

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF INFORMATION HISTORY

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First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-31607-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-31617-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-31053-2 (ebk)

CHAPTER 28 INFORMATION AND MOBILITY

Migrants and Roma as Historical Cases

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DOI: [10.4324/9781003310532-32](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003310532-32)



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INFORMATION AND MOBILITY

Migrants and Roma as Historical Cases*

Eve Rosenhaft

This chapter explores the existing scholarship on and some open questions about the relationship between information and geographical mobility in the past. Mobility and information have shared histories. One of the key innovations of the “first information revolution” during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the notion and institution of the intelligence office. Intelligence offices were clearing houses for information about things lost and found, employment and housing opportunities and the like. Their principal function became the editing and printing of early newspapers (intelligencers), but their utility was initially seen as answering the needs of an increasingly mobile and urban society: providing local knowledge for travellers who, arriving from outside, could not rely on personal or occupational networks to help them find their way in the city. In turn, cameralist thinkers argued, a network of such information hubs could promote the circulation of people, ideas, and wealth necessary for a flourishing economy.¹

European society was never static, however. In the early modern period, the services imagined for the new intelligence offices were already being provided for travelling artisans by institutions of their own making. Set on the road by the terms of their training which dictated that apprenticeship should be followed by a period of tramping (as “journeymen”) from one master to another and/or by the shortage of local employment, they joined together to establish inns and hostels (*Trinkstuben*, *Herbergen*, *logis*, houses of call) where they could learn about local job opportunities and gather intelligence about prospective employers. Sixteenth-century German journeymen swore an oath that they would themselves pass on any such information that they gained. And even in nineteenth-century England, it has been argued, “tramping had a powerful ancillary benefit in the dissemination of news.”² This reminds us that one of the defining features of information is that whether it is disseminated by word of mouth or in print on paper or in digital form, it has to move.

* Research for this chapter was supported by a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/W010658/1) for the AHRC-Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft collaborative development project *Romani Migration between Germany and Britain (1880s–1914): Spaces of Informal Business, Media Spectacle, and Racial Policing (2022–2026)*.

Knowledge becomes information in the process of being communicated. And so the history of information is closely bound up with the history of technologies of communication, transport, and travel. It is thus also the history of how people engage with those technologies when they are planning to move or are already on the road.

Continuing this focus on Europe, this chapter looks at two groups of historical actors whose history has been written in terms of their mobility.³ The larger and more extensively studied group is that of migrants, those millions of individuals and families who have left their homes and crossed geographical and political borders with the intention of settling in a new territory. In European history, the late nineteenth century is seen as the age of mass migration; this vision reflects in particular the transatlantic movement of between fifty-five and fifty-eight million Europeans between 1850 and 1940, but the pace of social and economic change during the first and second industrial revolutions also set large numbers of people in motion within Europe itself.⁴ In the context of European colonialism, however, the option of seeking a new home, career, or identity across the ocean was already opening up to ordinary people as early as the seventeenth century. Historians of migration have (largely) followed scholars interested in contemporary migration experiences in asking about the role that information of various kinds plays in migrant lives and decision-making: the decision to move, the choice of destinations and the continuing relations with friends and family back home. The first part of this chapter outlines the current state of knowledge about how migrants in the past made use of a variety of information sources and technologies to find their way to and in new worlds.

In the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts to another form of mobility, one which has received less attention from historians of modern societies: that of groups who built their social and economic existence on regular travel over relatively long distances, their purpose not to find a new home but to pursue temporary opportunities for making a living. Sometimes moving as whole families, commonly on a seasonal basis, they travelled over relatively familiar routes under normal circumstances—although a change of circumstances could mean that they had to seek out new opportunities or extend the distances travelled. Those changes could even mean that they became migrants “proper,” losing the labels that were historically attached to them: nomads, travellers, or itinerants. Recent scholarship has introduced the term *peripatetic* to apply to these groups, since it is more descriptive and less value-laden in the European context than the older terms.⁵

Among these *peripatetic* groups, the most significant in Europe is certainly the Roma,⁶ and the second part of the chapter explores the evidence for Romani information practices and experiences. As important as it is simply to note that not all “movers” are “migrants,” the history of the Roma offers a particular kind of counterpoint to migration narratives because of their status as outsider-insiders to European economic and social life. As such, they have only recently been acknowledged as people with a history worthy of critical research.⁷ The case of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European Roma, surrounded by a rich press landscape but often illiterate, socially marginalised but also embedded in highly articulated cross-border networks, pursuing economic opportunities not as individual labourers but as family units operating in largely informal economies, raises in particularly acute terms the question of how formal and informal sources of information interacted in facilitating both the *peripatetic* lifestyle and, in some cases, long-distance migration. More generally, the way in which they have been positioned (and often positioned themselves) as but occasional visitors to forms of modernity in which citizenship depends on being literate and having a fixed address means that their ways of gathering and sharing intelligence can

be seen as forms equally of appropriation and exploitation and evasion and subversion of modern information regimes. As will become clear, Roma have also been among the victims of those regimes—or rather of state practices of information-gathering (on the one hand) and of persecution facilitated by that information on the other.

