

VANCOUVER'S NEWS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

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Can't relate to animals, but her costars are scene-stealing chimps

Spearhead

Takes a smooth-sounding detour with Chocolate Supa Highway

Ron Sexsmith

Is proud to be part of the great Canadian troubadour tradition

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SPECIAL BOOKS SECTION

**Nomads' Land**

The daughter of Rom parents, Julia Lovell of Vancouver is part of a new generation of activists assisting fellow Gypsies fleeing Europe and seeking refuge here

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Nomads' Land

As anti-Gypsy violence rises in Europe, Vancouver beckons as a place of refuge ~ By Hadani Ditmars

In this city of hyphenated nationalities, Julia Lovell wears one that is romantic, tragic, and oxymoronic at the same time: Gypsy-Canadian.

Or is it Canadian-Gypsy? Or just plain Gypsy?

None of the above, Lovell says. It's Rom. "Gypsy is the *gadjo* name for us," she explains, *gadjo* being the Rom name for non-Gypsies—the Rom version of *goy*, if you will.

The word Gypsy, this Rom-Canadian woman explains, "is a corruption of *Egyptian*". It's both an inaccurate and a derogatory term, Lovell says, because the Rom did not come from Egypt and the word has racist associations. Still, Gypsy is a word in transition, a necessary evil when speaking English, that *gadjo* tongue. Until English speakers become accustomed to more accurate terminology, the Rom must, ironically, define themselves through a foreign and often ill-intentioned word.

"Just think of how casually people say 'I was gyped,'" she says, indignantly. "That kind of language just perpetuates negative stereotypes."

Like the millions of Rom who suffered or died at the hands of the Nazis, and those who lived through centuries of persecution, Lovell has had a lot of firsthand experience with negative stereotyping.

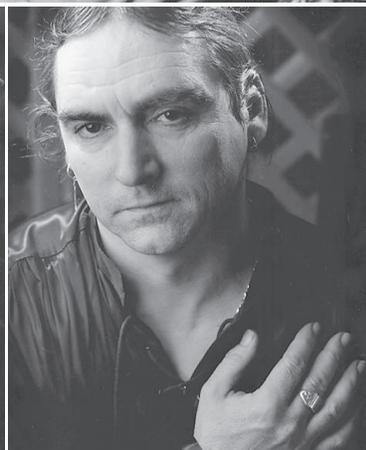
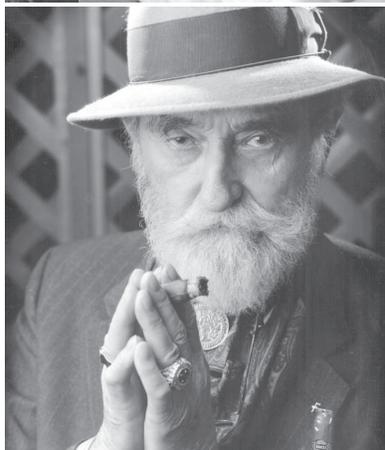
Vancouver was not a glowing advertisement for multiculturalism for this daughter of Rom parents from England who travelled in caravans and sold carpets and textiles. Name-calling, harassment, and even violence were a routine part of her childhood, even though it was in the hopes of finding a better life—free from Old World prejudice—that Lovell's parents chose to come to Canada a few decades ago.

Lovell's father, Tom, recalls Rom life in Depression-era Vancouver, when, as a young boy, he and a caravan of Rom camped out in a Burnaby orchard near what is now the Lougheed Mall. In that hard-times atmosphere of unemployment and despair, they were once attacked at night by neighbours armed with wooden clubs and anti-Rom slurs. Safer, if not greener, pastures beckoned, and Tom and his family went to South Africa for several years. They returned briefly to England, where their family had once been under the protection and in the service of a noblewoman, before coming back to Vancouver in the late '40s. Now in his 80s, Tom is content to be settled here, and he claims that "the magic is gone" from life on the road.

