Der nationalsozialistische Genozid an den Roma Osteuropas

Geschichte und künstlerische Verarbeitung

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Inhalt

„Wieviel Elend und Hunger! Wieviel Trauer und Wege!"

„Was wir von den Deutschen in Wolhynien im Jahre 43 und 44 ertragen mussten", verdichtete bald nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg die polnische Roma-Autorin Bronisława Wajs, bekannter unter dem Namen Papusza, zu dem Ausruf: „Wieviel Elend und Hunger! Wieviel Trauer und Wege!"[1] Damit hat sie das Leiden, das der nationalsozialistische Terror den osteuropäischen Roma zufügte, auf einen prägnanten, immer wieder zitierten Nenner gebracht. „Trauer und Wege": in dieser Formel lässt Papusza, selbst Angehörige einer nomadisierenden Familie, auch eine Verbindung zwischen der noch frischen Tragödie der osteuropäischen Roma während der Hitlerzeit und der vorangehenden, jahrhundertealten Verfolgungsgeschichte dieser Minderheit anklingen. Der Hinweis auf solche Kontinuität des Leidens braucht sich aber nicht nur auf die Vergangenheit zu richten, im Gegenteil: Er zielt nicht selten – gerade in Osteuropa – ganz dezidiert auf die Gegenwart. Auch dafür lässt sich ein schlagendes Beispiel in Versen anführen. In seinem Lyrikband über den „Roma-Holocaust" bringt Paul Polansky die Perspektive eines tschechischen Rom auf die Lage seines Volkes nach der „Samtenen Revolution" auf den Punkt: „Es ist absolut dasselbe / heute in der Tschechischen Republik / wie 1939 unter Hitler".[2] Man mag eine solche Äußerung als subjektiv, überspitzt, historisch uninformiert, ja als ungerecht beiseite wischen – eines wird man nicht ausräumen können: das tief sitzende und biographisch in vielen Fällen wohl begründete Gefühl vieler osteuropäischer Roma, ihre oft tödliche Ausgrenzung habe mit Hitler weder begonnen noch geendet.

Im Nationalsozialismus unterlagen die Sinti und Roma einer doppelten Verfolgung: als ‚Zigeuner' und als ‚Asoziale'. Durch die Propaganda der Kriegsjahre trat die rassistische Motivation in den Hintergrund, weshalb den Sinti und Roma auch nach Kriegsende mehrere Jahrzehnte die Anerkennung als rassisch Verfolgte und damit eine Kompensation ihrer Leiden versagt

1 Beide Zitate entstammen der Ballade „Blutige Tränen (Was wir von den Deutschen in Wolhynien im Jahre 43 und 44 ertragen mussten)" der Papusza, die der polnische Romist Jerzy Ficowski 1953 in seinem Buch *Cyganie Polscy* veröffentlichte.

2 Paul Polansky: Living through it twice: Poems of the Romany Holocaust (1940-1997). Prag 1997, S. 54. Siehe hierzu den Beitrag von Urs Heftrich.

SLAWOMIR KAPRALSKI

The Voices of a Mute Memory. The Holocaust and the Identity of the Eastern European Romanies

In this essay, I intend to address three main issues. First, I will answer the question why there has been a long-lasting silence regarding the Romani Holocaust, both in academic and public discourses. Second, the reasons why the silence has been broken at a particular moment in time will be examined. Third, I will discuss which role Holocaust discourse plays in the contemporary identity-building strategies of Eastern European Romanies.

A People Without a History?

It is indeed striking that for a long time academic and public debates regarding Romanies have not referred to Holocaust discourse, even though appropriate evidence has been available. When the Romanies are discussed, it is rather in the context of ethnic and social policy issues, not in terms of the most important event of European history that the Romanies were a part of. As a result, Gabrielle Tyrnauer observes that in the literature on the Holocaust, the "story of the Gypsy extermination has become an almost forgotten footnote to the history of Nazi genocide."[1] One can actually speak here of a very unfortunate circle: the way Romanies have been discussed does not contribute to Holocaust literature, and the marginal role of the Romanies in that literature does not influence those discourses in which the Romanies were present.

The silence about the fate of the Romanies during World War II, however, looks paradoxical only against the background of the contemporary proliferation of narratives of the Holocaust. In fact, it was a long time before the 'tragedy of the war' was conceptualized in a generally accepted way as having its core of atrocity, the unprecedented event that radically and forever reshaped the perception of history – the Holocaust. In this way, the development of Holocaust discourse reversed the path that is generally attributed

[1] Tyrnauer 1990, p. 366.

to memory. Memory usually offers the strongest and the most detailed account of the past immediately after the remembered events have taken place. The Holocaust, on the contrary, was hardly debated in the twenty years following World War II, only to eventually achieve a central position in the public discourse since the 1970s.[2]