Migrants

The emergence in the early years of the twenty-first century of a perceived “migration crisis” in the Global North (in fact the outcome of global population movements driven by conflict and environmental change) prompted a wave of new research in migration studies. Questions of why and in particular *how* people decide to leave home, of how they plan and execute their journeys and of the role that social and family networks play in the migration process have been at the centre of this research, which often draws explicitly on the language of information studies.⁸ The fact that contemporary migrants and refugees have had computers (the ubiquitous internet café) and more recently mobile phones at their disposal at nearly all points in their journey, dramatically even at the most hazardous moments of crossing land and sea barriers, means that the ways in which migrants use digital technologies have led to a convergence of scholarship in migration and information and media studies. (To the objects of interest in this case, we might also add the use of sophisticated technologies like facial recognition by the authorities seeking to control migration.)⁹

The scholarly interest sparked by new population movements has also given new impulses to the study of migration in the past. Here, too, a focus on the agency and qualitative experience of individual migrants that reflects wider trends in social history has led to questions being posed about how what people wanted and the choices they made were informed by what they knew and how that knowledge was communicated. This is where information history meets migration history. To a considerable extent, this involves interrogating long-standing concepts and observations to ask how they “worked” at a human level. One of these is “chain migration,” the process by which one cohort of migrants is followed to the same destination by family members or other associates. This can be linked to “step migration,” in which an individual or family moves in successive stages to a final place of settlement; one way the two combine is when family businesses set up a series of outposts as they extend their business activities abroad.¹⁰ These do not happen automatically. Flows of people are (and were) motivated and facilitated by flows of information transmitted between home countries and countries of settlement through family, business, and friendship networks.¹¹ Another key concept in migration studies has been “push and pull factors”—the conditions which move people to emigrate and those which attract them to particular destinations.¹² “Push factors” are likely to be all too familiar, experienced as fear, hunger, or distress. “Pull factors”—the qualities of a potential new home—need to be learned, and are associated with elements of uncertainty and risk that create a demand for credible information. In asking how people in the European past decided when, how, and where to move, historians have explored a range of information sources.

Migrant Letters

Letters written by emigrants to friends and family back home are among the oldest forms in which people received information about the conditions of travel and settlement, and they have been explored by migration historians with increasing intensity since the 1990s. The

information they conveyed about the circumstances of migrants might be characterised by gaps, inaccuracies, and misrepresentations, but they offer important insights into what people “back home” knew or imagined they knew—details that might have informed their own decision to emigrate.¹³ The analysis of correspondence networks can reveal the power of circulating information, as when Dutch men writing home from the United States in search of spouses effectively generated a virtual marriage market.¹⁴ Moreover, in their very subjective and discursive qualities, migrant letters yield insights into the changes wrought by the migration experience on the migrants themselves, their shifting identities, sense of self and others and affiliation to their home culture, which are themselves important questions for historians of migration and diaspora.¹⁵

By the late nineteenth century, relatively rapid land and sea transport and well-developed postal systems meant that such letters could be exchanged at a quick pace, so that there exist substantial archives of continuous chains of correspondence for the period of mass migration. For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a new body of manuscript sources began to open up in 2018 with the project to sort and digitise the Prize Papers held by the British National Archives. This collection comprises documents captured from enemy vessels by the Royal Navy between 1652 and 1815, and includes 160,000 undelivered letters.¹⁶ Early studies of German migrants based on these letters confirm the function of the letters themselves in sustaining and deploying family connections and communicating information; the letters also provide new insights into the ways in which travellers collected information themselves before departure.¹⁷

Of course, there is a paradox embodied in the Prize Papers: never delivered, they are a reminder that material chains of information can be fragile. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the kind of person-to-person communication originally enabled by letter-writing was facilitated by the telegraph and then the telephone. However, such evidence as we have for forms of communication that left little or no physical trace suggests that until the middle of the twentieth century, they were used rarely and mainly in emergencies or to pass on news of events like births and deaths.¹⁸

Print Media

Among the details that the Prize Papers afford about pre-departure information-gathering by eighteenth-century migrants is the purchase of dictionaries, and this is a reminder that since the early modern period print culture has been an important source of information for migrants. Migrant letters themselves entered into the printed circulation of knowledge about distant lands at a very early stage. By the late nineteenth century, such letters from abroad were a regular feature of newspapers in European hometowns, and they were also published in travel handbooks and emigrant guides.¹⁹ But as early as 1720, propaganda about Louisiana, the new French territory in America, which was designed to spark the interest both of potential investors and of possible colonists, took the form of enthusiastic (and fabricated) “letters home” from new immigrants.²⁰ In addition to what could be gleaned from newspapers from the eighteenth century onwards, printed prospectuses and books of advice for emigrants proliferated in the nineteenth. Their titles often betrayed particular advertising and recruitment purposes—for example, the 1852 London publication.

Cassell's Emigrants' Handbook: Being a Guide to the Various Fields of Emigration in All of the Globe. With an Introductory Essay, on the Importance of Emigration,

and the Danger to Which Emigrants are Exposed. To Which is Added, a Guide to the Gold Fields of Parts Australia, With Copious Instruction, Government Regulations, etc., Accompanied by a Map of Australia, in Which the Gold Regions are Clearly Indicated.

An example of a conventional tourist guidebook re-purposed for migrants (in the broad sense) is the volume on German-occupied Poland published in the well-known Baedeker series during the Second World War, which was primarily aimed at the occupying military forces and German civilian colonists who were expected to follow them.²¹ Reader annotations in early modern English almanacs provide some evidence of how people used them as guides when travelling locally.²² For modern travel guidebooks and handbooks, there is still research to be done on the specific, material ways in which they circulated among prospective migrants to be mined for useful information.