"A Gypsy needs an open space to have a campfire, a sense of freedom," he explains, but there is less and less of that open space in which to be free, it seems, even in the true north strong and free. Restrictions and regulations have put a damper on the travelling life, Tom says.

And now Lovell—less nomadic than her parents once were, settled in a charming East Vancouver character home at age 30—has become part of the activist generation of Rom, working to educate the *gadjo* about her culture and to sow the seeds of Rom solidarity through humanitarian action.

It was with the best of intentions that Lovell came to the assistance of 42 Rom who arrived in Vancouver last winter as refugees from the Czech Republic, one of several Eastern European countries where a new,



Vito and his family (top) came to Vancouver after fleeing the Czech Republic. Tom Lovell (left) camped out in Burnaby in the '20s, and Lolo Ines-Torres arranged help for refugees who arrived last winter. Alex Waterhouse-Hayward photos.

post-Communist wave of racist violence has claimed many Rom victims.

What she hadn't anticipated was that the Old World prejudices fled by her parents were still so alive and well in Vancouver.

"The death threats started around Christmas time," Lovell recounts, right after the *Province* published an article describing the plight of the refugees (22 of whom are children), hoping to appeal to readers' sense of

compassion and charity. An anonymous male caller with a heavy Czech accent (who obtained Lovell's number by posing as a humanitarian) offered this instead:

"You Gypsy cunt! You and all the other Gypsies and all the people that have been helping you should be sent back to the concentration camps and burned in the ovens with all the rest of the Jew fags!"

Over a period of a few weeks, simi-

lar calls followed, and a social-services worker trying to help the Rom refugees also received death threats.

The whole story of Lovell and the Gypsies unfolds in Lovell's living room, filled with photos of her Rom relatives and four of the refugees hoping to settle in Vancouver. Lovell, equipped with a cellular phone that she uses in her work as a textile trader, sings along to rhythmic Romany tunes blasting from the stereo.

Although the Rom present have just heard of rumours that the Czech government is threatening their relatives back home—essentially for embarrassing the Czech Republic by telling their story to Canadian media—spirits are high.

Stefan, a half-Rom Polish friend who translates from Romany to English, is the only blond present, so when Lovell's dog begins to bark at him, everyone jokes that it's because he looks like a *gadjo*.

The Gypsies want to know where I'm from, and they are intrigued by my story of Lebanese great-grandparents arriving here from the Bekka Valley in 1908. "Did they come for the gold?" they ask. "No," I explain, "it was because of the Turks: Ottoman oppression and discrimination forced them to flee."

They nod, and begin to recount their own stories. Daniel Emil, 45, worked for a construction company in Pardubice in the Czech Republic—the town where all 42 Gypsies are from—for 15 years. It had been a few generations since their family was truly nomadic; they were settled down in a nice apartment that was paid for by Emil's employer in gratitude for his years of hard work and service.

Things were relatively good under the Communist regime, says Emil, but in the past five or six years there has been a gradual escalation of violence and discrimination against the Gypsies. Skinheads regularly attacked Gypsies in their neighbourhood, burning their houses and beating them up.

Another Gypsy, one of many who didn't want their names mentioned for fear of reprisal, tells of his brother, who is still in jail after being arrested in 1993 for trying to defend himself against skinheads. And Emil's wife, Anna, speaks tearfully of the older children they had to leave behind and of the discrimination they faced on a daily basis: being refused service in restaurants, being denied jobs and apartments, their children being harassed at school. According to Lovell, many Gypsy community leaders have been attacked recently, and even killed, in the Czech Republic. Emil shows scars from a stab wound inflicted by skinheads.

Things eventually became so desperate that Daniel and Anna decided to sell all their possessions and come to Canada, hoping they would find refuge here. They went first to Montreal last May, and over a six-month period, other friends and neighbours from their hometown followed. They all applied for refugee status, but in Montreal they faced unsympathetic and, they say, racist Québecois social-services workers, one of whom allegedly told them: "Why should we help you? We're supposed to be helping French-speaking people, not Gypsy immigrants."