Thus one can say that the fate of the Roma was not debated in the discourse of the Holocaust because this very discourse had to be developed to give voice to the specificity of the wartime genocide, which – in the period immediately following the war – was dissolved into generalizing concepts of 'crime against humanity,' or 'Man's inhumanity to Man.'[3] Once the discourse was established, however, it became the frame of the narratives that described the Jewish suffering and focused on its uniqueness, unprecedented character and incommensurability with the suffering of other victims of the war. This led to the view that the extermination of the Jews "finds [...] no parallel with the persecutions of the other groups by the Nazis, [it] does not matter whether it happened to Russians, Serbs, Czechs, Sinti, Roma, homosexuals or political opponents."[4]

Even if Holocaust scholars were initially largely reluctant to grant Romanies the status of being Holocaust victims, it must be noted that the scholars who studied the Romanies did not push too hard. It can be said that the traditional academic approach located Romanies on a different, so to speak, shelf, than the accounts of the atrocities of contemporary history. This approach, based predominantly on linguistics and ethnographic constructs of ethnicity, made it possible to see the 'Gypsies' as the designation of a single people living scattered in groups throughout the world and having a distinct, objectively given, and fixed ethnic identity.

According to such an understanding of Romani ethnicity, a 'Gypsy' is one who was born 'Gypsy' (with minor exceptions for co-optation and intermarriage), one who speaks the Romani language or at least appreciates its importance, one who acts according to the principle of group solidarity, one who follows the principle of ritual purity and related concept of the universe as being divided into the spheres of purity and pollution, one who accepts obligations resulting from the social structure and shows respect to internal authorities, and one whose way of life makes it possible to avoid being controlled by the non-Romani environment (for example a peripatetic lifestyle

2 Novick 2001, pp. 1-2.
3 Rosenbaum 2001, p. 3.
4 Wistrich 1992, p. 21.

or specific patterns of economic activity: self-employment and engagement in 'traditionally Romani' professions).[5]

Those features create a stable pattern of 'being a Rom,' or *Romanipen* in the Romani language, which may also be rendered as 'Romness.' According to the 'ethnicity' approach, Romani identity was created in the framework of culture, not of history: it rested in the manifestations of an a-temporal value-pattern of *Romanipen*, i.e. 'being a Rom' in the surrounding world of 'others,' in maintaining 'horizontal' kinship relations, ways of life, and patterns of interaction with non-Romanies. While national communities of Europe defined themselves with reference to their respective histories, the "need of history was alien to the Romanies and emerged only recently due to the Romani elites [...] which attempt to create in a divided and sub-ethnically differentiated population a sense of national community."[6]

History is thus claimed to be irrelevant for Romani self-identity. The latter does not unfold in time, which would involve change. It is rather a permanent reproduction of cultural tradition that becomes extracted from the flow of time and 'elevated' to the status of an extra-historical, eternal 'truth' of the Roma. In this extraction, tradition has been denied historicity: it ceases to be the past reality of the group, compared or juxtaposed to one of the present. Instead, it is perceived as the core 'essence' of the group's identity, which exists apart from time. As Gaspar Miklos Tamas observed, the "[s]o-called traditional societies do not defer to Tradition as such. What we regard as Tradition, traditional people regard as Truth. The collection of true ideas and stories bequeathed by the ancients, the canon, is respected, but not only because of its antiquity; it is believed because of its veracity."[7] Incidentally, it is worth noting here that Romanies usually do not call a person who lives strictly according to *Romanipen* a traditional Rom. They use the expression *caco Rom*: a true Rom.

However, such an obliteration of Romani history by relegating it to the domain of an a-temporal reproduction of cultural idiom may well be a misconception. The perception of history among Romanies has been based – until very recently – on the oral transmission of knowledge. The scholars of oral cultures indicate that knowledge changes in the course of oral transmission but in a way that is 'invisible.'

> Without written records to freeze a version at any stage of transmission, there is no basis for comparison. The version as told by the storyteller seems the same as the ver-

5 This list of the key elements of Romani ethnicity has been adapted with minor changes from Salo 1979.
6 Mirga/Mróz 1994, pp. 31-32.
7 Tamas 1993, p. 17.

> sion learned by the storyteller many years ago. [...] There is no perception of the process of change, for this process obliterates itself in passing.[8]

The same may be said about the accounts of identity. The identity of Romanies may change in the course of time and in this way be exposed to history, but its accounts will emphasize the permanence of *Romanipen* and its insulation from the flow of change.

