Catalan Gypsies, Unique and Embattled, Resist as Homes Are Reduced to Rubble

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PERPIGNAN, France — First it was the 20 old houses demolished several years ago. Then 13 more 19th-century houses came down in June, wrought-iron balconies and all, leaving only bare asphalt baking in the summer heat in Perpignan, a city near France's border with Spain and close to the Mediterranean coast.

Finally, the residents of the city's old Saint Jacques district had endured enough. Well over 50 dwellings in their neighborhood had been reduced to rubble since 2015.

Late last month, they gathered in the district's ancient square high on a hill, as a city excavator was making another mess of bricks and jagged wall fragments nearby.

Dozens marched from there down to the prefecture, the central government's representative, demanding to be heard. City Hall backed down. The excavator was withdrawn, the demolitions left at a standstill.

What made the events exceptional was not just that this was a stand by one of the poorest neighborhoods in France. It was also a protest by a unique population, one the French media and academics universally refer to as "les gitans," or Gypsies.

The Gypsies of Perpignan, who speak Catalan, appear to be distinct culturally from the broader population of Roma, sometimes also referred to as Gypsies, but they are in many ways no less maligned and marginalized in France.

With some 3,000 to 5,000 inhabitants, Saint Jacques is urban France's largest Gypsy neighborhood, a festering sore of poverty and unemployment, a place normally drawing few allies.

Yet in its fight against the destruction of its neighborhood, the community found help from local preservationists and allied itself with North African neighbors — a group it has clashed with in the past. The community also mobilized its youth, 90 percent of whom are jobless and many of whom hang out in the streets after the sun has set.

"If you kick an angry dog, he'll bite you and he won't let go," said Alain Giménez, a community leader, as others who had gathered in the raffish Place du Puig, or "Hill Square" in the local Catalan, nodded their assent.

"So, what are we here, nothing? They say we're dirty," said Mr. Giménez, who calls himself "Nounourse," or teddy bear, mocking his own portliness. "The problem is, they don't talk to us, they just say we are dirty."

The truce achieved with the city over the demolitions is only temporary, said Jean-Bernard Mathon, head of the local preservation society. At least 37 more buildings in Saint Jacques were slated to come down, he said.

"What we want is the rehabilitation of the old core," Mr. Mathon said. "What they want to do is demolish. But they have rebuilt nothing. It's hideous."

Saint Jacques, dilapidated, crumbling and now threatened, even drew the backing of President Emmanuel Macron's special emissary on historical preservation, the French television personality, Stéphane Bern.

Mr. Bern wrote on social media that he was "scandalized and shocked by the images of destruction in the center of Perpignan," and promised his "support and solidarity."

The preservationists point to the delicate balcony railings, the incised roof moldings, the occasional centuries-old doorway and the intricate Medieval street grid, and urge renovation rather than demolition.

Yet in a country with more historical districts than it knows what to do with or has the money to pay for, Saint Jacques is something of an ugly duckling.

The district, a frontier within a frontier — Spain is only 20 miles away — is vulnerable, and the Catalan Gypsies, historically victims of discrimination, feel threatened, too.

The Gypsies of Perpignan have been speaking Catalan since the 16th century, but have been present as semi-nomads in this area since the 14th or 15th century, said Mr. Mathon, the preservationist.

They acquired fixed domiciles only from the late 1930s, when Jews were chased from this district during World War II.

Mr. Mathon said the Gypsies of Perpignan don't appear to be related ethnically to the Roma populations of Eastern Europe. Others agree.

The moment you climb up to Saint Jacques from Perpignan's prosperous city center, you enter another land. St. Jacques was built in the Middle Ages with a narrow grid of houses huddled protectively against one another.

Today big chunks of plaster and paint are missing from the facades. Shutters are closed. Tall, narrow dwellings crowd together on steep streets plunging down toward the horizon, with the Pyrenees looming in the distance.

The Mediterranean sun cannot penetrate the deep shade. Laundry hangs from windows, and steel girders bridge the alleylike streets, propping up the buildings. Perpignan's street cleaners don't appear to make it up to Saint Jacques.

Late at night, while the city below sleeps beneath its orange tile roofs, the streets of Saint Jacques are alive with children, grandmothers dressed in black sitting on plastic chairs, and men stripped to the waist in the summer heat.

The locals warn you not to bother them before 6 p.m. because most will be sleeping.

The demolitions have pockmarked the district with "useless" squares — Mr. Mathon's word — but its social fabric is intact.

"Look, there was a school there," said Josiana Caragol, pointing to a now-vacant square. "They're cutting down all the houses. Is that right? If there is more demolition, they are going to kick us all out."

The city's argument for the demolitions is simple, and revolves around numbers. Sixty percent of the district's population lives below the poverty line. Forty percent of the dwellings are vacant. Overall unemployment is 70 percent. Many children skip school. It is cheaper to rebuild than to renovate.

"You can't just let people live in insalubrious conditions, just because it's picturesque," said Olivier Amiel, the official in charge of the St. Jacques reconstruction, for which he said 100 million euros, or about $113 million, had been set aside. "Given the urgency of the conditions there, we can't wait for these aesthetic debates to take place," he said.

"This program is a last chance for the community," said Mr. Amiel, who added that over 50 meetings had taken place with community representatives. "You can have preservation without freezing things," he said, pointing to the dangerous collapse of several buildings.

Mr. Amiel said 588 dwellings are to be demolished, "restructured" or rehabilitated, and 312 new dwellings built. But Mr. Mathon says there has been no new construction where the houses have been demolished.

"They think we want to chase them from the district, but that has never been our intention," said Pierre Parrat, the deputy mayor, in his office at City Hall, an elegant 14th-century building below Saint Jacques.

The fear is real, though. The Gypsies of Perpignan feel the expanding university below pressing up against them.

Officials want to take the neighborhood down, said Valerie Cargol, outside her immaculately kept house on a steep street in Saint Jacques. "But they must not."

Officials question the Roma's hygiene, but Ms. Cargol's kitchen was sparkling.

"It's been here for 150 years. So why break it all up?" she asked. "Break it, for what reason?"

Paul Orell, 34 and unemployed, said he was eager to participate in the rebuilding of the neighborhood. "These house were lived in by our grandparents," he said. "We've been abandoned."

With new ruins of the Place du Puig behind him — "Beirut," as some call it — Nick Giménez, one of the community's elders, said: "We were born here. If they kick us out, we are dead."