Anna recounts that a worker advised the Gypsies to go to Vancouver, because there would be more opportunity for them there. So, finally, discouraged by the racism and lack of economic opportunity in Quebec, they arrived en masse at the Vancouver airport on Friday, December 7, and went straight to the Mosaic immigrant-services office. Overwhelmed Mosaic workers then called Lovell, who speaks basic Romany, to translate.

Coincidentally, two days before the

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refugees' arrival, Lovell and a French Gypsy friend named Lolo Ines-Torres had met to discuss forming a Canadian Gypsy union, which would act as an advocacy group and deal with human- and civil-rights issues for the Rom.

"We never expected things to move so fast," Lovell deadpans.

Since then, Lovell and Ines-Torres and a small ad hoc group of other local Gypsies and friends have been trying to supply the refugees with housing, clothes, and food. They tried to enlist the help of Vancouver's Czech community, but they soon realized it was an uphill battle when administrators of a local Czech church hung up on them at the very mention of Gypsies. The alternative became a bewildering maze of social-services bureaucracy.

When the refugees arrived, Lovell and Ines-Torres helped arrange emergency shelter at the YWCA, a shelter for the homeless in Marpole, and Fine Day, a Native social-housing development. It was not an easy undertaking—some of the Gypsies ended up going hungry for several days at the Y, and Lovell says she encountered resistance from an administrator at Fine Day who initially insisted that the facility was only for Natives—but no one froze. Eventually, refugee Vito, his wife, and three children settled in temporarily there. At the Marpole shelter, Lovell and her father even organized a traditional Gypsy bread-breaking ceremony to welcome their Rom cousins to Vancouver.

The Gypsies housed at the shelter were somewhat shocked to encounter such poverty in such a prosperous country, but they made friends with many of the homeless people. One of them was a Greek man who drove them to social-services appointments in his truck—his only real "home".

One of the Gypsies asks about the situation of the Natives here. Why do they live in such poverty when it's their own land? He came to Canada with visions of noble Indians in feather headdresses, images gleaned from programs on Czech TV. When he arrived here, these images were replaced with scenes of street life on Main and Hastings and desperate people at Fine Day.

I don't know what to tell him.

By now, everyone is tired from storytelling, but Lovell is still intense and focused, buoying them up with her tales of resistance.

She just split with her Italian-Canadian fiancé, she says, after his mother called her a *zingara* (a derogatory Italian word for "Gypsy") and asked her never to talk about her origins in front of the family. She is corresponding with an Indian linguist and Gypsy advocate who has compiled a Romany-English dictionary, and she is in contact with Amnesty International regarding the documentation of human-rights abuses against Gypsies. She is proud of her heritage, and she shows me photos of ancestors in covered, brightly painted wagons.

"I remember once as a child," she

recounts, "when I was travelling with my family in the States, the owner of a trailer park wouldn't let us park our caravan on his site. He told us that he didn't want 'our kind' and that we should go back to where we came from. I just laughed and said 'Okay, do you want to pay our fares back to India?'"

These days, in a rather exotic, multicultural full circle, Lovell's father, a true Vancouver Gypsy pioneer, speaks a broken Romany-Punjabi combination with an Indian shopkeeper on

A Czech poll surveyed eight ethnic groups and reported that 69 percent of the respondents had ill feelings toward Gypsies.

Commercial Drive.

I have travelled by long roads, I have met fortunate Rom. Oh Gypsy men! Oh Gypsy youth! Oh Gypsies from wherever you come, with tents along lucky roads. I too once had a large family, but the black legion murdered them. Come with me, oh Gypsies of the world, to where the Romany roads are opening. Now is the time! Arise Gypsy now! We will succeed where we make the effort!

—*Anthem of the International Romany Union*

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, India was

the Rom motherland. Some sources claim that the Gypsies were a Rajasthani people who were sent westward a millennium ago to resist incursions by Islamic leader Mohammed Ghaznavid. Similarly, the spread of Islam may have contributed to the movement of Gypsies from Turkey into the Balkans by about AD 1250. Ironically, many of the racist terms used by Christian Europe to describe the Rom, such as *Tartar*, *Turk*, and *Saracen*, were also used to refer to the "Muslim threat".