To the printed sources of information available to and used by long-distance travellers, including migrants, may be added railway and shipping timetables. By the twenty-first century, printed timetables of this kind were increasingly obsolete, and at the same time their format and use continues to be taken for granted. But railway timetables were a novelty in the nineteenth century; the first tabular one was published in 1838. They had to be invented and designed and re-designed, and recent research on the ways in which people used them has emphasised how understanding them was a learned skill.²³

Other People

At the beginning and end of a migrant journey, there were nearly always human agents and face-to-face conversations. Word of mouth, in conversations with others who had returned from a period of migration or with the families that were in contact with those abroad, was always an element in the information mix, with local points of encounter—the tavern, the grocery store, the barber shop—key nodes in an information network.

Once they had decided to leave, long-distance migrants might rely on the knowledge and advice of the agents of the shipping lines, paid employees, or more often sub-contracted brokers, who sold tickets for oceanic journeys. The Holland America Line had more than two thousand agents spread across Europe by 1890, and they were part of a network of middlemen which included agents of various kinds at the point of departure and lodging house owners at transfer points and ports of call. It was in their interest to offer prospective migrants a vision of their destination and the nature of the journey that would prompt them to move, but also as far as possible to keep them safe. Moreover, it was in the interest of the shipping lines to ensure that if passengers were allowed to board their ships, they would not be turned back at their destination; they needed to be in conformity with the relevant immigration regulations. In the 1900s, for example, emigrants travelling from Russia to America via German ports had to have purchased their tickets before they crossed the Russian border to be allowed through German territory. The brokers would have made sure the travellers were aware of that while encouraging them on their journey with the posters and brochures placed at their disposal by the shipping firms. What migrants could expect from those in the pay of the shipping firms, then, was a fairly standard combination of useful information, guidance in filling out the necessary documentation and propaganda.²⁴ It was the job of the broker to be persuasive, and that of the migrant to identify her or his relative advantage in weighing up what was said and what was offered. Called to testify at

an 1889 trial of Jewish travel agents in Poland, which the Habsburg authorities staged in a drive to stop emigration, Anna Fujarkos and Marjanna Gnapp insisted that the agents had not swindled or misled them; they had only needed the agents' help and advice to fulfil their own reasons for emigrating to the United States: Anna to meet her fiancé, Marjanna to escape poverty.²⁵

The Roma

Mobility has played a series of distinct but related roles in the history of the Roma. They have a migration history in the sense outlined above, having left northwest India as a group and moved westward as early as the fifth century C.E. After spending time in Persia and Armenia, they settled in the Greek-speaking parts of the Byzantine Empire (the Balkans), where the first records of their presence date from the thirteenth century. In the early fifteenth century, a new wave of migration set in, and a hundred years later Roma groups were appearing in Britain and Scandinavia, having already established a presence on the European continent. Often described (and describing themselves) as Egyptians (hence the term Gypsy), they were recognisable everywhere by their distinctive appearance, dress and language (Romanes, derived from Sanskrit), and by the fact that they travelled in extended families and earned their living as entertainers. A second wave of westward migration was touched off in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Roma who had been enslaved in Wallachia and Transylvania (today's Romania) were emancipated and moved to Western Europe in large numbers.²⁶

Mobility of a different kind became a feature of the Romani way of life in many parts of Europe once their initial migrations had ended. Among the many stereotypes that were applied to Roma in the modern period was that of the "nomad"—a romantic misnomer. In fact, significant numbers of Roma were settled in rural communities and did not travel at all. Those who did travel generally followed fixed circuits which took them to towns and villages, fairs and markets, where they dealt in horses, provided services like sharpening knives and mending pots, sold their own artisanal wares like metalwares, pottery and baskets, peddled small manufactured goods and textiles, or offered musical entertainments and acrobatic displays. Roma also operated travelling shows, including (by the twentieth century) travelling cinemas. These travels were seasonal; during the winter months, Romani families rested in safe spaces.

Among the different Romani groups that were on the move, it is possible to distinguish different patterns of mobility. The Sinti who had settled in Germany in the fifteenth century and the French Manouche tended to travel on relatively closed circuits in their national territories and borderlands, while the Lovara (whose name denoted their horse-dealing traditions) and Kalderash (coppersmiths), having arrived in Western Europe relatively late along with other Eastern European Roma, seem to have been more ambitious, ranging from Belgium and France to the Balkans on their seasonal travels. Lovara and Kalderash were also prominent among the Romani groups who took part in the wave of transoceanic migration around 1900, often by way of British ports. Groups of Continental Roma visited England and Scotland on several well-recorded occasions between 1886 and 1913. Some families travelled on to and across the Americas; these include the Kalderash Ciurons (also Tschorons), who established a global network of "branch families" that extended to North and South America and Australia. Others looked to Asia, forming communities as far East as Shanghai. And those who paused or abandoned their travels to form permanent

communities in European and American cities maintained ties to family members still on the move or far away.²⁷

An important driver of mobility for European Roma was the hostility of state authorities. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, they were identified as “heathens” and vagabonds. They fell under bans in most parts of Europe and were subject to penal sanctions and even massacre. Starting in the eighteenth century, there were repeated attempts to force them to settle down and lose their cultural distinctness. The westward migration after the 1880s coincided with and was likely driven by a Europe-wide panic about the “Gypsy menace,” leading to a reinforcement of police measures that amounted to continuous harassment and systematic criminalisation. This modern antigypsyism culminated in the genocidal violence that Roma suffered all over Europe at the hands of the Nazis and their allies between 1933 and 1945. Historians explain the nineteenth-century intensification of public hostility to the Roma as a consequence of the consolidation of nation states, which called for the policing of borders and meant that people who travelled and communicated across borders and were typically multilingual were inherently suspect. Geographical mobility and cultural flexibility (including having a “secret” language of their own) laid Roma open to the charge of being spies.²⁸

