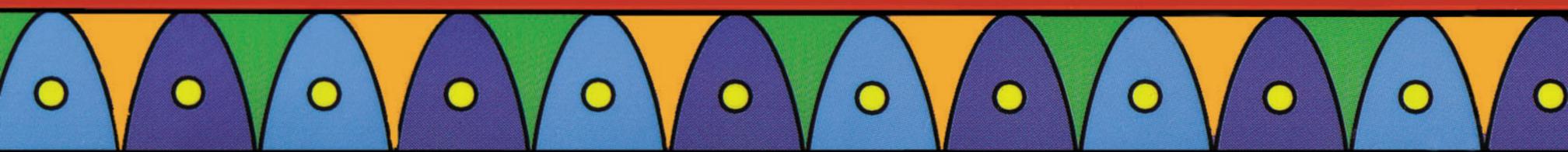


A Gypsy in New York



Juliette de Bairaclı Levy



This new edition of Juliette's memoir has been edited for accuracy and clarity; new illustrations and photos have been added, making it substantially different from the earlier work of the same name published by Faber and Faber, London, England in 1962.

In this richly detailed memoir, **Juliette de Bairacli Levy** – one of the founders of American herbalism – offers us a rare documentary. It is at once an herbal, a travel book, and a compendium of Gypsy lore and Gypsy ways.

Juliette gives us river winds, strange characters in the streets by day, rats scurrying by at night, and legions of cockroaches in the apartments, against whose windows the blossoms of apple and pear trees toss, even in the great city's cement heart.

Part the curtain and enter the hidden world of Gypsies in New York; mysteries await you.



Praise for *A Gypsy in New York*

“Charmingly written, unusual, and captivating. I was sorry when its end came, too quickly to please me.”

Helen Siemers

“I am left much wiser concerning that strangest and greatest of the world's cities, New York, my city. In this fascinating book, Gypsy eyes helped me to see New York in all sorts of ways that I formerly had never imagined existed.”

Margaret Behrens

In your heart a Gypsy lives; in your fingers a Gypsy dances.

By **Juliette de Bairacli Levy**

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A Gypsy in New York

Nature's Children

Spanish Mountain Life

Summer in Galilee

Traveler's Joy

*A
Gypsy
in
New York*



Juliette de Bairacli Levy



Ash Tree Publishing
Woodstock, NY

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Ash Tree Publishing
PO Box 64
Woodstock, NY 12498
845-246-8081

www.wisewomanbookshop.com (to buy our books)
www.ashtreepublishing.com (to learn more about our
books and authors)
www.susunweed.com (for more information on herbs)

Publisher's Cataloging in Publication
(Prepared by Quality Books Inc.)

Bairacli-Levy, Juliette de.
A Gypsy in New York / Juliette de Bairacli Levy.
Rev. and updated ed.
p. cm.
Includes index.
LCCN 2005934395
ISBN-13: 978-1-888123-08-1
ISBN-10: 1-888123-08-7

1. Bairacli-Levy, Juliette de. 2. Herbalists—Biography.
3. Materia medica, Vegetable. 4. Medicinal plants.
5. Romanies—New York (State)—New York—Social life
and customs. 6. New York (N.Y.)—Description and travel.
I. Title.

RS164.B289 2006

615'.321'092

QBI06-600260



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All photos by Juliette de Bairacli Levy.

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Welcome to New York



New York is the most written-about city in the world. In this book it is seen through unusual eyes, Gypsy eyes, and readers will enjoy new and strange information concerning New York's large Gypsy population, which is still nomadic and hidden from those whom the Gypsies do not accept as their friends.

Author, herbalist, and world traveler, Juliette de Bairacli Levy wanders through New York streets, accompanied by her two young children and her Turkuman Afghan Hounds (for which she is famous). Like the true Romany people, they are more often outdoors than in, and they explore the city in its snow-swept wintertime and its cold early spring.

Juliette describes New York's many wild plants and its wild birds, too. She enjoys the mysterious sight of truckloads of almond blossoms being driven along a Manhattan avenue. And she experiences New York's crime: her money is stolen from her apartment by a dangerous fake window cleaner; she is frightened and chased along the East River walkway by a man and his boxer dog; she witnesses a possible murder in an apartment facing one of her windows; and her beloved amber necklace is bewitched away by a Gypsy friend of deep occult power!

"As a traveler," wrote the poet Stephen Spender in his review in *The Sunday Times* (London), "she makes other records of their journeys seem like waterflies skating over the surface of a pond. Her progress across a country seems more antlike, moving from stone to stone, and from stalk to stalk of grass, which is the Gypsy way of looking at things."