Another manifestation of the view that history does not matter for Romanies can be found in the conviction that Romani identity refers neither to the past, nor to the future, and exists in the present only. According to this view, Romani "identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relation with significant others, not something inherited from the past." Therefore, what makes the identity of Romanies is neither the "myth of shared ancestry," nor the "dream of future reunion," but "a place of their own [...] in which they could feel at home [...] a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness."[9]

This may well be true for many Romani communities, as for example the one of Harangos where Michael Stewart conducted his research, but it may not be a valid description of other groups, like the Gitanos of Jarana, studied by Paloma Gay y Blasco, for whom "contrary to common assumptions in academia and elsewhere, the past is central to [the] processes of making identity and community."[10] This may not be a valid description of the activities of Romani intellectuals and politicians consciously designing a transgroup Romani identity as a project that reaches into the future. There is no reason why we should disregard the views of Romani elites as nonrepresentative. The voice of elites usually differs from commonsense knowledge that is widespread in society. However, when we want to know something about British society, for example, we listen to the elites in addition to conducting surveys. For some reason, when it comes to Romanies we are inclined to think that fieldwork is sufficient.

The ethnographic accounts of Romani identity, which obliterate its historical character, emerge from the conviction that Romanies belong essentially to the order of 'nature,' which is characterized by an entirely different temporality than 'our' historical world. This conviction is founded on the divisive logic of modernity and is shaped by the discourse of nationalism. The way we think about Romanies is marked by the opposition

> between timeless 'natural' cultures, locked into themselves, changeable only when disrupted, and culture-bearing, narrative bearing nations, moving purposefully through history towards geographical and ethnic self-realization. In an epoch shaped by nationalist rhetoric, those people who do not claim a land and a written tradition for themselves, who cannot or do not claim a history, are relegated to nature, without a voice in any political process....[11]

Romanies, excluded from the realm of history as an area of competition among legitimizing strategies of nation-states, have been placed by the ethnographic approach in the 'eternal present,' in a different time than the one in which we live.

Thus the ethnographic approach to the Romanies operates in an 'allochronic discourse,' which is the study 'of other men in another Time' and which removes its referent "from the present of the speaking/writing subject."[12] This 'allochronic' discourse did not only result in the Romanies denying the past on their own, but also in society's perception of Romanies as a people who live here and now, synchronically with us, as belonging to or representing the temporality of life peculiar to the past epochs (that is, to the past as perceived in the modern 'Western' or 'European' tradition).

It seems, however, that what accounts for such a perception of the Romani past is, paradoxically, the issue of the future. The Romanies have been perceived as a people without a history not because they are believed to have no past, but because they apparently have no future. The presumed incompatibility of traditional Romani culture with the demands of modern life have made them allegedly unable to survive as Romanies: sooner or later they will disappear through marginalization, assimilation or acculturation. Thus the task of an ethnologist studying the Romanies would be similar to that of American 'cultural anthropologist' studying Native Americans: to record as much as possible from their traditional culture before it disappears.

Such an attitude disregards the transforming potential within Romani culture, its flexibility and ability to produce viable strategies of adapting to modern conditions without losing its distinctiveness. Regarding this point, the modernist paradigm of anthropology becomes, paradoxically, similar to the anti-modern, romantic visions of the 'primitives' as depositing the virtues of the past time: both have constructed their objects in a similar fashion, as an opposition to modernity. As a result, both may disregard processes contradicting their approaches, which may lead to an attitude bitterly commented on by Ian Hancock: "When non-Gypsies go from wagon to automobile, it is called progress; when Gypsies do the same thing, it is disappointment."[13]

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8 Fentress/Wickham 1992, p. 40.
9 Stewart 1997a, p. 28.
10 Gay y Blasco 2001, pp. 644-645.

11 Trumpener 1992, p. 884.
12 Fabian 1983, p. 143.
13 Hancock 1991, p. 138.

The ethnography of Romanies shares the European perspective, according to which it is very difficult to imagine that a group without any territory, political organization or a commonly shared sense of history will be able to survive. As a matter of fact, though, Romanies do survive: they successfully "go from wagon to automobile." As Michael Stewart rightly observes, Romanies "all over Europe have been remarkably successful in preserving their way of life, adapting to their changed conditions in order to remain the same."[14] Whether they have indeed remained 'the same' is, however, an open question. The answer depends on the particular circumstances of the groups we study, on the complicated relation between the 'objective' change and cultural apparatus the groups possess to record or neglect the change, and on the degree to which we can liberate ourselves from the stereotype of a 'pre-modern' people who live in an 'eternal present.'

At the end of this section it should be added that the a-historical ethnography of Romanies has a hidden ethical agenda. This is, to use Eric Wolf's expression, an obliteration of history through the erasure of interconnection. By claiming that Romanies exist outside history, in a world of their own, we tacitly erase hundreds of years of interactions between the Romanies and European societies, which have not left Europeans with a clear conscience. The traditional approach to Romanies is therefore based on similar assumptions of most anthropologists of colonial societies: the people studied by anthropologists are a 'people without history,' which "amounts to the erasure of 500 years of confrontation, killing, resurrection, and accommodation."[15] The "obliteration of a people's actual and tragic history," as Kate Trumpener observes, [16] may be thus attributed to the 'European myth of the Gypsies' (in both 'modernist' and 'romantic' versions), the myth that has animated the traditional ethnography of the Romanies. However the reverse seems to be equally true: the myth has emerged and is perpetuated as a consequence of the processes of marginalization, subjugation and obliteration of Romani history.