Under these circumstances, information-gathering had two main functions for travelling Roma. The first was to sustain productive relationships within and among Romani families. When Lovara or Kalderash went on the road, they typically formed a *kumpania*, a group of households which travelled together for reasons of both pragmatism and affinity. The households within a *kumpania* were not necessarily related by blood, and different households from the same family group could travel with different *kumpanji*. In a single season, a *kumpania* might dissolve and re-form several times, as the group was forced apart by police action or one household needed to split off for family reasons, but the value of critical mass for mutual support, protection, and sociability brought them back together again, sometimes incorporating new households. Under these circumstances, it was important to know where other members of one’s *kumpania* or family were.²⁹ More generally, the extended family was the site of socialisation, the guarantor of survival, and the point of reference for personal and group identity for Roma. The tie of family was critical, even if it was geographically elastic. Accordingly, getting the news about one’s family members—communicating with or about them—was critical even if one didn’t know where they were. As the migrant experience shows, sharing news and gossip with family and friends is an inherent part of social life and can be crucial for getting along in a new place; the special challenge for travelling Roma was that both parties to a conversation were likely to be in motion.

The second purpose of information-gathering was to provide knowledge of where and where not to go and of the conditions that awaited travellers at their destination. Information of this kind included intelligence about the local police force and other authorities—their numbers and attitudes—and more broadly about how receptive a particular community would be to the presence and needs of the Roma. Would shopkeepers welcome their custom or lock their doors? Would farmers be willing to sell or trade food or livestock, or even to exercise charity to hungry travellers? Was there a demand for the goods the Roma had to peddle or the services they had to offer? Was there someone—a farmer or an innkeeper—who would allow them to camp on his land?³⁰ These are mainly questions about opportunities for earning a living, and when Roma routes took them beyond regional circuits with which they were relatively familiar, the questions that needed answering were more specific: horse dealers wanted to know where the nearest horse

fairs were. Performers and musicians had to learn where to find an audience, and what would draw the crowds. But Roma were also particularly alert to news of unanticipated opportunities. Historians Ilse Auer and Adèle Sutre have written of the dialectics of information in the peculiar knowledge economy of the Roma: “Each journey feeds on encounters and received bits of information which inform their decisions, leading them onto new trajectories which were never planned but which seem to answer their hope of being *baxtalo*—lucky—a fundamental concept in the Romani world.”³¹ And families whose hope led them across oceans and prairies needed markers and signposts in genuinely unknown territories.

Romani Technologies: “Vurma” and “Patrin”

A long-standing practice of spatial communication among Roma travelling in the countryside was to place objects by the road to let those who were following know what direction to follow. Among Lovara Roma, such a message was known as *vurma* (Lovara Romanes for track or trace). In the interwar period, Burgenland (Austrian) Lovara marked their trajectories at crossroads with such things as two stones tied together with horsehair, or a forked twig with the middle twig pointing in the direction of travel. Signs could also be made of pig’s bristles, dog’s hairs, pumpkin seeds, cuts in tree trunks, scorched twigs, tears in pieces of cloth or marks made with coal on walls. Each family had its own set of markers.³² In his account of travelling with Lovara families mainly in the Low Countries and France in the 1930s, Jan Yoors reports that a route might be indicated by a branch broken or with a scrap of textile tied to it at the eye-level of a wagon driver, or else by objects placed at the side of the road of the kind “that did not seem too out of place and therefore obvious.”³³ Among British Romanies, the standard term for a trail marker is *patrin*, variations of which mean “leaf” in many European Romani dialects.³⁴ Thus, the English Romani poet David Morley writes: “PATRIN/or *pateran*, *pyaytrin*, or *sikaimasko*./The marker used by Roma/that tell others of their direction,/often grids of branches or leaf-twists or/bark-binds. Used for passing on news/using prearranged forms, patterns/or permutations of these. Yet/it also means a leaf or,/simply, a page.”³⁵

The information communicated by these signs went beyond the purely directional, as Yoors reports: “There are special signs indicating such specific messages as: ‘speed up travel and join us’; ‘follow us’; ‘assembling for *Kris* [the periodic meeting of households to resolve disputes]’; ‘Rom died, burial ahead’; ‘do not stop around here: local police and population hostile to Gypsies’; ‘turn back and tread softly,’ etc. The leaving of such trails of information covers whole territories with an effective intelligence network.”³⁶ According to Yoors, failure to furnish such information to other Roma, and especially to warn them of hazards, was a punishable offence in the internal code of justice of the Lovara.

Appropriating Technologies to Keep in Touch: Letters and Telephones, Literacy and Orality

Travelling Roma also made use of the technologies made available by the wider culture. The oldest of those technologies was of course the writing and exchange of letters. But this called for some specific adaptations on the part of Romani families as they engaged with the business of writing letters and of making sure they came into the hands of their intended recipients.

Romani culture is traditionally an oral culture. Knowledge of the past, at whose centre was always the history of the extended family, was communicated by word of mouth and in particular through a rich storytelling practice, and in the twenty-first century, the preference for oral over written communication persists within Romani communities. By extension, before the Second World War, many if not most travelling Roma were formally illiterate (as signalled at least by the inability to write their names), and this persisted in the older generations even as formal schooling became available for their children. Non-literacy was only partly the consequence of schooling avoided or interrupted. Rather, it can be understood as a strategic choice, a conscious rejection of the terms of non-Romani culture based on the conviction that the written word detached from the person who had issued it was inherently untrustworthy. But while word of mouth (what has been called the “Romani post”) played an important role (for example) in helping scattered families to find each other after the Second World War,³⁷ in practice people who needed to communicate over distance could not avoid engaging with the written word.