La Diamanta Negra: Gypsy dancer and actress of Valencia

Chapter One



New York and Man-a-hat-ta

Like Gypsies, we entered the port of New York in its wintertime, its bleak time. We came with the Atlantic winds – icy-breathed and burdened with snow – and with the winds rising off the great Hudson River, so broad and deep, whose tides flow at one hundred and fifty miles an hour, to join at Albany a system of canals which link New York City with the Great Western Lakes and the Saint Lawrence River. I liked the feel of water and winds around and within New York, and knowing from what places such winds and water came thither. I wondered if sometimes there might drop onto those man-made, confined city streets a plume from a wild goose or wild turkey in flight over that shut-in sky.

Federico Garcia is one of my favorite people, both as person and poet. When he stayed a while in New York, he was inspired to write of its dawn – *la aurora*, that beautiful word – as he saw it:

“New York’s daybreak contains/four columns of mire/and a hurricane of black doves/paddling in putrescent waters.”

I saw New York’s daybreak differently. I saw gray mists clearing and leaving below valleys of yellowness like the stretches of wild daffodils which I remember with longing from my childhood in England.

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So! New York! Over those misty stretches of yellowness at dawn fly crowds of pigeons or doves – call them either, what you choose – those birds seem as many and as noisy as honeybees emerging from an overturned bee-skep [a hive made of straw]. The New York pigeons are away in search of that day’s food. Some receive stale bread or crumbs from compassionate New Yorkers, others fend for themselves amongst garbage; they are clean-natured eaters of cereals only, and decline all other food.

Winter is the season when many Gypsies move into houses in cities all over the world, and they come likewise into New York. The Gypsies are wanting house roofs over their heads during the cold-weather months, and, above all, opportunity to find well-paid work to enable them to amass the wherewithal to travel again, carefree, when the first scents of spring come on the warming air, as the Scottish tinkers say: “When the yellow is on the broom bushes.”

A Chinese poet says of that time:

How fragrant the scent that comes softly with the wind,
Breaking the traveler’s heart in vain
As he halts his horse, wondering, wandering.

The Gypsies’ hearts do not break, the Gypsies go! Now, for American Gypsies, Cadillac cars and upholstered trailers replace the horse-drawn, carved, wooden vans of former days. They follow old and new trails across the Americas of North and South; in Mexico I was to meet, later, American-born Gypsies from New York, mostly traveling in tropical Colima, with its great volcano dominating that beautiful part of the world. Many of the Gypsies in Mexico made their money from sideshows, rather of the Punch and Judy type.

As for “wondering, wandering,” I had arrived in New York from southern Spain, with my eight-year-old son, Rafik Nissim, my seven-year-old daughter, Luz España, and an Af-

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ghan hound bitch, Cingane. The dog was the greyhound kind which the Gypsies always like to keep, though in this case she was the Afghanistan greyhound breed, not one of the usual hare-chasing “long-tails” of the Gypsy world. In Spain we had stayed in the absolute solitude of the hills of the Malaga territory on a goat farm two hours’ donkey-ride away from any village, where the only loud sounds were the pouring of swift streams down rocky courses, and the hundredfold tambourines of shaken goat bells.

Gypsies – equaled only by the nomad Bedouin Arabs – know and love the lonely places of the world. In Spain there are mountain trails which only the Gypsy caravans travel. The contrast of clamorous New York port to the quiet of Malaga hills was extraordinary; but it was also exciting. I have heard many times from traveler friends, people who have lived and worked in many cities, especially writers and artists, that they consider New York to be the most exciting city in the world. I heard one woman passenger on the American Export Lines ship on which we entered the Port of New York telling a woman passenger friend, in her foreign-sounding English, that if you live in New York. “No need go other place, New York got everything!”

I had visited New York fourteen years ago. Then I had come by plane and had been wearing Paris-bought clothes and carried a mere handful of lightweight luggage. Now I had two young children at my side, and all three of us were wearing the sort of odd-looking clothes that long-time travelers tend to wear: rough, hard-wearing materials, wide sleeves for comfort, and many and big pockets to help carry things. I knew that my face had become as weatherworn as that of any old Gypsy woman, although by age I should be considered young. But the heat and the winds of deserts, the cold of mountaintops and the harsh weather of other places where true Gypsy travel takes one, mark the face of travelers as surely as it roughens the stones exposed to it the

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year around. Not all the lovely herbal lotions that one may make from flowers and leaves, steeped in sunlight and moonlight, can fully protect the skin against changing weather and changing climates.