14 Stewart 1997b, p. 82.
15 Wolf 1982, p. 18.
16 Trumpener 1992, p. 861.

A Mute Memory?

The preceding section aimed to show why traditional scholarship has largely ignored the historical character of Romani identities and therefore tends to interpret them as existing outside of history. As a consequence, the Romanies could not have been easily incorporated into the narrative of the Holocaust. This is not only because the narrative itself had first to be developed and because the inclusion of the Romanies has been met with reserve by the proponents of the unique character of the Holocaust and of the incomparable character of the Jewish suffering. Moreover, the Holocaust has been a part, or even a key element, of European history, the history from which Romanies have been removed. Thus, it has been difficult to break disciplinary and mental boundaries that are responsible for the fact that the entry 'Romanies' has invoked associations with 'pollution taboos,' 'kinship,' and 'traditional law,' rather than with the central event of European history.

Let us now move from history to memory in order to investigate the difficulties the Romanies themselves have had with conceptualizing their suffering. First, a number of obvious factors must be noted. Until very recently, Romanies have neither published historical books, nor read them. They have been outside of the formal education system and absent from the public debates of the European societies. Contrary to the assumptions of traditional scholarship, Romanies do not constitute a single people: they are divided into groups, whose historical experiences may be radically different, and among which there is little communication. All these factors have contributed to the fact that it has been difficult for many Romanies to find the proper words to express the fate of their families during World War II and to realize that the members of other groups suffered similarly.

The above-mentioned facts have also contributed to the lack of perceiving the wartime persecutions as radically different from what Romanies experienced in their history. A good illustration may be here a story of John ('Lazo') Megel, told by Gabrielle Tyrnauer:

> Lazo had first encountered the Holocaust as a young man, during the Eichmann trial, when, like millions of others, he had watched the 'man in the glass booth' give his testimony on TV. He then learned that the Nazi terror apparatus had also targeted his people for extermination. This triggered childhood memories of relatives coming to his father's house in the years during and after World War II, talking about the murder of Gypsies in Europe. He did not pay much attention at the time, because he had learned at an early age that persecution was his people's legacy.[17]

17 Tyrnauer 1991, p. viii.

Living at the time in the US, John Megel – like many Americans – witnessed the development of the Holocaust discourse around the time of the Eichmann trial, and subsequently came to understand the fate of his 'people' by integrating the recollections from his childhood into a narrative of the Holocaust. Jan Yoors, a European who spent a large part of his life traveling with Romanies, had similar difficulties recognizing the fate of his (chosen) people. Reflecting upon the years of World War II, he is rather ambiguous about the situation of Romanies. On the one hand, he understands the racial character of the persecutions and their ultimate consequence: "Like the Jews, the Gypsies became Rassenverfolgte (racially undesirable), enemies of the Reich, and were legislated out of existence."[18] On the other hand, for him the idea that Romanies had been an object of the conscious strategy of annihilation remained inconceivable. For example, he recollected the experiences of his group in the 1940s in the following way:

> Soon alarming rumors reached us about wholesale massacres of Gypsies by the Croatian Nationalists. There were outbursts of killings by Ukrainians in the forests of Wolyn in Eastern Poland. There were endless other instances of random extermination. But never at any time was an overall effort made to liquidate the Gypsies.[19]

Yoors, fascinated by the ability of Romanies to survive in harsh conditions, points out that traditional Romani culture is oriented towards life and that the collective memory of Romanies does not store traumatic experiences. "I often wondered," he commented, "at their strange, inexplicable lack of traumatic reactions to their often violent personal persecutions. I observed, and eventually learned to understand, their rejection of hate or personal bitterness as a response to outside pressures. Pulika, my adopted father, said: 'Too often the courage about dying is cowardice about living'."[20] From this point of view it may be understandable that, according to him, the persecutions Romanies suffered during World War II were not radically different from what had been their fate throughout history, even if this opinion may be questioned against the background of historical evidence.