The strategic character of Roma orality is emphasised by the anthropologist Patrick Williams in his observations about mid-twentieth-century French Roma. He argues that just as Roma live inside of their respective societies while preserving their own way of life at a distance from non-Roma (*gadje*, in Romanes), they “define their relationship to the written word from ‘inside writing’”—while engaging with the written and spoken word in a variety of different combinations. One of the examples he offers dates from the 1960s: a Rom declares that he will “write a letter” to his cousin, selects the letter paper, and proceeds to dictate to a *gadjo* scribe. His wording has the form neither of speech nor of formal writing, but it has a conventional declarative shape and rhythm of its own, dictated in part by the fact that news and greetings from various other members of the family are communicated in successive sentences. The scribe is not expected to offer editorial interventions, and the author makes no changes to the text once it is on paper.³⁸ Letters (and postcards) that show evidence of this kind of dictation can be encountered elsewhere among the surviving traces of European Romani life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this suggests that the practice that Williams describes was characteristic of many Roma groups. In their travels through Britain and across the Atlantic, the Ciurons employed a *gadjo* “secretary,” and also engaged local gypsologists to read, write, and translate letters for them.³⁹

As long as they chose not to (literally) write, then, Roma relied on *gadje* to receive and transmit information wherever they were, and this reliance—usually informal and based on trust—extended to Romani engagement with postal systems. The most conventional of these was the use of the *poste restante* or General Delivery facility in urban post offices. One Lovara family head said he could recognise the sender of a letter from the surname to which it was addressed (he used several different names).⁴⁰ Under other circumstances, and probably more often, Roma used informal “drop points,” usually in businesses managed by *gadje*. In Europe, these were often the premises of sympathetic innkeepers or restaurateurs, who could hope to benefit from the custom of the large groups of travellers when they called in for their mail and by the public attention their presence would attract. In the United States between the wars, the proprietress of a drug store in Fort Smith Arkansas “handled the mail” for Romani families from all over the country.⁴¹

Travelling Roma also routinely used the newer communication technologies to exchange information on their journeys. Long-distance phone calls made and received—again—on the premises of friendly *gadje* were an important element of their information economy in the twentieth century. Jan Yoors’ Lovara companion used several different premises

and distinguished callers by the telephone number at which they contacted him. Yoors' description of the characteristic way in which he engaged physically with the technology anticipates Williams' account of "writing" a letter: "He was ill at ease, stiff, and his speech became declamatory. Finally, he handed me the telephone receiver, asking me to hold it up to him like a microphone. Pulika stepped a little to the side, and using both free hands to gesture in emphasis of his words, he spoke to the telephone rather than into it."⁴²

Seizing Opportunities: Communications and Transport Technologies, Non-Romani Intermediaries, and Self-Advertisement

A micro-study of one episode in the history of Romani mobility further underlines the range and complexity of practices and media that constituted their information economy. In the spring of 1906, some two hundred Roma travelled from Germany to Britain fleeing intensified police harassment and seeking new business opportunities (specifically, by their own account, as horse traders and performers).⁴³ When the last of them, a group of 112, was forcibly returned to Hamburg in November of that year, it was observed that they were organising their onward journeys by telephone and telegraph. This strategic engagement with technological modernity is in keeping with the fact that the Romani families made their way to and from the ports by train and used scheduled ferries for their crossings, and these steps involved relatively complex negotiations about transporting the horses and caravans with which they travelled.

In this particular episode, if we ask how the travellers were informed about how to get to Britain and what awaited them there, we find some evidence that they relied in the first instance on the same public actors as other migrants—ticket sellers and travel agents. More particularly, it was presumably the officers of the shipping lines who gave the travellers the critical information that they would not be denied entry at British ports if they travelled in groups of less than 20. It is also clear that intra-community word of mouth was in action as different groups of travellers communicated their experiences to one another, even across the North Sea (as some groups of travellers returned before others had set off): Scotland was a more welcoming place than England, Ireland might be even better.

On their first arrival at a new place in Britain, the travellers clearly depended on local *gadje* for information about opportunities: where and how they could earn money. They rapidly learned where the key horse fairs were, for example. Their progress through the country also brings home the interactions between the performance culture that many of them belonged to and an informal information economy. Romani musicians in Germany generally played either on the street or in country inns where their stock in trade was current hits.⁴⁴ The few records we have of their performances in Europe show that they were quick to adopt the latest dance music into their repertoire. By the time they left Britain, members of these groups of travellers were performing not only the globally popular cakewalk, but also versions of the Lambeth Walk; when challenged by the police to move on, one group burst into a rendition of "I Wouldn't Leave My Little Wooden Hut for You"—a music-hall song which had only come out in the previous year.⁴⁵ These Roma had clearly benefited from contact with locals. Like some friendly innkeepers back home, there were people in Britain ready to assist the visitors in exploiting their capacity for spectacle—the public fascination with exotic others. These included pastors who encouraged public "Gypsy weddings," farmers on whose land they were allowed to camp, and professional theatre managers and promoters, some of whom had come to specialise in collaborating

with visiting Roma. The travellers learned from these people what kind of show and what tunes would draw a paying audience.