Also, like Gypsies, I now carried all my possessions with me, as for years I had had no home in which to leave things. So we brought into New York a burdensome weight of my children's collection of toys of the world, to which they were going to add later from New York's fabulous toy shops, and the toy shop of the United Nations, and all their books, the school ones from which I, with much labor, taught them, and their "pleasure" ones; also my own chosen books, and then all the weighty necessities of my two professions, herbalist and writer, including sacks of herbs which I had gathered and dried myself in many countries and used constantly, volumes of notes for books on herbs, human and veterinary, and notes on our travel. I intended to write these books one day, but meanwhile carried them from country to country, still unwritten! And then cameras and artist's materials, and a heavy collection of ancient stones and pots which my children and I had dug out of their hiding places in Europe, Mexico, and Israel. Some had gone into museums; others we could not bear to part with. Our luggage was now a collection of big wicker traveling basket-trunks, made by Gypsies from such places as Poland and Spain, and also peasant-made from that lovely island of Madeira, rightly famed for its baskets.

There was reason in such choice of luggage: the Gypsies store their possessions in sacks from the same motives. When clothing has to remain packed for months, it needs ventilation to prevent mustiness and discoloration. In the primitive places where we have stayed, from Gypsy tents to old water-mills, and even ruins, our trunks are usually our only furniture, both for storing things and for sitting on. As I write this, we are living far from New York, in an old Greek

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church by the Sea of Galilee, in Israel. Our cell-like room is furnished with two beds and one table only, therefore our luggage is again in use for storage and for seating! And we will probably be living in this room for three months.

The sky of New York held my attention. In winter it seems to be a very high sky: artists have commented on this. Its color, when the sun is not shining, is usually ashen, and against that pale color, the famous heaven-reaching, fantastic, often monolithic, buildings of Manhattan look darkly gray. Because Manhattan is such a narrow stretch of land – it is described as being not unlike a fish in shape – the New York builders, once they had built on every possible inch of the limited ground space, and still the demand for offices and apartments increased, had to build upwards towards the clouds; thus their descriptive name: “skyscrapers.”

All who come to New York and look upon its crowding buildings, more pressed together and far more towering than any buildings anywhere else on earth, cannot help but think back to the time when, only a few hundred years ago, the only dwellings on that now crowded area of Manhattan were a few scattered lodges of the peaceful Canarsie Indians. It was said to have been a place of wild roses and brambles which yielded wonderful blackberries. Perhaps it was the fragrance of those Manhattan wild roses which made the Indians name that land, which the surrounding rivers make an island, *Man-a-hat-ta*, which means in their beautiful language “Heavenly Land.” The official flower of New York State, aptly, is the wild rose.



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As a botanist, I know that two wild American plants are named after New York, the New York aster and New York fern. The state has flower festivals: Every year an Apple Blossom Festival is held at Rochester, and later a Lilac Festival elsewhere.

New York State's motto is equally apt: *Excelsior*, "Ever Upward." Looking around at the Manhattan skyline reaching its climax in the Empire State Building, which pierces the sky like a giant's hypodermic syringe, one wonders if the motto was chosen with Manhattan in mind.

Now the roses and blackberry bushes are found only in the parks, and there is no heavenly fragrance. Nostril-pricking fumes of petrol from the exhaust pipes of vehicles of every kind which teem in every street in the city, belching fumes from the numerous factories which surround New York City and poison the city's heart, all afflict one's nose and lungs. Like the Gypsies, I am always conscious of the "poisoned air of cities," throughout my time in New York, and later, in Los Angeles, where I suffered worst of all.

The waterfront of New York, stretching as far as one's eyes can see ahead, seems enormous, and there are, indeed, about seven hundred miles of it. Many nostalgic seamen's songs have been written about it. It faces numerous small islands, the most famous and romantic of these islands being that on which stands the Liberty statue. All ships' passengers approaching New York keep a lookout for the towering Statue of Liberty, that splendid woman of copper standing on a small, water-splashed piece of land in New York harbor. Sea mists and salty winds blown inland from the Atlantic have grayed and greened the copper figure and made her more beautiful: she is a perching place for seagulls and other sea birds, and sometimes, oh! wonderful! wild geese.

Although she is of Amazon type and her face is stern, for she must protect her torch of Liberty from being blown

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out by any oppressing forces, the words inscribed at her feet are tender enough. I knew that they had been composed for the statue by a young Jewish woman, Emma Lazarus. My father, when I was a girl, had once given me a small volume of her poems. I had been impressed then by the promise of the Golden Door. But I have ceased to look for Golden Doors into anywhere, for I have come to believe that life is really more fun on the other side, among the ragged Bohemians. I wanted to know the complete words of the inscribed verse on the Statue of Liberty as our ship sailed past. I wanted to tell them to my children as they stood at my side marveling at New York harbor. Therefore it was strange to me that of the twelve Americans around me on the ship whom I asked – one of them a schoolmistress and most of them New Yorkers – not one of them could tell me the words! Here they are, beautiful in their promise to all homeless wanderers [from “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus]:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

The immense statue was presented by France to America, in admiration and friendship, symbolic of the liberty and freedom enjoyed by all citizens of America under a free government, elected freely by the people for the people. A symbol of Liberty enlightening the world.

