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## Foreword

My teacher, Professor Ian F. Hancock, is an unusual man: unusual in his background, in the breadth of his interests and in the range of his accomplishments. He was the first Gypsy to be awarded a doctorate in the UK; he is perhaps the only person to hold three doctorates without having finished high school. His book *The Pariah Syndrome* (1987) – the first to document the enslavement of Roma in Europe – came as a revelation to those who were accustomed to think of slavery as an institution restricted in modern times only to Europe's colonies. Another of his books, *We Are the Romani People* (2002), also the first of its kind (and now translated into several languages), has become an authoritative source for teachers who wish to present the Romani self-statement to their students. Author of over 400 publications, esteemed teacher to generations of students and tireless spokesman for the Romani peoples of the world, Ian has achieved much fame and even some notoriety in his eventful lifetime.

This collection of select writings is an attempt to introduce this dangerously educated and educating man through the medium of his work. Within its covers you will find poetry and song, stories and scholarship, bitter criticisms and friendly advice. The characters that speak through the pages of this book include scholars and 'concoctors', oppressors and victims, promoters of equality and racial supremacists. Some characters, such as the seductive Gypsy woman of lore, turn out to be entirely imaginary upon closer examination. Others, such as a racist police officer, turn out to be all too real.

The book is inaugurated by *Djabravoki*, in which Ian brings his translator's craftsmanship to bear on the famous poem by Lewis Carroll.

This is followed by an introduction to his family, which he narrates in the first person. Raconteur then turns rebel (although his 'vorpal sword' is his pen) in one of his earliest essays from the 1960s, giving us a taste of his still-forming rhetoric, a rhetoric clearly influenced by the emerging Black Power movement to which he was exposed as a student in London.

In the next section, Ian dons the cloak of linguist and historian and clarifies the Indian connections of the Roma, explaining how an Asiatic people came to be transplanted into Europe. His vast knowledge of the Romani language gives him a vantage point from which to make useful suggestions for its standardisation. Speaking as an academic and educator, Ian shares his unique insights into the problems confronting the Roma in their quest for formal education. Then, embracing the role of social commentator, he rehabilitates the true image of his people, by rescuing Romani reality from the encroachment of the fictional 'Gypsy' stereotype.

In the last section, as advocate and human rights activist, Ian draws attention to the many impediments the Roma have endured over the centuries, especially during the *Porrajmos* (Holocaust) in the twentieth century and takes their case to the courts of justice to which they have long been denied access. Finally, as a watchful elder and shepherd of his people, he ends with a piece of sobering advice for the Roma: to live with dignity, to promote harmony and to discourage fractious tendencies among the various Romani groups.

In some of these writings, an undercurrent of anger and frustration is apparent. Anger at the sense of entitlement academics and others assume in studying, manipulating, defining and thinking for his people; frustration that Roma lack the adequate means to address this, while remaining victims of the stubborn and one-sided representation perpetrated by the all-controlling media. But the anger and frustration are channeled and sublimated and pour themselves finally into a message of accommodation, reconciliation and hope.

Ian's life story is anything but ordinary. Born into a British and Hungarian Romani family in London, he went with them to live in Canada for four of his teenage years and returned to England by himself at the age of nineteen. While in Canada he attended school briefly, but found his effort to 'fit in' an unrewarding experience. One teacher in particular, a Mr Tippett, told Ian that he was wasting his time getting an education and that he would never amount to anything. Mr Tippett would

say this often and before the whole class, and Ian left after less than a year. But the stinging words lingered, and he told me that they motivated him fiercely to prove the man wrong. After his stint at school he found various jobs in Canada – in an automotive supply store, as a darkroom assistant on a daily newspaper, as a pin-setter in a bowling alley and as a Ferris wheel assembler, all the while saving his money to return to Britain. Back in London, he found jobs in the factories along the Great West Road as a plastic garment cutter, a windscreen-wiper packer and a spray painter. Later, he worked for the late Joe Meek as a roadie for a prominent band called the Outlaws. One of his jobs was working for an antiquarian bookseller called Luzac, opposite the British Museum. The shop specialised in secondhand language books, and Ian used his lunch breaks to go through the stock and learn what he could about philology.

The house in which he rented a room was also home to a number of students from Sierra Leone, and he spent many evenings in their company, getting to know them and their unwritten language, Krio. The Sierra Leonean community was large in that part of the city, and very supportive of his attempts to commit Krio to paper. Egged on to publish his efforts, Ian sought the advice of the Sierra Leonean writer Eldred Jones, then a visiting scholar at the University of Leeds. In turn Jones put him in touch with the editor of the *Sierra Leone Language Review*, Dr David Dalby, who was based at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Dalby was impressed and asked to hold onto the notes that Hancock had brought along so that he could show them to the head of the college.

When Ian went back a second time, Dalby asked him to consider enrolling as a student at the University of London, a proposition which seemed so unreal that it angered Ian at the time, given his limited educational history prior to that. This was at a juncture when entry to a British university was still the preserve of the privileged and not considered suitable for school ‘dropouts’. Dalby explained his thinking, however: in the absence of any formal linguistic training Ian had produced an impressive body of research, this despite the fact that he had never actually visited Sierra Leone. Dalby assured Ian that the University considered him capable of great things if given the opportunity.

On account of his Romani background, Ian qualified for a short-lived experimental affirmative action programme created by Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Wilson’s socialist government wanted to make higher

education available for minorities and other 'special case' individuals and Ian, along with just one other person (the late Abdul Karim Turay, who went on to become Sierra Leone's Minister for External Affairs) were selected. Ian's tuition was paid for and he was given a small amount of money to purchase books, although throughout his time at SOAS he continued to hold a variety of jobs to support himself.