What they did not need to learn was how to promote themselves, and in communicating information about themselves they made their own use of the opportunities afforded by the press. The Romani travellers in Britain sold picture postcards of themselves, a practice which also appears in the Netherlands at the same time. How they managed the trade in postcards, for example whether they commissioned their own or acquired stock from printers serving the large market in circulating images of “Gypsies,” remains an open research question. Similarly, Roma engaged in artisanal trades and repair services who travelled in Europe left a trail of newspaper advertisements and trade cards which were clearly of their own initiative.⁴⁶

Counter-Information: Resistance and Subversion

A discussion of the role of information in Romani history would not be complete without a consideration of the ways in which Roma have historically evaded and subverted modern information regimes. Managing information and developing complex systems for that purpose are recognised by historians as one of the central functions of the modern state, and in this context the surveillance and control of the mobility of populations is a key application of information technologies. These include systems of personal identification (passports) and of registering and recording individuals and their whereabouts (certification of birth, death, and marriage; address registers; censuses). The securing of national borders is one of the principal uses of these systems, and to this end states can be inventive in projecting as well as processing information. In 2020s Britain, the immigration authorities justified changes to the treatment of migrants and refugees after their arrival not in terms of what the migrants themselves might or might not deserve, but as a way of sending a message to others who might be contemplating an attempted border breach and/or their traffickers—informing them that a journey was pointless.⁴⁷

As noted above, the historical harassment and persecution of Roma was predicated on their mobility as well as on their cultural non-conformity. Official information systems were deployed specifically to keep them under surveillance: as early as 1899, the Bavarian police began systematically compiling a database on Roma; it included more than thirty thousand individuals at the point when the files were transferred to the new Reich Central Office for Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance in 1938. The French authorities introduced a compulsory anthropometric identification document for all itinerants in 1912, with a particular emphasis on Romani travellers. And by 1930, Roma in two-thirds of German territories were similarly required to carry identification papers designed specifically for them.⁴⁸

Roma thus had good reasons to be suspicious of police systems. James C. Scott, one of the most influential of contemporary scholars to argue that modern states require space and people to be “legible” (and by extension recordable), numbers the Roma among those who have historically practised “the art of not being governed.” He argues that orality, the resistance to literacy and to written records, is itself an effective strategy for evading governance.⁴⁹

A Romani practice that commonly frustrated police and researchers alike was the use of dual naming systems: typically, Romani individuals had both a Romani name by which they were known to family and friends, and which was rarely if ever written down, and given names and surnames characteristic of the wider community in which

they lived. In official contexts, these latter names were used. But in everyday life, it was the Romani name that had a fixed association with the person, while the use of non-Romani “civil” names was strategic and flexible. Families or individuals might adopt a regional surname and use it over several generations, but choose a new one (or choose to let the authorities record a different one) as circumstances changed. While the use of non-Romani names was approached largely as a matter of convenience, Roma marriage and child-raising practices meant that they sometimes had to be deployed strategically. Roma generally started their families very young, and registering a baby under the name of another adult could screen families against the kinds of questions that might be raised where the natural mother was still legally underage. Among German Sinti in the 1920s and 1930s, it was common for women to take the “German” surnames of their husbands in public and official contexts and for their children also to be registered under the father’s surname, even when they were married according to Romani custom rather than before the law.

The utility of this practice for the Romani subjects is obvious, though it continues to complicate the study of Romani history. Under the Nazis, it was answered by the grotesque policy of forcing two generations of people born to such couples to adopt their mothers’ surnames. The National Socialist drive to make the Roma legible once and for all was the first step in a process that led to forced registration, violent and physically invasive measures to determine people’s family background and “racial” status, immobilisation, and internment, and finally to genocide. Compounded by the failures of official acknowledgement and compensation after 1945, this experience left many survivor communities even more sceptical than before of letting the *gadje* know who they were and where to find them.⁵⁰

Conclusion: Moving Targets

Information history operates at the intersection of social and cultural history and the history of technology. It involves the study both of the material media which moved information and of the ways in which people have used those media. But while we see information as inherently in motion, historians of the Global North have often pictured its human subjects as static. Attention to the information needs and practices of users who are themselves mobile—among them migrants and peripatetic groups such as Roma—highlights the very wide range of media (human and material, formal and informal) that may constitute particular information economies. At the same time, the lens that brings moving subjects into focus should sharpen the historian’s awareness of how far modern civic norms of settledness, traceability, and legibility have been contested. Information regimes have been designed to facilitate and enforce a system of bordered nation states, and people who need to move have developed inventive strategies for appropriation, evasion, and disruption—though often at a heavy cost.

Notes

- 1 Anton Tantner, “Intelligence Offices in the Habsburg Monarchy,” in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 443–464; and Eve Rosenhaft, “Hands and Minds: Clerical Work in the First ‘Information Society’,” *International Review of Social History* 48, no. S11 (2003): 20–21. On the “first information revolution,” see Paul M. Dover, *The Information Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Daniel R. Headrick, *When Information Came of Age*.