Nowadays “the wretched [human] refuse” find America a difficult country to enter. The official question-forms to be completed, and the guarantees to be made, would baffle most modern wandering Gypsies wishing to enter as immigrants. My children and I came only as visitors to America, and that was difficult enough. Then, on arrival, there was talk of de-

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taining us on Ellis Island because of my absolute refusal to have my children and dog vaccinated.

As an herbalist I keep my children and animals – dogs and goats – all safe and healthy on the medicines of the Bible: the herbs and the grasses. I fear no disease, and so far, with the exception of typhus in Spain years ago, I have not had to pay out one cent to any doctor other than for an occasional certificate of good health needed as we travel from country to country. Herbal medicine is also Native American medicine, well known to those who occupied the New York State region before the coming of the Dutch: the Great Peaceful Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. These farmers, hunters, and fishermen were some of the largest and most powerful of the North American Indian nations.

Close to the island of the Statue of Liberty is Ellis Island, the gateway into New York that is also a detention and deportation center of the United States Immigration Service. For two centuries New York itself has been an Eldorado to pressing crowds of immigrants and exiles from Europe, and among those human masses, many thousands of Serbian and Balkan Gypsies entered at the time of World War I.

The Jewish population of New York City is enormous: at times, as high as 30 percent of the population [in 2002, 12 percent were Jewish]. In the Lower East Side thousands of Jews occupy whole streets, but there is no ghetto there or anywhere in America. The American Jewish people are a free and prosperous minority, and their genius has created many of New York's most famous and most beautiful stores. Christopher Columbus's voyage to the New World was supposed to have been financed largely by Portuguese Jews. At the time of Columbus's voyage, King Ferdinand had already turned his jealous eyes upon the flourishing Jews of Spain, and the Spanish and Portuguese Jews anxiously hoped that that great navigator, perhaps of their own race, as some historians have decided, would find them a

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new country to which they could flee from the commencing agony of the Spanish Inquisition.

And that was exactly what came to be, although not as refugees from the Spanish persecutors; that was too early, the Jews of Spain leaving then for Holland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, and thereabouts. My own family on my father's side left Toledo for Smyrna in Turkey, and on my mother's side they went from Barcelona to Tetuan in Spanish Morocco and to Marrakesh; and they still bear names such as Barchelon and Maratchi.

It was the Jews of Russia and Poland who swarmed to the New World to escape the more recent *pogroms* of those lands, and yet later on, the German, Polish, Hungarian, and other Jews from Hitler's Nazi-occupied countries found refuge in America from the worst *pogroms* of their history: refuge from unspeakable mass death in gas chambers or in execution pits. That is why the European Jews predominate in America and the Sephardic – Spanish and Portuguese – Jews are still only a small percentage in comparison.

No one who has ever embarked at New York port can fail to agree that it is among the most beautiful, largest, and best of all the great ports of the world. It is claimed that New York harbor could easily contain any six of the world's largest ports.

Other than the birch-bark canoes of the original Indian inhabitants, the small ship, Half Moon, sailed by the European Henry Hudson, was the first to travel, in 1609, the majestic river that leads to Manhattan Island. The river bears the explorer's name, the Hudson, and so does one of New York's hotels, the Henry Hudson, where I was to attend the annual dog show of the American Afghan Hound Association.

The part-English explorer, Hudson, was in the employ of the Dutch East India Company. It was the Dutch who first settled Manhattan and the surrounding areas and

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called their settlement New Amsterdam. Here is a legend, and it is true! that Peter Minuit, a governor of the Dutch trading company, purchased Manhattan Island from “the wild men” for \$24 worth of baubles and a small amount of fancy cloth. In land value alone, it is worth untold millions of dollars only a few hundred years later, and the population has grown from a handful of Indians to millions of



Three dancing girls of La Faraona, Sacromonte, Granada

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people who have come from all over the world to settle and trade there.

I was coming to “trade” in books. A number of American publishers had written to my English publishers, Faber and Faber, concerning their interest in a book that I had written about Galilee of the Holy Land, legends and true travel tales (*Summer in Galilee*, now published by Ash Tree Publishing). With the help of a New York literary agent, Paul Reynolds, American publication of that book, and several of my earlier ones, was envisaged. So now I, too, had come to the Golden Door, rather old and tired and much traveled.