Many Rom in Central and Eastern Europe were enslaved by feudal lords. In fact, Gypsy slavery was not fully abolished in Europe until 1860—about the same time slavery was banned in the United States.

In the 1860s, there was a mass exodus of Rom to North and South America. Those who remained in Europe continued to suffer persecution and pogroms, culminating in the murder of 500,000 Gypsies by the Nazis.

Today, not just in the Czech Republic but all over Eastern Europe—still home to some seven million of the world's 13 million Rom—anti-Gypsy racism and violence are on the rise once again.

As Communist regimes have transformed into free-market economies, many ethnic minorities have suffered increased discrimination and hardship. Rising unemployment figures in countries where guaranteed state jobs were once the norm have resurrected old ghosts. Gypsies—as well as Jews, blacks, and Middle Eastern immigrants—are convenient scapegoats for economic woes and are often subjected to harassment and random attacks. In Bulgaria, mob violence against Gypsies (who make up approximately 10 percent of the population) has become almost commonplace. In Romania, where the Rom population of well over 2 million is the largest of any country in the world, mob violence has escalated since the overthrow of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime in 1989. In fact, just two weeks after Ceausescu's execution, about a thousand villagers in the town of Turulung attacked a Gypsy neighbourhood, resulting in the destruction of 38 houses and the disappearance of a three-year-old child. When authorities failed to prosecute or punish anyone involved, many such incidents followed.

Two years ago in Oberwart, Austria, four Gypsies died in a racist's booby-trap explosion, and in Germany, skinhead violence against Rom continues. That same year, an independent citizens organization recorded more than 80 race-motivated attacks against Gypsies in the Czech Republic, including one in which a father of five was clubbed to death by skinheads in front of his family.

But violence is not the only means of persecution suffered by the Rom.

In many places in Central and Eastern Europe, they also suffer from discriminatory practices in employment, housing, education, and access to public services. Every day, instances of harassment include being denied entry into restaurants, shops, and clubs (many with signs declaring "No Gypsies allowed"). A November 1995 Czech poll surveyed eight ethnic groups and reported that 69 percent of the respondents had ill feelings toward Gypsies.

In other instances, laws that do not appear racist on the surface are manipulated to discriminate against the Rom. An example of this, and a catalyst in the exodus of the 42 Gypsies from Pardubice, is the Czech Republic's new citizenship law, introduced in 1993 (officially known as the Law on Acquisition and Loss of Citizenship).

The law's criteria for citizenship—permanent residence in the country for five years and no criminal record for five years—seem practically designed to exclude the Gypsies, traditionally nomadic people whose often substandard housing is officially considered temporary and who are

somewhat overrepresented in the Czech prison population. In both criteria, the Rom's marginalized socio-economic position is exploited legally.

According to a recent report in the *Nation* by Aryeh Neier: "In combination, the provisions of the Czech law have denied citizenship to many life-long residents. More than 100,000 Rom—about one-third of their population in the country—have lost citizenship, and nearly 50 percent of those rendered stateless have lived in the country since birth."

In a letter to Czech president Vaclav Havel, the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe described the citizenship law as "instituting what may be the largest denaturalization in Europe since the World War II period".

Effectively, the law has meant that many Gypsies cannot take part in the country's privatization program or reclaim property confiscated by the Communists. And the rights to vote, hold public office, and receive social benefits are only available to those with citizenship.

This kind of official dispossession of Gypsies is worrying to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, which thinks a precedent might be set for other countries considering implementing strict citizenship requirements as a way of excluding people on religious or ethnic grounds.

In a 1995 interview with journalist Jane Perlez for *The National*, a UN refugee officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "Citizenship legislation based on ethnicity is the worst thing happening in Europe, and it's being done in the cloak of democracy because international law is weak on this. If the international community accepts this legislation in the highly developed Czech Republic, with a Prague castle and Havel in it, what's to stop the Yugoslav lands from doing it?"