- Technologies of Knowledge in the Age of Reason and Revolution, 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 2 Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism. Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (London: Routledge, 2000), 62. Compare (for France) Michael Sonenscher, “Journeymen’s Migrations and Workshop Organization in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Work in France*, ed. Steven Laurence Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 74–96; and (for Germany) Knut Schulz, “Gesellentrinkstuben und Gesellenherbergen im 14./15. Und 16. Jahrhundert,” in *Gastfreundschaft, Taverne und Gasthaus im Mittelalter*, ed. Hans Conrad Peyer (Munich: Oldenburg, 1983), 221–242.
 - 3 The subjects of the chapter are people who move by choice (however much their choice may be forced or constrained by circumstance), rather than forced migrants or trafficked or enslaved people.
 - 4 Adam McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846–1940,” *Journal of World History* 15 (2004): 155–189.
 - 5 On “peripatetic,” see Daniele Viktor Leggio and Yaron Matras, “How Open Borders Can Unlock Cultures. Concepts, Methods, and Procedures,” in *Open Borders, Unlocked Cultures. Romanian Roma Migrants in Western Europe*, ed. Daniele Viktor Leggio and Yaron Matras (London: Routledge, 2018), 1–25; and Aparna Rau, ed., *The Other Nomads: Peripatetic Minorities in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1987). See also the critical discussion of the distinction between “migrants” and “movers” in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, “Measuring and Quantifying Cross-Cultural Migrations: An Introduction,” in *Globalising Migration History: The Eurasian Experience (16th–21st Centuries)*, ed. Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 5–11.
 - 6 I use the endonym Roma (adjective Romani) to designate historical subjects. The discriminatory exonym “Gypsy” is used only where it is necessary to reproduce the language current in contemporary official and public usage.
 - 7 Cf. Jodie Matthews, “Where Are the Romanies? An Absent Presence in Narratives of Britishness,” *Identity Papers: A Journal of British and Irish Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 79–90.
 - 8 For recent examples, see Paola Campana and Loraine Gelsthorpe, “Choosing a Smuggler: Decision-Making amongst Migrants Smuggled to Europe,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 27 (2021): 5–21; Elizabeth Koomson-Yalley, “Information Sharing and Decision-Making: Attempts by Ghanaian Return Migrants to Enter through Libya,” *Social Inclusion* 9 (2021): 226–234; and Fang Wang, “Social Capital or Non-human Sources? A Cross-context Study on Information Source Selection of Migrant Farmer Workers,” *Journal of Information Science* 49, no. 5 (2021): 1–17.
 - 9 See, for example, “Precarious Migrants, Migration Regimes and Digital Technologies: The Empowerment-Control Nexus,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 8 (2022) (Special Issue), ed. Mihaela Nedelcu and Ibrahim Soysüren; and Athina Karatzogianni, Dennis Nguyen, and Elisa Serafinelli, eds., *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere: Conflict, Migration, Crisis and Culture in Digital Networks* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). On digital media use by other mobile groups, see Allison Hailey Hahn, *Media Culture in Nomadic Communities* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021).
 - 10 See, for example, Margrit Schulte Beerbühl, *The Forgotten Majority. German Merchants in London, Naturalization and Global Trade 1660–1815*, trans. Cynthia Klor (New York: Berghahn, 2015).
 - 11 For relevant historical approaches, see Annemarie Steidl, “The ‘Relatives and Friends Effect’: Migration Networks of Transatlantic Migrants from the Late Habsburg Monarchy,” in *Maritime Transport and Migration: The Connections between Maritime and Migration Networks*, ed. Torsten Feys et al. (St. John’s: IMEHA, 2007), 75–95; and Simone A. Wegge, “Chain Migration and Information Networks: Evidence from Nineteenth-Century Hesse Cassel,” *Journal of Economic History* 58 (1998): 957–986 (a broadly quantitative study).
 - 12 See, for example, Michael John, “Push and Pull Factors for Overseas Migrants from Austria-Hungary in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” in *Austrian Immigration to Canada: Selected Essays*, ed. Franz A. J. Szabo (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1996), 59–60.
 - 13 For an introduction to the field, see Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

- 14 Suzanne M. Sinke, "Marriage through the Mail: North American Correspondence Marriage from Early Print to the Web," in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 75–94.
- 15 Kathleen A. de Haan, "Negotiating the Transnational Moment: Immigrant Letters as Performance of a Diasporic Identity," *National Identities* 12 (2010): 107–131.
- 16 The Prize Papers Project, <https://www.prizepapers.de/the-project/the-prize-papers-collection>.
- 17 See, for example, Francisca Hoyer, *Relations of Absence: Germans in the East Indies and Their Families c. 1750–1820* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis, 2020).
- 18 Colin Pooley, *Mobility, Migration and Transport: Historical Perspectives* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 66–67.
- 19 William D. Jones, "'Going into Print': Published Immigrant Letters, Webs of Personal Relations, and the Emergence of the Welsh Public Sphere," in *Letters across Borders: The Epistolary Practices of International Migrants*, ed. Bruce S. Elliott, David A. Gerber, and Suzanne M. Sinke (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 175–199.
- 20 May Rush Gwin Waggoner, ed., *Le Plus Beau Païs du Monde: Completing the Picture of Proprietary Louisiana, 1699–1722* (Lafayette, LA: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2005).
- 21 Jane Caplan, *"Jetzt Judenfrei": Writing Tourism in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (London: German Historical Institute, 2012).
- 22 Laura Williamson Ambrose, "Travel in Time. Local Travel Writing and Seventeenth-Century English Almanacs," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 43 (2013): 419–433.
- 23 Mike Esbester, "Nineteenth-Century Timetables and the History of Reading," *Book History* 12 (2009): 156–185.
- 24 Torsten Feys, *The Battle for the Migrants: The Introduction of Steamshipping on the North Atlantic and Its Impact on the European Exodus* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 71–118.
- 25 Tara Zahra, "Travel Agents on Trial: Policing Mobility in East Central Europe, 1889–1989," *Past & Present* 223 (May 2014): 176.
- 26 For a recent general account, see Lev Tcherenkov and Stephane Laederich, *The Rroma*, 2 vols. (Basel: Schwab, 2004).
- 27 Ilsen About and Adèle Sutre, "Circulations Raisonnées: Consciences et Discours du Voyage dans les Sociétés Romani-Tsiganes au Début du XX^e Siècle," in *L'Expérience de la Mobilité de l'Antiquité à nos Jours, Entre PréCarité et Confiance*, ed. Claudia Moatti and Emmanuelle Chevreau (Mayenne: Ausonius, 2021), 319–333; and Adèle Sutre, "They Give a History of Wandering All Over the World: A Romani Clan's Transnational Movement in the Early 20th Century," *Quaderni Historici* 49 (2014): 471–498.
- 28 Jennifer Illuzzi, *Gypsies in Germany and Italy, 1861–1914: Lives Outside the Law* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Leo Lucassen, Wim Willems, and Anne-Marie Cottaar, *Gypsies and Other Itinerant Groups: A Socio-Historical Approach* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1996).
- 29 For the 1930s, see Jan Yoors, *The Gypsies* (Prospect Heights, NY: Waveland Press, 1967). For contemporary France, see Lise Foisneau, "Former une *Kumpania*: Composition et recomposition des Collectifs Roms de Provence," *Ethnologie Française* 48 (2018): 635–644.
- 30 On the ambivalent relations between traveling Roma and rural communities, see Simon Constantine, *Sinti and Roma in Germany (1871–1933): Gypsy Policy in the Second Empire and Weimar Republic* (London: Routledge, 2020), 103–105; and Angelika Albrecht, *Zigeuner in Altbayern 1871–1914: Eine Sozial-, Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der Bayerischen Zigeunerpolitik* (Munich: Kommission für Bayerische Landesgeschichte, 2002), 258–285.
- 31 About and Sutre, "Circulations Raisonnées," 320.
- 32 Claudia Mayerhofer, *Dorfzigeuner: Kultur und Geschichte der Burgenland-Roma von der Ersten Republik bis zur Gegenwart* (Vienna: Picus, 1987), 119.
- 33 Yoors, *The Gypsies*, 126.
- 34 Current usage is recorded in the Romani lexical database RomLex, <http://romani.uni-graz.at/rom-lex/>. *Patrin* was also the title of a web journal of Romani studies between 1996 and 2002.
- 35 David Morley, "Patrin," in *The Invisible Kings* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007), 8. The lexical root of *sikaimasko* means point, direct and teach.
- 36 Jan Yoors, "O Drom le Lowarengo: Recollections of Life and Travel with the Lovara [Part II]," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, 3rd series, 38 (1959): 96.

