—open carts—fanning out across the countryside in the direction the other Gypsies were said to have gone. Yoors and a companion drove their cart farther and faster than the others, slept in a farmer's field that night, then cut through a huge pine forest and finally came out onto an open plain. "Suddenly we became aware of a long line of Gypsy wagons a great distance ahead of us, slowly moving in wide lazy curves like a languorous and



Yoors and *kumpania*, Serbia, 1936: "The luminous shore."

fat summer snake." At last, when night had fallen and the campfires were lit, they caught up. The wagons were the *kumpania* of Milosh, Pulika's younger brother, who had, with incredible difficulty, made his way from German-occupied Eastern Europe to France in search of Pulika. The two brothers had not seen each other for 17 years. The *patshiv* lasted for days.

It is not a *patshiv*, but there seems something special when I sit down to dinner with Jan Yoors and his household before leaving. It is a hot summer evening, and we eat out on a tiny patio. There are high walls on each side, but I am more aware of the island of night sky above us. In this little well beneath the rooftops of the city, we are cut off from most noise. It is very peaceful. Motoe and Masumi speak softly in Japanese, Marianne and her sister in Dutch, and the children talk in English about their day at school. At the end of the meal is Gypsy-style coffee: Turkish coffee thick with fine grounds, poured from a copper pot into brown ceramic bowls that look like miniature flower pots.

Yoors is talking once again about the Gypsies' capacity for enjoying the present. He tells of meeting one Gypsy, who was known as "the Millionaire"—not because he had a million francs or zlotys or whatever, but because he had *spent* a million. To the Gypsies, he says, all wealth is for celebrating, not hoarding: when Gypsies die, all their possessions are burned.

Suddenly I notice one thing that has given this cramped space we are in its spaciousness: a giant design, ten feet or so high, in black paint on the white-washed wall opposite me. "It's the Japanese character for fire," Yoors explains. "Fire is a very Gypsy thing. The process is the actuality. It does not construct something for the future. Its present is everything. And when it is dead . . ." (he smiles and spreads his palms wide) ". . . it is gone."

For Jan Yoors, the fire did not burn long. Though he never mentioned it during my visit with him, it turns out he was under treatment for a steadily worsening heart condition. On Novem-

ber 24, 1977, just as this article was being prepared for the typesetter, he suffered a massive heart attack. Three days later, still unconscious, he died. He is buried in Long Island's Green River Cemetery, in a special plot, where the bodies of Jackson Pollock and other artists also lie.

Yoors designed tapestries at a pace that far outstripped the rate at which he and the others could weave them. He left behind many designs at his death, and his household plans to continue weaving from them for some years. This bit of artist's immortality would probably please his Gypsy friends, for it contains an echo of their own beliefs. The Gypsies believe, Yoors wrote, that the soul of a dead man lives on as long as do people who knew him and remember him. Only when the last of them are gone does the soul finally die.

Both books by Jan Yoors mentioned in this article are published by Simon & Schuster. *The Gypsies* is a Touchstone paperback (\$2.95); *Crossing* is available only in hardcover (\$6.95).