Already, said the official, restrictive citizenship legislation is being drafted in Croatia and Macedonia.

In addition to the damage caused by the new citizenship law in the Czech Republic, policies of forced resettlement have destroyed hundreds of close-knit Gypsy communities during the past few decades, resulting in profound cultural loss for the Rom. When communities are torn apart, children lose touch with elders and traditions, and language, songs, and stories disappear. The cycle of poverty is perpetuated, in part, as many Gypsy children who normally speak Romany at home are sent to schools for the mentally handicapped because their second language, Czech, is not considered up to standard.

As racism rises, their struggle to find work is made harder by the fact that many "white" immigrants from poorer neighbouring countries have taken even the traditional manual-labour jobs that Gypsies have always done. In the Czech Republic, even jobs like ditch-digging have been usurped by Russians and Ukrainians.

And so, once again, as they did after the abolition of Gypsy slavery, many Rom are choosing the unknown shores of North America over the familiar yet violent and oppressive Old World.

And Vancouver, it seems, is considered by many to be an ideal place of refuge.

Where is the Romany truth?
Where is the Gypsy truth? For as long as I can remember, I have carried my tent through the country, seeking love and affection, justice and fortune. I have grown old on the road and have not found love that is true, I have not found a true word. Where is the Romany truth?

—*Romany poet Rasim Sejdic*

EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE, of course, and it's a safe bet that the Gypsies from Pardubice have not yet had time to familiarize themselves with Reform party rhetoric, or read of Nazi war criminals hiding out in Hope or anti-immigrant rants in the *Province*, or venture too far into the bowels of the Downtown Eastside or

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violent suburban convenience-store wastelands. For them, Vancouver is still a dream of racial harmony, a promise of future greatness, a "place where we can raise our children in peace", says Eva, a mother of three and one of the 42 Gypsies who came here in December.

Eva came here with her girlfriend, and they are living in a small one-bedroom apartment on Main Street with a Gypsy friend who had to leave his family behind.

Being gay doesn't seem to be an issue for anyone in the group from Pardubice. They are, after all, Gypsies from the Czech Republic, a place that, despite its disregard for Rom human rights, is rather liberal in its attitudes toward sexuality.

Eva's girlfriend, Elana, whose short-cropped hair and leather boots wouldn't be out of place in a Commercial Drive café, thinks Vancouver is great. "So many different kinds of people walking down the street," she says in mild awe. "People from all over the

world." Elana's grandmother died in a Nazi concentration camp and she is frightened by recent developments in the Czech Republic. Her worst nightmare is the prospect of being sent back.

Eva and Elana are sitting in the Kino Café on Cambie Street, where a group of local Gypsies have gathered to discuss Rom culture and possible ways to organize help for their Czech cousins.

One of the locals is Dolores, a fortune-teller. She came with her husband, a plumber, to help translate tonight. Her grandfather came to Canada from Russia 100 years ago, and she is "proud to be a Gypsy". According to figures supplied by Lovell, Dolores is one of approximately 1,060,000 North American Gypsies (60,000 in Canada). Statistics are not easy to compile, as many are afraid to admit to their Rom sta-

tus for fear of discrimination.

Originally from Montreal, Dolores claims to have suffered discrimination all her life, but she recognizes that things are far worse for Gypsies in Europe.

"At least here, I can go into a shop or a restaurant and say 'I'm a Gypsy'

How could friends and neighbours change overnight? How could whole communities just turn against them?

and still get served," Dolores says. "No one's going to beat me up for saying what I am."

But aren't Gypsies here more assimilated than in Europe?

"Not necessarily," Dolores says. "My own kids, for instance, they want to marry other Gypsies; they want to

keep their culture. They don't want to lose their identity."

Dolores gets approving nods from the other women at the table. One of them begins to inquire about the eligibility of one of Dolores's daughters; her son is looking for a wife. "Just last week, I was at a beautiful wedding in

Seattle," Dolores recounts. "It was at the Four Seasons Hotel." All the traditions were observed: the crowning of the bride, the circle dancing, the songs and blessings.