In the follow-up of his memoirs, which focused on the time of the war, Yoors adopted more elements of the Holocaust discourse and presented general facts of the Nazi genocide of Romanies (although in a rather unsystematic and imprecise manner). Nevertheless, his story remained a narrative of survival against all odds, a tale of the victory of life over death. According to him, the extermination of Romanies had not been documented and remembered, even by the Romanies themselves, "due to the Gypsies' own lack of a

18 Yoors 1967, p. 253.
19 Yoors 1967, p. 253.
20 Yoors 1967, pp. 7-8.

sense of history." "Even though over half a million of them were massacred," he continued, "they are content to remain forgotten and unnoticed."[21]

Even if this opinion may be tainted with the European stereotype of a 'people without history' or may perhaps be attributed to the fact that Yoors lived with very traditional Romani groups (which, moreover, did not fully experience the Nazi annihilation strategy), it nevertheless points out two important aspects of traditional Romani culture that have created serious obstacles in the process of recognizing the true nature of the wartime persecutions. The first one is related to the Romani culture as orally transmitted. This makes the lack of documents produced by Romanies obvious, but it also refers to the essential difficulty that orally transmitted cultures have with admitting the novelty of events in which their members participate. The qualitatively different character of the experienced events is difficult to be acknowledged in a culture that focuses on passing on the corpus of the group's lore in an unaltered form. The acknowledgment of novelty would require a change of the very cultural mechanism that is responsible for group identity; it would deconstruct the 'taken-for-granted' nature of the world in which the group lives, and would decompose the coherence of the group's narrative. In this sense we may say that Romanies do have a history, but some of the Romani groups may in certain circumstances have difficulties perceiving it as history in the way cultures based on written texts do.

The second problem highlighted by Yoors is related to the traditional Romani strategy of survival, which (with some historical exceptions) is based on keeping a low profile and remaining unnoticed to the non-Romani world. Anything related to the Romanies must not be brought to the attention of non-Romanies because the historical experience has shown that nothing good comes out of that. For traditional Romanies it would be thus difficult to fight for a place in the non-Romani historical narrative for it would mean a 'crossing' between the two worlds and an unnecessary and potentially dangerous focusing of attention of a generally hostile environment. Thus one can speak of two mechanisms, which together contributed to the silence about the Romani Holocaust. On the one hand, the non-Romani world has not been able to place the 'people without history' in what became acknowledged as the central event of world history. On the other hand, traditional Romanies have not been able to cross the boundaries and 'make history' on their own.

There is one more element of the traditional Romani culture which should be mentioned here as an obstacle in the process of giving voice to the memory of the time of annihilation. It is the attitude toward death and the

21 Yoors 1988 [1971], p. 38.

dead. Both are dealt with very carefully by an elaborated system of conventions, taboos, and rituals, which are observed in the traditional Romani communities. It is against their customs to extend mourning beyond the prescribed time and to return to the death of the deceased outside the cultural conventions.[22] Thus, according to Mirga and Mróz, "it is inappropriate in this culture to commemorate the time of death, both individual and collective, from the period of World War II."[23]

Finally, the issue of trauma should be mentioned here as one of the factors that has made the Romani memories of the Holocaust voiceless. As we can see, Yoors wondered about the lack of the Romanies' traumatic reactions to their fate. It should be mentioned that the concept of trauma implies that those who survived a traumatizing event are unable to properly react to it in a psychological sense, and this inability causes long-lasting damage to the psychological structures of the survivors.[24] The essence of trauma is that we are unable to remember the traumatizing event as such: we repress it from our memory because we cannot integrate it with the image of ourselves we would like to hold.[25] This inability can be expressed in forgetfulness, silence, amnesia, or in attempts to reconstruct a past which eliminate memory of the traumatizing event.[26]

Following that concept of trauma, we may say that Romanies have been traumatized by their wartime experiences and that their memories could be silenced or voiceless, in such a way that the traumatizing event could not be expressed in the available cultural forms. However, the memory nevertheless persists, and if voiced it becomes an expressed recollection. Emmanuel Filhol's research on the Romani inmates of the internment camps in Vichy France proves that this might have been the case. As he concludes, contrary to the views of historians, politicians and local non-Romani communities, Romanies do remember:

> When questioning ex-internees, I realized to what degree the internment drama was engraved into the collective and individual memories of the witnesses. The memories linked to the trauma of the camps had not changed. What struck me was the extraordinary precision with which the witnesses were able to remember and relate the many ordeals they had lived through [...] Surprisingly, the Gypsy narrators had not spoken a great deal to those close to them, perhaps since the memory of those lost and the past in general is not part of their culture as it is with other peoples [...] they were relating this dramatic event for the first time to a non-Gypsy...[27]

What Filhol calls 'hidden,' and what I call 'mute' memory, is thus repressed by the mechanisms of traditional culture, for it may not fit the traditional image of the group. Only when those mechanisms do not work, which is implied by the context of an interview conducted with a non-Romani person, can the Romanies find the voice for their remembrance. In this way, the Romani 'mute memory' represents the opposite case to that of the Jewish survivors during the years immediately following the tragedy of the Shoah. As Saul Friedländer observes, in that period, and particularly in the United States, the Holocaust was not a widely debated issue. However, the "silence did not exist *within* the survivor community. It was maintained in relation to the outside world, and was often imposed by shame, the shame of telling a story that must appear unbelievable, and was, in any case, entirely out of tune with surrounding society."[28]

The Jews at that time talked about their memories within the community of survivors but they remained voiceless to the external world. Some time later, the Romanies, having benefited from the already developed Holocaust discourse and an expanded interest in the fate of the victims, could share their memories with an external researcher, while remaining silent about their past traumas within their communities.