Before I left Granada, in Spain, my Gypsy friend, the great dancer La Faraona (one of the Gypsy priestesses of the famed mountain caves dancing-places of Sacro Monte), had taken my hand unasked and had begun reading it! I had never seen her hand reading before, and she seemed in a trance, as she pressed her powerful dancer’s leg against mine. She prophesied great success in America.

I was not to find it! Moderate success in my work, but the making of many American friends and friendships that I know will endure my life through. Success may come later! Faraona had seemed so sure. And indeed, she is always questioning any friends of mine who had come from America to Spain, asking them: Had I made my fortune? Faraona is dead now. Her remarkable face is deeply etched on my mind. I miss her. We will meet again likely in the spirit world of the dead. Some friendships are everlasting.

Safely in through the Golden Door, past the Customs officials, who I feared might seize my harmless herbs if they found them, perhaps believing them to be some form of the forbidden marijuana – and they had not at all liked the look of luggage in the form of big, travel-battered baskets – I was able to gaze about me, with quieter eyes, at the New York scene. Taking one’s eyes away from the pleasing, natural waters of the great river on which our ship still rode, I was

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pleased to see natural-looking rocks on one side of the harbor, and here and there clumps of trees or a solitary tree, leafless now in the month of December. All else around looked artificial, so much a show of man's cleverness that, although as I came to know Manhattan well, and the rest of New York a little, and to find much beauty after all, I was, at that moment, regretting the lack of the American Indians in their peaceful setting among the wild roses and the bramble thickets! In England, those plants remain in leaf, green turning to gold, well into January. Now, leafless and stony gray, the inimical-seeming world stretched around me filled with a noise of moving vehicles that was incredible in its volume and diversity, and not pleasing at all.

I know that it is claimed that New York city has more trees than buildings or people, and city officials are trying to keep it that way. But the great old elms of Washington Square and other places in the city, are stricken with disease and falling. Can trees really live and flourish in poisoned, polluted air, drinking dirty water streaked with petrol from the teeming motor vehicles?

The pear tree of New York's good and romantic first Governor, Peter Stuyvesant, survived through nearly three centuries, but had to be cut down recently. Legend tells us that Stuyvesant used one of his pear-tree boughs for a new peg leg, when he had worn down the first one through his habit of stamping with it upon the ground to emphasize his orders. I regretted that I was not to see what must have been New York's most famous tree. And a pear tree, even an ordinary, non-famous one, is always a lovely thing in its blossom-time. That must have looked good, the white fleeces of pear blossom, wind-tossed against the surrounding monotonous gray of the city buildings. And apple blossom also, rose-tinted on the white. Those sweet trees' blossoms are truly a refreshment to the nostrils and the soul.

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New York State has fame for its apple orchards, some of which are truly vast. But those apple orchards have not given New York its strange and endearing name: “The Big Apple.”

An American schoolgirl, Emma Palmer, had the intelligence to make use of the New York free information service, which will answer queries concerning New York, so we could learn about the Big Apple. It is associated with jazz players, who call a job “an apple.” A gig or job in New York is a big apple. Later, New York itself came to be called “The Big Apple.” There are porcelain cups for sale in New York shops with a big red apple on them and the two words “New York.” Yet, surprisingly, few people know how the apple and New York came to be associated. Merely ask your New York friends to confirm this!

Whenever I hear about unusual events in world weather patterns, losses of forest, and other strange phenomena afflicting the world, such as the reports that famed ancient monuments – like the pyramids of Egypt and the Acropolis of Greece – are crumbling, I am always possessed by worrying thoughts as to the far-reaching and as yet incalculable effects of atomic bomb test explosions. More than the scientists, the simple peasants of the world greatly fear them. I was surprised when first I learned that the peasants interest themselves in the atomic explosions, but they certainly do. And the Gypsies of the world, who are still greatly gifted with the powers of prophecy, warn frequently against the experiments, which they say bring with them a “charnel smell” to the earth and its waters.

I have been told about Jacob Joshua Levison, Chief Forester for the City of New York, who as a boy had come from Latvia to the slums of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Wanting the trees that he must have known in his early childhood in Latvia, he became one of the greatest crusaders for conservation of America’s trees and forests. He was associated with places where trees survive – the Cloisters,

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and the gardens of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and of Tudor City – which saved New York from becoming an ugly city. It was this tree- and plant-loving man who created one of the largest and most original of the roof gardens of Manhattan, covering almost two acres, and remarkably being only six feet above the level of the street and built over a garage roof, of a 300-car capacity. This man said that it was “the sordidness of a treeless existence that caused me to choose forestry over other vocations. Then, as now, the aesthetic aspects of trees appealed to me as much as the practical ones.”