- 37 On the “Romani post”: Volha Bartash, “The Joy and Burden of Living: Roma Communities in the Western Borderlands of the Postwar Soviet Union,” in *No Neighbors’ Land. Postwar Europe in a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. Anna Wylegała, Sabine Rutar, and Małgorzata Łukianov (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 170.
- 38 Patrick Williams, “L’Écriture entre l’Oral et l’Écrit. Six Scènes de la Vie Tsigane en France,” in *Par Écrit: Ethnologie des Écritures Quotidiennes*, ed. Daniel Fabre, Martin de La Soudière and Claudie Voisenat (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1997), 59–78.
- 39 About and Sutre, “Circulations Raisonnées,” 325.
- 40 Yoors, *The Gypsies*, 210–212.
- 41 About and Sutre, 325, citing E. P. Hicks, “She handled the mail for Gypsies all over the world. The passing of ‘Mother Cole’ leaves vacant the unique post which made this Arkansas woman the one stationary factor in the lives of all the Romany tribes,” *The Journal of the Fort Smith Historical Society* 7, no. 1 (1983): 9–11.
- 42 Yoors, *The Gypsies*, 52, 212–213.
- 43 For the following account, see Eve Rosenhaft and Tamara West, “‘Invaders’: Mobility and Economy in the Lives of the Laubinger Family,” in *European Roma: Lives Beyond Stereotypes*, ed. Eve Rosenhaft and María Sierra (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), 127–147, and continuing research into this episode in the context of the AHRC-Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft collaborative development project Romani Migration between Germany and Britain (1880s–1914): Spaces of Informal Business, Media Spectacle, and Racial Policing (2022–2026).
- 44 Bernard Gilliat-Smith, “The Gypsies of the Rhine Provinz in 1902–1903,” *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, New series, 1 (1907–1908), 129.
- 45 “Visit of the German Gypsies to Langholm,” *Eskdale and Liddesdale Advertiser*, November 21, 1906.
- 46 About and Sutre, “Circulations Raisonnées,” 326.
- 47 UK Home Office, “World First Partnership to Tackle Global Migration Crisis,” April 14, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/world-first-partnership-to-tackle-global-migration-crisis>.
- 48 Rainer Hehemann, *Die “Bekämpfung des Zigeunerunwesens” im Wilhelminischen Deutschland und in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt a.M.: Haag + Herchen, 1987); and Emmanuel Filhol and Marie-Christine Hubert, *Les Tsiganes en France: Un Sort à Part (1939–1946)* (Paris: Perrin, 2009), 87–93.
- 49 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 226–237. Cf. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
- 50 Julia von dem Knesebeck, *The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011); Eve Rosenhaft, “Wissenschaft als Herrschaftsakt: Die Forschungspraxis der Ritterschen Forschungsstelle und das Wissen über ‘Zigeuner,’” in *Zwischen Erziehung und Vernichtung. Zigeunerforschung und Zigeunerpolitik im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Michael Zimmermann (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2007), 329–353; Heike Krokowski, *Die Last der Vergangenheit: Auswirkungen nationalsozialistischer Verfolgung auf Deutsche Sinti* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2001); and Michael Zimmermann, *Rassenutopie und Genozid: Die Nationalsozialistische “Lösung der Zigeunerfrage”* (Hamburg: Christians, 1996).