The voiceless nature of Romani memory could also be accounted for by the fact that the wartime persecutions of Romanies meant not only the individual trauma of the survivors and the experience of biological extinction, but also a threat to the very code of Romani culture, that cultural idiom that Romanies always attempted to preserve intact and separate from the non-Romani world. Lech Mróz, in his powerful description of the so-called *Zigeunerlager* at Birkenau, pointed out that the situation of the camp violated all cultural rules which regulated family, gender, and inter-group relations.[29] If we generalize this picture and take the *Zigeunerlager* as a metaphor of the Romani fate during the time of the Holocaust, we realize that the Romani trauma was largely a collective one, for the persecutions shattered the very sense of 'being Rom' and not only the psychological structures of individual survivors. Traditional Romanies in post-war Europe did not have a choice: the option of living out of the *Romanipen* did not exist for them and the very

22 One of such conventions is *swato* or *swatura*, described by Yoors: a story told on specific occasions, which, among others, passes on to the next generations the deeds and virtues of the deceased. The main objective of *swatura* is, however, rather the affirmation of the present and of the life of the community. Nevertheless, there are *swatura* from the period of WWII (Yoors 1967, pp. 142-145).

23 Mirga/Mróz 1994, p. 31.

24 Novick 2001, p. 2.

25 Prager 1998, pp. 155-156.

26 Misztal 2003, p. 141.

27 Filhol 2003, p. 13.

28 Friedländer 1994, p. 259.

29 Mróz 2000, pp. 107-108.

nature of their traditional culture prevented them from finding a voice for their experience.

Breaking the Silence

All the above-mentioned factors that contributed to the silence regarding the Romani Holocaust, i.e. the slow development of the Holocaust discourse, the resistance to include Romanies in the narrative of the Holocaust, the traditional scholarship with its conceptualization of Romanies as people of a fixed ethnicity, living in an 'eternal present,' the peculiarities of the traditional Romani culture that prevented Romanies from finding a voice for their memories, and the traumatic character of the latter, have gradually been disappearing in the course of postwar European history.

The discourse of the Holocaust has established a frame of perception for the atrocities of World War II. The process of the gradual inclusion of the Romanies into that narrative as one of the main groups of victims began in the 1960s as a result of the intellectual pursuits of historians and the practical efforts of the German Sinti and Roma organizations to receive compensation for the Nazi persecutions.[30] The impulse for historical research was given by Simon Wiesenthal's pioneering attempts to collect documents of the Romani Holocaust and his first publications on this issue. This was followed by the first monographic work on the persecutions of the Romanies during World War II by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon[31] and subsequently by Ian Hancock's[32] passionate defense of the place of Romanies among the victims of the Holocaust.

At the same time, the traditional approach to Romanies received substantial criticism from a new generation of scholars (sometimes referred to as 'constructivists'), who undermined most of the assumptions of traditional scholarship. They pointed out that the identity of various Romani groups might have been a result of several contingent factors and external influences, and not necessarily of the preservation of the ancient and fixed ethnic features. Leo Lucassen has, for example, pointed out that the

> labeling by authorities of certain categories as different, unwanted or even dangerous, not only influences their position in society in a negative way, the power of definition by authorities can even initiate group formation and minorization. People who at the outset felt no, or only weak ties with one another can be driven towards each other and in the course of time become a minority or project themselves as one.[33]

The 'Gypsies' were thus a 'product' of administrative labels and policies related to the nineteenth century's development of the modern welfare system administered by local authorities, the modern state based on the concept of citizenship and control of 'foreigners,' and the concept of citizenship based on 'ethnicity.'[34] For another 'constructivist,' Wim Willems, Romanies do not in fact make a single people, which means that

> not everyone to whom the label of 'Gypsy' has been applied [...] leads an itinerant way of life, speaks *Romani* [...] stands out through bodily characteristics from others in their surroundings, is conscious of being subject to strict, group specific mores, or shares an awareness of common roots. This is not to contend, however, that Gypsies do not exist. The history of the persecution of persons and groups so labeled [...] is already in itself sufficient to establish the reality of their existence beyond denial. Interest groups [...] also testify to the feeling that there is a need for groups self-presentation along ethnic lines. It is merely that this has probably not always been true and it seems that the idea that all ethnic Gypsy groups belong to one people obscures, rather than clarifies, their complex history.[35]