As soon as my children got out into the New York streets they noticed the iron or wooden railings around the trees, and “No Climbing” notices by many of the surviving rocks in the public parks.

“What are we to climb?” they asked me in dismay. “No trees! No rocks!”

“You’ll find plenty of climbing in New York buildings!” I assured them. “No need to use the elevators, we have legs to carry us up and down places, as you know!”

The sun came out above the towering rooftops of Manhattan. Then the harbor sky was no longer ashen; daffodil streaks appeared there, and golden sun-rays like the tall yellow candles I have seen the Baltic Gypsies carrying to the shrine of the world’s only Gypsy saint, the Black Virgin, Sainte Sara, who has domain over her underground chapel, beneath the ancient church of Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, in the French Camargue, Provence.

The sun over New York! When later I came to know artists in New York, they told me that, in wintertime, nowhere in Europe, not even in southern Spain famous for its light, is there to be found more sun and light than along the open places of New York, by its waterfront and its parks.

But all the time I was in New York the sun was associated with one of my greatest frustrations: for there is

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nowhere to sunbathe! Every grimy rooftop, every patch of parkland, seemed overlooked. I am, with all my being, a sun and fire worshiper. And I do not mean the artificial fire or light from electric sunlamps or fire stoves or gas fires! I mean the powerful, naked sun, and the flames from true Gypsy fires of piled wood or turf, or next best, from rich chunks of coal. When one sunbathes and firebathes, one never feels cold. In the bitterest of New York subzero [Fahrenheit] weather, I was always warm; I never once wore a topcoat. Because immediately before coming to America, I had been fed for three years by the sun of Spanish Andalusia and later of Mexico, living always in primitive places where it was possible to sunbathe completely.

Whenever the sun was shining I envied the New York pigeons. Sun-seekers, like all the family of the doves, they flitted from sunlit ledge to sunlit ledge of the New York buildings, and the golden light gilded their plumage, which has the colors and the shimmer of iris flowers. In Washington Square I found the pigeons more at home, as if in their original woodland setting, for there in the Square they had found tree hollows for nesting places, and on sunny mornings, even in the winter months, they made their soothing pigeon sounds, which were a strange but pleasing addition to the surrounding noise of Manhattan.

The modern steam heating of New York, Chicago, and other towns in North America that experience cold winters is considered an essential of civilized life. Yet most foreign visitors to New York complain about the stifling heat of New York apartments, stores, and restaurants. I was never able to accept, enjoy, or understand that unbearable, airless heating; it seemed to me to be the best formula for catching a true New York feverish cold, from which most of my friends were suffering at one time or another whenever I was in that city. To go out from such unnatural heat to the cold of often ten degrees below zero in the streets!

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Those over-hot New York buildings made me often feel that I was being slowly steamed alive, like a crab in this horrible recipe, which a beer firm was advertising under the headline: "From Chesapeake Bay, land of pleasant living." Here it is:

Use a steampot that has an elevated platform. For every dozen crabs used, put into the steamer one cup of beer, one cup of vinegar, and enough water to cover.

Place live, soft crabs that have just shed their shells on platform in layers, sprinkle seasoning (salt, pepper, mustard, paprika, cayenne) between the layers of crabs. Steam (do not boil) for about twenty minutes, until crabs are a fiery red and ready to eat.

Shameful. However, despite the present-day world being meaner and crueler to animals than ever before, many crabs and lobsters are now first stabbed through the back before being steamed.

As if the slow steaming alive were not agony enough, the additional sprinkling of burning spices pricks the eyes and other parts of the live creatures piled upon one another. And crabs are wise and clever. I came to know very well the land crabs of tropical Mexico and also the sweetwater crabs of the Sea of Galilee. No wonder that I bring up my two children to be vegetarians and hope they will stay that way. I read out the crab recipe to them as a reminder.

The Gypsies are some of the New York winter visitors who complain most about steam heating and are nostalgic for their big outdoor fires. Like migratory birds, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Gypsies enter New York for the winter season, congregating especially in and around Manhattan and Brooklyn. They come for the profitable fortune-telling earnings of their women, and the odd metal-repairing piecework and cloth-trade dealing of their men. Many of the Gypsy lads work profitably as bootblacks.

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They come also in troupes as dancers and singers, and the Hungarians among them provide violin music in restaurants and cafes. Many of them have been living outdoors in desert parts of California or in North America's numerous forests, for even the American Gypsy, the most "civilized" of their race, remains nomad at heart: now they come to stifle in the city. The American Gypsy mostly truck-travels today, although many of the fortune-telling families use expensive Cadillac cars and well-equipped trailers when on the roads. Indeed, Cadillacs are the most typical of the many cars that the American Gypsies drive.