"In Europe, it's still old-fashioned," she continues. "Take the Polish Gypsies.

All they know is how to run and steal. That's all they've ever known. Some came here a while back and we tried to help them adjust to Canadian life. But it's hard to change them, when all they've known is hatred and discrimination."

One should perhaps take Dolores's statement with a grain of salt: it recalls the comments of so many other sec-

ond- or third-generation North Americans about their "cousins" from "the old country". In any case, the Gypsies from Pardubice, many of them fifth- and sixth-generation Czechs who had long abandoned traditional nomadic ways, were nevertheless targets of such brutal harassment and eventual uprooting.

How could friends and neighbours change overnight? How could whole communities just turn against them?

Anna Duna, a Pardubice refugee who came here with her husband and three children, says: "It was as if the hatred [of the Rom] was there all along and it just came out, it exploded." During the Communist era, she says, society was under a lot of constraints, some of them obviously repressive, but she feels that those restrictions acted as a deterrent to racial violence. "People were afraid to do anything for fear of repercussion," she explains.

For Anna, there was a precise moment when things began to change.

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It was in the spring of 1990, shortly after her husband, Jan, and 40 of his fellow Gypsy colleagues were fired when their employer, the former state railway company, was privatized. They were let go because they "weren't real Czechs".

One of those fine spring mornings, Anna says, she was walking to the market, wondering if her husband would be able to find another job, when out of nowhere a man came up to her and punched her in the face. She was pushed to the ground by the strength of the blow, and she remembers sitting there, dazed, while everyone just continued going about their business, acting as if nothing had happened.

Afterwards, Anna recounts, "People that we used to buy bread from wouldn't sell it to us any more; people that we used to work with wouldn't talk to us. Children that used to play with my children stopped coming around." When her young daughter, deaf since birth, was almost murdered by older teenage boys at her school, she knew it was time to leave.

As her family tried to find a way out, random attacks against Gypsies increased. A riot erupted when tens of thousands of neo-Nazi youth from across Europe congregated in the Czech Republic to celebrate Hitler's birthday. Several hundred found their way to Pardubice, burning houses and attacking people in the Gypsy quarter. During the attack, Anna says, many children disappeared. "It wasn't just skinheads," Anna says. "It was ordinary people too." Former friends and neighbours were among those involved in anti-Gypsy violence, she explains.

If "ordinary" people from a country renowned for its "liberalism" can suddenly turn into killers of children, what hope is there for the future of multiculturalism here?

"Vancouver's a good place," Anna says. "There are nice gadjo here."

Except, of course, for those death threats and the people at the Czech church who hung up on Lovell when she asked them to help the Gypsies. And what about Preston Manning, or, say, Doug Collins? What would they have to say about Gypsy refugees?

The mood tonight, though, is hopeful, even euphoric. The Gypsies have all found homes, at least temporarily. They are out of immediate danger. Lawyer Phil Rankin is taking on their immigration case. There's no chance of them being "sent back", at least not for the next 24 months, anyway.

For the moment, everyone is happy. There is a lively, if slightly halting, conversation going on in Romany, as live flamenco music fills the room. Gypsies from around the world are speaking a language that has survived centuries of persecution, in a café in a city on the edge of the Pacific that people from all over have been escaping to for the past 100 years.

"Ideally," says Lolo Ines-Torres, "the Rom experience—both of persecution as well as travelling the world and encountering different cultures—can be a positive in the context of multiculturalism." The Rom culture, he maintains, is a universal culture, with universal values.

"Hopefully, with what we have gained from our own experience," he explains, "we can begin to move toward a culture where the barriers between 'us' and 'them' are broken down."

Tonight's flamenco show seems to indicate that this is already happening. Performing artists with backgrounds as diverse as Turkish, Mexican, Greek, Spanish, and Irish are caught up in the duende.

Here there is no gadjo or Rom. Everyone is dancing together. ■