Contrary to 'constructivism,' we may assume that there are certain characteristics of the Roma that are not merely products of external or internal conscious strategies, but which developed more or less spontaneously in the long historical process of mutual influences between different groups. Contrary to traditional scholarship, we should avoid the 'reification' of certain characteristics that were products of a particular time and space. Nevertheless, as a result of the 'constructivist challenge,' the Romanies appear as a people 'with a history' that was largely the history of their interactions with European societies and the persecutions Romanies suffered. The Holocaust may be perceived as the culmination of the persecutions the Romanies experienced after their arrival in Europe and as a condensation of different forms of discrimination to which they were subjected. As such, the Holocaust creates the linearity of Romani history, dividing it into periods 'before' and 'after,' and gives this history meaning as a continuous unfolding of the persecution pattern.[36]

Some Romani intellectuals and activists prefer to use the Romani word *Porrajmos* (or *Baro Porrajmos*) instead of 'the Holocaust,' which is advo-

30 Mirga 2005, p. 97.
31 Kenrick/Puxon 1972.
32 Hancock 1987; Hancock 1989; Hancock 1991a.

33 Lucassen 1991, p. 89.
34 Lucassen 1996.
35 Willems 1997, pp. 6-7.
36 This idea is clearly indicated by the title of Hancock's article: Gypsy History in Germany and Neighboring Lands. A Chronology Leading to the Holocaust and Beyond. (Hancock 1991a).

cated particularly by Ian Hancock. This word has, among others, the meaning of the (great) devouring of human life and is an "ugly word, well chosen for the ugliest event in our history. It can also mean 'rape,' as well as 'gaping' as in shock or horror."[37] By and large, among regular Romanies this word does not function as a synonym for the Holocaust. Its popularity is limited to the activists and, recently, to non-Romanies dealing with the subject. Various theoretical as well as linguistic objections against the word could be raised, but the intention behind its introduction into the language of Romani politics is clear: it is an attempt to show that Romanies do have their own history and that this history is conceptualized in their own language.

The Holocaust and the History-making Process

In addition to the intellectual efforts to write down the Romani history, the Romanies make history. In 1971, the year in which Jan Yoors published a book in which he claimed that Romanies lack the sense of history and prefer to remain unnoticed, a group of Romani (and non-Romani) intellectuals and activists gathered in London at the First World Romani Congress, which, among other accomplishments, adopted the Romani national flag and anthem. This event, followed by the establishment of the International Romani Union, was an important step in the process of the organization and politicization of the Romani movement. The Holocaust has been on its agenda from the very beginning. The Third Roma World Congress (1982, Göttingen) was devoted almost entirely to this issue.

The presence of the Holocaust discourse in the strategies of the Romani movement indicates the changes of the traditional patterns of Romani identities and the corresponding need for history that has been expressed among Romani intellectuals.[38] Economic transformations in postwar Europe, a voluntary or coerced shift to a settled style of life, assimilation processes, the growing role of formal education – all these made traditional Romani culture, based on replicating in the present the suprahistorical model of 'the way of a Rom,' more and more anachronistic, and incompatible with a reality in which Romanies ever more frequently had to come into contact with the non-Romani society around them on terms set by the latter. In the absence of options such as effective integration of Romanies with the communities in which they lived, the disintegration of traditional Romani culture meant that

[37] Hancock 2002, p. 34.

[38] The best illustration of such an approach is the position of Ian Hancock (2002).

intellectuals and Romani activists faced the problem of developing new cultural forms with which Romanies could identify in the changed reality. One such cultural form has been a vision of the Romanies as a nation in diaspora, having its own history and modern identity.

The vision of history put forward by Romani elites as the domain in which modern identity is constructed includes the following elements: common roots in the culture of India; the common experience of long interaction with the European peoples amidst whom the Roma ultimately constituted themselves as a group (or number of groups); the common experience of persecution the Roma suffered, the culmination and new dimension of which was the Second World War; and finally, the still-brief but important history of political organizing by Roma.

In presenting such a vision of history, Romani activists wish to stress the antiquity of Romani tradition and culture (the connection with India), while defining themselves as a European people par excellence (with an inalienable right to live among the peoples of Europe). They call attention to the modernity of the kind of identity proposed: political self-organization, which takes on many different forms.

The experience of persecution during World War II plays a particular role in this vision. First, making it a fundamental dimension of Romani history is an effort to show the Romanies as a people at the center of the most important events in Europe's modern history, not as a marginalized people vegetating outside of history. Second, a historical narrative of the fate of Romanies during the war can become an excellent link to unite the different groups into which Romanies are divided, by making them aware that in certain historical situations their differences did not matter: they were treated the same (at least in principle) because they were 'Gypsies.' In this way a uniform narrative of the Holocaust allows the members of different Romani groups, who often do not feel closely associated or are even in conflict, to envision the commonality of fate of the Romanies, and this can have important consequences for the forms their political cooperation takes now and in the future. Third, the conception of the history of the Romanies as a nation which Romani activists have elaborated can contribute to the creation of a paradigm of collective memory in which they can find themselves and can bring together dispersed individual or family memories. In this sense, a history centered around the Romani Holocaust can create a discourse that will allow forms of expression to be found for the experiences of many Romanies who have been silent about their sufferings because they lacked a language to express them until now.