Countless New York Gypsies have commiserated with me concerning the unpleasantness of life in steam-heated apartments. They stifle in the overheating, but when windows are opened the street dirt blows in upon them. If they turn off all the heating they freeze with the damp cold of shut-in house-places where the sunlight never enters. Gypsies in New York nearly always rent ground-floor rooms, because not only do they like to see the road, their beloved *drom*, around them, but it is also better for business. However, today many Gypsies have to be satisfied with first-floor apartments. There they are still close enough to their *drom* for life to be bearable. One seldom finds Gypsies living higher up than the first floor.

And the Gypsies of New York, where are they? One of the first thoughts that occupy my mind when entering any new city is "Will there be Gypsies? And, where will I find them?" One is told, ask the police! They always keep track of the Gypsies! But do they keep track? I think they are unable to do so still; for it is rightly said of the New York Gypsies that no one knows how many there are in the city because they are nomads. They move from borough to borough and neighborhood to neighborhood, when they are not traveling farther afield from city to city or from state to state. Then, more persistently than any other race, the

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Gypsies keep two or more names; constant enmity with soldiers and police has driven them to this. So the Gypsies have two names, a Romany family one and a “civilized” one in keeping with the land in which they settle or travel most. This second name they use for school (if their children ever attend one), business, and the police. The Gypsies themselves have told me that their population in New York is a shifting one of around 3,000 in the wintertime, but far less in the spring and summer. They reckoned that [in the 1960s] in Los Angeles they were about 7,000 strong.

I get to know the Gypsies of every town that I visit, because I am sure of finding among them loyal friendship and interesting companionship and true amusement, song, music, dance, magic, all of these and more; love, sometimes.

In any Spanish or Turkish or Balkan town one is almost sure to find a Gypsy quarter, also in many French towns; but New York has no Gypsy quarter nowadays, although I believe there was one once. I had no intention of asking the police to help me to find my friends! The only American guidebook that I ever saw which mentioned the Gypsies said there was a Gypsy quarter in New York in the neighborhood of the Essex Street market.

The book went on to say that around Broome Street, close by the market, there are many dark-complexioned people living in ground-floor places such as long-abandoned warehouses, or tenting out in backyards. These families are especially numerous along Attorney Street, where almost every ground-floor room is occupied by them. As their doors are nearly always open, it was easy to look inside and see the strangely “foreign” dwelling places of hanging curtains dividing the rooms into smaller portions, where family lived along with other families. Mattress beds or rag-littered floors, very little furniture, and charcoal brazier fires in wintertime; and above all, flocks of dark-faced children with flashing smiles and teeth of pearls, the

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only begging children in that poor-class neighborhood, who dart out from almost every home, pleading, “Gimme a nickel, kind lady, kind genilman, gimme a dime” – these are the proofs. “These are the Gypsies,” the guidebook said.

And the book description is true enough of the *kair* (house) Gypsies of New York. For no matter how prosperous the fortune-telling Gypsies are, they nearly always choose to sleep behind their place or in their place, after the clients have gone away. They prefer bedrolls on the floor, thin, mattress-type things, which they will roll up and store away during the daytime. And the same house-living plan



Tent-dwelling Gypsies; Valencia, Spain

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applies also to the other American Gypsies, whether they are the fortune-tellers or not. Some even erect tents inside the stores, and burn wood chips inside old tins, and that way fire worship as usual, although to a very limited extent!

I went to the Essex Street neighborhood in search of the Gypsies soon after my arrival in New York, but although I found there people from almost all lands, including many of the old-fashioned Yiddish-speaking types of black-clad European Jews, and many Puerto Ricans in gaudy clothes, there were no Gypsies to be seen. I patiently searched every street in the neighborhood and made inquiries in many shops. That way, from the shopkeepers, I did find that Gypsies had lived there once, but only as recently as a year ago their places had all been condemned and the tenements had been pulled down. Now big new apartment houses stood ready completed where the Gypsy tents had once been in the open yards, and more big modern buildings were being erected. Indeed, that typical noise of New York – building construction – could be heard on all sides: that hammering of steel girders, the whirring of the concrete mixers, and the knock of bricks falling or being laid into place. One Jewish grocer said he did remember the Gypsy families of Attorney Street, “Nice people, very handsome. They seemed to live mostly on bread and bars of chocolate. Did not use electric lights, liked to burn candles.”