Two other people also attended SOAS whose work later had an impact upon Ian's academic development: Lorenzo Dow Turner, who wrote a seminal book on African elements in the Gullah Creole spoken on the south-eastern coast of the US, and Ian's contemporary the late Walter Rodney, who reshaped current understanding of the first fifteenth-century European contacts with Africans on the Guinea Coast. Ian readily attributes his 'domestic hypothesis' of Creole origins to Rodney's work, and in 1976 Ian also discovered and later described an archaic variety of Gullah that is spoken to this day in south Texas and northern Mexico in two widely separated communities. The present volume includes a selection of his Roma-related writings, but he also has over two hundred publications dealing with Creole languages. His very first was about Sierra Leone Krio, and appeared in a 1964 issue of *The Linguist* magazine.

Ian's involvement in the Romani struggle began at about the same time that he became a student. Although he had grown up in an urban Romani household, he was not politicised. But then several incidents occurred in Britain's West Midlands that warranted brief mention in the *Evening Standard* newspaper, and they so upset him that he felt moved to become involved. In the first, a Gypsy man needed to pull his trailer off the road because his wife was going into labour, but was ordered to move on by the police. When the man refused he was driven away and thrown into a prison cell where he was badly beaten by the same officers, his pregnant wife and small children having been left alone on the side of the road. In a similar incident, both of the parents were taken into custody, leaving the children by themselves in the trailer. A paraffin lamp was knocked over and a fire spread that resulted in the death of all three Gypsy children. This was during the 1960s, when the police would contract professional teams using bulldozers, axes and other brutal means to move people on, a phenomenon that Ian describes in his book *The Pariah Syndrome*.

Ian made contact with the Gypsy Education Council, through which

he met three non-Romanians who were to have a profound influence on the direction his life was taking: Thomas Acton, Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon. They encouraged his participation in Romani advocacy and rights issues and he found himself playing a key role in the first World Romani Congress, held near London in 1971, where he first met some of the major figures in the Romani movement.

In the same year Ian left the University of London with a PhD, the first in Britain to be awarded to a Gypsy. It was in African linguistics, with a specialisation in creole languages. As it happened, The University of Texas was looking for an expert in creolistics, and Ian was offered a job there while speaking at a conference in Washington DC in 1972. This was once again the result of his being in the right place at the right time – the original speaker invited to that conference lived in Hawaii and was unable to attend, so gave his ticket to Ian to go in his place. If Ian had not gone to Washington, he would have missed the offer. With his new doctorate, Ian had applied to over seventy universities for jobs, but had got nowhere. And here was an offer from one he had not even applied to. He had to borrow the money to fly to Austin.

As a new assistant professor at The University of Texas, Ian was taken under the wing of a senior faculty member, the late Edgar Polomé, who gave him the same advice, offered in good faith, that Ian had previously received from his supervisor at SOAS – that drawing attention to his Gypsy identity would hinder him academically. He consequently kept quiet about it until he received tenure – and hence job security – in his fourth year, a process which generally takes six years. He immediately began to compile the Romani Archives and to publish widely on Romani topics, both linguistic and sociopolitical. The Archives, which line the walls ceiling-high and are piled up on the floor of Ian's office at The University of Texas, are now known as the Romani Archives and Documentation Center, and is the biggest collection of its kind in the world, though it has never been officially recognised by his university.

Despite these remarkable achievements, Ian has become a controversial figure in some quarters. His linguistic theories have come under attack, and his sometimes outspoken criticism of the non-Romani monopolisation of Romani Studies has alienated him from some of those specialists. But it has been his effort to bring the details of the *Porrajmos*, the Romani Holocaust, to popular and academic attention which has caused him to be viewed with the most suspicion. Can it be

that his determination to uncover the truth of what happened to the estimated million or more of his own people has caused discomfort in some quarters? He provides a wonderful Romani proverb in his book *We Are the Romani People*: 'He who is about to tell the truth should have one foot in the stirrup.' In recent years Ian has found himself dropped from the US Holocaust Memorial Council (to which he had been appointed by President Clinton in 1998), the Anne Frank Institute and the Project on Ethnic Relations Roma Advisory Board. Why was this?

One of Ian's most strident positions is found in *Responses*, which you will find in this volume, an essay which has provoked controversy and generated debate in no small measure. Ian is asking difficult questions here. Are Gypsies once again being accused of trespassing, of stealing the property of others? Have those age-old accusations now spilt over into the academic realm? Or is it the 'overly nationalistic' position that he and other Romani intellectuals espouse which raises hackles? Can it be that those non-Gypsy organisations which seek the assimilation and ultimate disappearance of Roma have no truck with him because he speaks instead of integration and self-determination? Is this the more profound truth that remains at the edges of the modern-day diaspora experience? Many European-based organisations, Ian argues, refuse to acknowledge the complexity of Romani history and the reality that Roma are a global people, and not simply a collection of disparate groups scattered throughout Europe.

If his scholarly views are perceived to be a threat by some intellectuals and scholars, then this is hardly a surprise. The 'Other' who ventures bravely in will always be a threat. The wheel of life turns, but it turns slowly. The most important fact to remember is that the wheel does turn. And the reader of this volume is free to judge Ian Hancock for himself – his views and the people for whom he speaks. This is an important step forward. Once, and it was not so long ago, the Roma were enslaved and their linguistic and cultural inheritances derided or ignored altogether. Today, both Roma and non-Roma are freer to read and debate, and come to better informed conclusions.