Sufferings in the past are bound up with present-day sufferings. This is the fourth aspect of the vision of history presented here: it can depict con-

temporary persecutions of Romanies as a continuation of the Nazi persecutions and thereby surround them with a similar aura of moral condemnation. Such delegitimation of anti-Romani violence can prove important in education. It allows existing prejudice and acts against Romanies to be classed together with the Nazi-inspired racism that is universally condemned. For many students in various European countries whose people suffered during World War II, it will probably be a surprise to learn that they are linked by a commonality of suffering with the generally scorned 'Gypsies' (though the Romanies suffered to an incomparably greater degree).

Romani activists (for example Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe) are fully cognizant of the political weight of such a vision of history. These historical dimensions mentioned above are interwoven with, for example, the political program of the International Romani Union, according to which

> [t]he Roma are a legitimate part of European culture and society and [...] by virtue of their unique history and problems they deserve special treatment within a European framework. The IRU advocates recognition of the Roma as a nation and is dedicated to building unity around its symbol, a standardized Romani language. The IRU demands the creation of a special status for the Roma and Sinti as a non-territorial (multistate-based or transnational) minority in Europe, in order to protect a people who experienced a holocaust during World War II and violence, pogroms, and genocide in the present era.[39]

In this manifesto we see the confluence of many earlier-presented elements, comprising a self-definition of modern Romanies. The experience of the Holocaust appears as one justification of the special status of Romanies.

In expanding upon the IRU program, the Romani intellectuals Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe write that

> Romani political elites were never driven to demand their own territory and state. Thus, to legitimize their claim, they advanced other elements of the concept of nation – the common roots of the Romani people, their common historical experiences and perspectives, and the commonality of culture, language and social standing. The experience of the Porrajmos – the Romani holocaust during World War II – played an important role in providing the Romani diaspora with its sense of nationhood.[40]

Here as well, an extraordinarily important nation-building role is attributed to the experience of the Holocaust.

39 Mirga/Gheorghe 1997, p. 22.
40 Mirga/Gheorghe 1997, p. 18.

Inventing Tradition for the Sake of the Future

The relation between the Holocaust discourse and identity among the Romanies excellently illustrates the dialectics of identity and history as described by David Lowenthal. In his view, a commonly shared past creates a necessary component of identity among those who adhere to that past: On the one hand, the easiest answer to the question 'who are we?' seems to rely on some reference to 'who we were.' On the other hand, it is precisely the group's identity which makes that past real: the viable past is always someone's past; it is a historical image, filtrated through and sedimented in collective memory which proves useful for identity-constructs existing at a given time among a certain group. Such a viable past, which we may call tradition, is of particular importance for those groups whose identities are threatened: "Identification with a national past," Lowenthal writes, "often serves as an assurance of worth against subjugation or bolsters a new sovereignty. Peoples deprived by conquest of their proper past strive hard to retrieve its validating comforts."[41] The same is definitely true not only in the case of a conquered nation but also in the case of marginalized peoples and, in general, in all those situations in which a group's identity has been denied, situations to which the Romanies are particularly vulnerable.

The situation, however, becomes more complicated when there is no obvious tradition to which the threatened identity could refer, or when there are several competing traditions. In such a case traditions have to be invented. The "element of invention is particularly clear," Eric Hobsbawm writes, where the "history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so."[42]

Applying the model of national memory formation presented by James Fentress and Chris Wickham to the process of inventing traditions, we may distinguish the following stages (1) construction of tradition by elites; (2) creation of a "rhetorical discourse," related to a given tradition and "directed at internal or external opponents;" (3) conveying the tradition to the collective memory and creation of popular discourses that "make up the substructure of national historical consciousness."[43]

If the first two tasks seem to have already been successfully accomplished by Romani organizations and intellectual elites, the third remains a

41 Lowenthal 1985, p. 44.
42 Hobsbawm 1983, p. 13.
43 Fentress/Wickham 1992, p. 129.

task for the future. Legal and political attempts to get recognition as a nation, together with the intellectual efforts to write Romani own history, have to be accompanied by actions on the social and cultural level which, on the one hand, legitimize these attempts, and, on the other hand, lay the foundations of a common, historically grounded, identity. In this way the present-day generations of Romanies may uphold links to their ancestors, while at the same time various contemporary Romani communities may develop a sense of solidarity and belonging to one ethnic-national group – by building up a linkage with the past. The past in question was a traumatic one. However, in the present-day circumstances, given the gradual disappearance of traditional culture and the radical changes of the lifestyle, as well as of the hostility of non-Romani environments, the 'working through' the traumatic past may help to find strength to endure a traumatic present.

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