I thought of the Gypsies that New York friends had described to me. Jean Goldfarb remembered when Gypsy families used to encamp at Jamaica, by Long Island. In her childhood there, a copse of trees was still standing, and the Gypsies would come and stay there, bringing with them their van-houses of beautifully carved wood, pulled along by fine and mettlesome horses, greyhounds running at their sides. They would light fires and sit around them. The local children used to hurry from school to the Gypsy encampment and would be allowed to look inside the wagons and

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see the babies in wooden-box cradles. The schoolchildren were asked by the Gypsies to bring them a little boxwood kindling for their fires, and roots – potatoes, carrots, turnips – or stale bread leftovers, in return for the privilege of being allowed to see inside the Gypsy wagons, to sit on the horses' backs, to play with the greyhound puppies, and so forth.

Jean remembered very well that the Gypsy people, not their animals, had a peculiar smell about them, "like goats." The New York schoolchildren found that very exciting; people who really smelled like goats and who also spoke a language to each other that was quite unlike any of the many foreign jargons commonly heard in the New York streets. Then further, they were a people who would suddenly strike up a wild singing or dancing for seemingly no other reason than that they wished to sing and dance, while they were leading in their horses or chopping wood for their fires. And sometimes they would pick up one of their brown babies and toss the child from one person to another across the leaping fire flames, to the astonishment of the New York children watching, and the unmistakable pleasure of the tossed little Gypsy.

Carol Cohen remembered a pre-funeral ceremony for a Gypsy queen, in New York, on Henry Street. Like Jean Goldfarb, Carol was a child then. It was a ground-floor room, made brilliant and dramatic with candles burning in the daytime and heaped flowers of all colors. Teeming Gypsy mourners, mostly black-clad, filled the room. A frightened, yet enchanted, party of little New York school-girls determinedly pushed their way into the room until they had a sufficient viewing place of the dead Gypsy queen. The children never let go their hold of each other's hands, as they had agreed before entering. Their great fear had been the Gypsy reputation of being child-stealers, and they had decided that the Gypsies could not take them all joined together in a heavy, fleshy chain of eight little girls!

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The queen had been laid out on a cloth-draped table, her head upon an embroidered pillow, a big candle at her feet, another at her head. Smaller candles on all sides. But most impressive had been the jewelry piled upon her and flashing in the candlelight. Jewels hanging from the woman's withered ears, around her scraggy neck and burdening her thin arms. Jewels that scintillated like stars and glowed like fires. The dazzled Carol Cohen had asked of one of the Gypsies standing at the side of the old queen:

"Will she take all that with her into her grave?"

No reply had been spoken by the Gypsy mourner, only such a malignant look of scorn and hate directed upon the inquiring non-Gypsy that the little girls, still holding hands, decided in quick consultation that they had seen enough, and it was time to go!

Although I searched carefully, I did not find any Gypsies in New York during my entire first month there. The only Gypsies that I saw were embroidered on a medieval tapestry in French's famous antique shop on Madison Avenue. I was offering a Chinese butterfly silk shawl of mine for sale there, and I was invited to look over the many floors of that wonderful, treasure-packed place. There I came upon the Gypsies on the tapestry. I was told that it was called "The Birthday of the Empress." It showed the rich being entertained by a family of traveling Gypsies who were reading the hands of the Empress and her party.

I myself learned fortune-telling from an old Algerian Gypsy, a Madame Caulas of the family Heredia, whom I met in the Rue de la Corderie in the Gypsy quarter of Marseilles. A strange place of shacks, where the riffraff of the town lived along with the Gypsies, who were mostly of the fortune-telling, basket-making, dancer, and street-singer class. Madame Caulas was considered to be an expert in three forms of fortune telling: hand reading, sand

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reading, and reading the mysterious Tarot cards of the Bohemians.

I did not find it difficult to learn hand reading the Gypsy way, as taught by Madame Caulas. Perhaps the old woman had foretold rightly that I had the Gypsy gift of *dukkeripen*, (reading, magic reading). Soon the Gypsies of many lands, including America and Mexico, were asking me to read their hands! The “deep reading,” they call it.

“That,” said American writer friend Michael Kuh, “is a subject for a cartoon! An English university-educated young woman, reared in a strict English school [in my case it was an old Welsh castle converted into a school for the daughters of rich English and Welsh gentry] even though her blood is Turkish, reading the hands of the hard-baked professional fortune-telling Gypsies of New York!”

A friend, Roy Nicholls, told me about a Gypsy fortune-telling cartoon he saw: Marked “Lexington Avenue,” it showed a street window, with a scarf-draped Gypsy woman’s head peering out. Alongside was a big notice, which read: “Psychoanalysis \$1, palm-reading \$2.”

I did not meet with any Gypsies in New York until well into the New Year, when I came to know many families of them, in Manhattan.



Gypsies of Sacromonte; the author, center in dark blouse.