

A Guidebook Extraordinary

KONRAD BERCOVICI, the Americanized Roumanian, has written many stories of alien life in New York. Sometimes they were purely reportorial; at other times they gave evidence of elaborate romance. Always they were colorful. Now he has put together in "Around the World in New York" (Century) a series of chapters on metropolitan foreign quarters. To say that this is a book which gives New York something of the charm of Paris would be silly; but it does open new vistas to the person bent on exploring the town. Few people, I think, realize the fascinating corners to be reached, if knowledge and persistence guide, in the byways of Manhattan. Doesn't this paragraph on the Greeks surprise you?

I do not believe there are a hundred manual workers, in factories or shops, among the Greeks in this city, although there are some thirty thousand living here. Still, wherever the Greek may have his business place, whether it is a peanut stand at Bronx Park, a florist shop in Washington Park or on Fifth Avenue, or a restaurant on Broadway, at the close of his business he will go among his own people. And when I say among his own people, I do not mean merely among the people of Greece. For there are streets occupied by Greeks whose home originally was in Alexandria, Egypt, and other streets of Greeks whose home was in Cairo. The Greeks of old Stamboul, descendants of the Fanariots, the fathers of many of whom have under duress accepted the religion of the Moslem, live separately from the others. The Greeks from Corfu crowd in one part, and the Greeks from Athens in another part of the district. Really the Greek quarter is another repetition of factional Greece, which though to us known as an entity is only so geographically; while, racially, it is composed of people as different from one another as any other people might be.

So far the Greeks have contributed nothing to the spiritual life of the country.

They take no interest in the political life of the country, either. New York is to them a transitory station on the way to . . . nowhere.

Or this on the Czechs?

The Webster Branch of the Public Library on Avenue A, which opened in 1906 with fifteen hundred Czech books, has now fifteen thousand in that language. It is the largest Czech library in the country. Additions to it are being made daily. For every Czech donates his books after he is through reading them. It is a pleasure to examine any of the Czech books. Apart from the fact that they are beautifully printed and beautifully bound, one is pleasantly surprised to see with what respect the readers have handled them. I have frequently looked at books that have been read by forty or fifty people during the first year of their appearance. The pages were still neat and clean. There was no evidence of disrespect toward them. No signs left by moistened thumbs. No dog-eared pages. The books of a library are the best indication of the character of a nation.

Or this on Bercovici's own gipsies?

In October I had gone to visit my Gipsy friends who should have come in from the west at about that time. There was no trace of them anywhere. Although they had come to the city in September, they had returned to the road, feeling that there were yet three months of good weather ahead of them. And when a Gipsy can be outdoors he is never to be got indoors. When I returned again, three months later, Fourth Street between Avenue A and the East River, Third Street, Second Street, First Street, the heart of the Balkan quarters in New York, were full of them. Not an empty store which had formerly housed a butcher or a grocer but had been taken by them. The windows were curtained off to the top with Turkish patterned gauzes and calicoes; and a beautiful dusky maiden, with her black tresses hanging loosely over her shoulders, and her golden necklaces and bracelets dangling from her neck and arms, was standing outside awaiting her lover from the other street. An old woman, loaded down by the numerous dresses she wore, one on top of the other, and a wolfskin fur coat on top of all, was walking about, followed by a

number of impudent gamins, on her way to gossip with friends who had just come from some other part of the country, to learn the tidings of the road.

Surely here is a book without which no out of town person can in the future care to come to New York, and from which native New Yorkers will glean much startling information.

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