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Family Memories of Roma as Sources for Holocaust Studies

Insights from the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region

Abstract

In recent years, there has been a boom of scholarship on the Romani memory of the Nazi genocide. Approaches vary from collective amnesia to the impact of the Holocaust on current identities of European Roma and the role of Romani Holocaust memories in nation-building processes. However, few studies have attempted to analyse memories of ordinary Roma as sources on their suffering and survival under the Nazi occupation. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate in which ways family memories of Roma, coupled with local archival evidence and ethnographic data, may shed light on the plight of Roma in the occupied territories. In doing so, I argue for the inclusion of Romani experiences in the broader field of Holocaust studies, as well as in the history of their micro-regions.

Introduction

When one thinks of the Holocaust, one probably thinks first of the gas chambers in extermination camps and the images of victims of medical experiments. However, the Holocaust, as well as the Nazi genocide of Roma in the Soviet Union, was implemented in other ways, too. Most victims were not transferred from ghettos to concentration camps to die there through extreme labour, starvation, or gassing. As the Yahad-In Unum project has shown, many Soviet Jews and the majority of Roma were captured and murdered not far from their homes and in the presence of their neighbours, whose hands were often used to assist the perpetrators.¹ These crimes were often implemented alongside other activities, such as against Soviet partisans, and they were randomly documented.

Following the advance of the Red Army, local sections of the Extraordinary State Commission began investigating Nazi crimes against the civil population.² The Commission's accounts included eyewitness testimonies and provided important evidence on the mass killings of Jews and Roma. Nevertheless, they remain problematic sources for the study of the genocide of Roma. It is a well-known fact that the

1 Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets. A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, New York 2009.

2 Chrezvychajnaja Gosudarstvennaja Kommissija po ustanovleniju i rassledovaniju zlodejanij nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov [The Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices] was established in November 1942 in order to investigate war crimes against the Soviet Union and to document the losses caused by Nazi Germany. Its methods of investigation included interviewing eyewitnesses, compiling statistical records, and exhuming human remains. For more on the work of the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission, see: Andrej Umansky, *Geschichtsschreiber wider Willen? Einblick in die Quellen der "Außerordentlichen Staatlichen Kommission" und der "Zentralen Stelle"*, in: Angelika Nußberger/Caroline von Gall (ed.), *Bewusstes Erinnern und bewusstes Vergessen. Der juristische Umgang mit der Vergangenheit in den Ländern Mittel- und Osteuropas*, Tübingen 2011, 347-374.

Holocaust as well as the genocide of Roma was not officially recognised by the Soviet state, which claimed instead that all Soviet nations suffered equally under the German occupation.³ The work of the Extraordinary State Commission was affected by this ideology, with its early records often mentioning the ‘nationality’ of victims while later accounts omitted this information.⁴ It is often possible to identify Jewish victims by their names, but this method does not work for Roma who had the same family names as their Belarusian, Polish and Lithuanian neighbours. In the case of nomadic Roma, it is even more complicated, as eyewitnesses were often unaware of their family names. Because of the lack of information or its omission due to ideological reasons, many mass graves of Roma are currently marked as the graves of ‘unknown peaceful Soviet citizens’.

How to Gain an Idea of what Happened to the Romani Population under the Nazi Occupation?

My research attempts to resolve this challenge by documenting family biographies of Roma and combining these with local archival evidence. I argue that such an integrated approach is especially desirable in the Roma case, whose history under Nazi persecution still requires much deeper engagement. Incorporating oral histories and ethnographic data into existing research would allow us not only to add the victims’ perspective but also to challenge some of the existing views on Nazi policies towards Roma.

Though the first work on the Nazi persecution of European Roma was published in 1972, this topic only became the subject of close scholarly attention since the late 1980s.⁵ The ground-breaking work of historian Michael Zimmerman gave rise to important questions concerning for example the motives behind the Nazi persecution of Roma and the differences in Nazi policies towards sedentary and nomadic groups.⁶ However, historical research was for a long time based almost exclusively on German archives, which do not allow for a full picture of the persecution. Only recently have there been attempts to collect and analyse local archival evidence on the genocide of Roma. In particular, Martin Holler’s study on the Soviet Union has called many of Zimmerman’s conclusions into question. In his analysis of the extermination of Romani populations in several Russian villages, Holler demonstrated that Roma were persecuted for racial motives, irrespective of their lifestyle and social status.⁷

Scholarship on the Romani memories of the Holocaust has emerged to a great degree in response to the works of historians most of whom neglected to analyse the attitudes of Roma towards their past. In a pioneering article, Michael Stewart paint-

3 For more on the Soviet and post-Soviet politics of memory concerning the Second World War, see: Zvi Gitelman (ed.), *Bitter Legacy. Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, Bloomington 1997; Andrej Kotljarchuk, *World War II Memory Politics. Jewish, Polish and Roma Minorities of Belarus*, in: *The Journal of Belarusian Studies* 7 (2013) 1, 7-37.

4 Martin Holler, *The National Socialist Genocide of the Roma in the German-occupied Soviet Union. Report for the Documentary and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma*, Heidelberg 2009; <http://www.sintiundroma.de/uploads/media/martinholler.pdf> (27 March 2017).

5 Donald Kenrick/Grattan Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe’s Gypsies*, London 1972.

6 Michael Zimmermann, *Rassenutopie und Genozid. Die nationalsozialistische “Lösung der Zigeunerfrage”*, Hamburg 1996.

7 Martin Holler, “Like Jews?” The Nazi Persecution and Extermination of Soviet Roma Under the German Military Administration. A New Interpretation, Based on Soviet Sources, in: *Dapim. Studies on the Holocaust* 24 (2010) 1, 137-176.

ed a picture of the memory work in a rural Romani community in Hungary.⁸ Although unable to record any coherent narrative of the Nazi persecution, Stewart observed how the memories of this bitter past were activated under the threat of skinhead attacks in the late 1980s. In their self-defence strategy, the Roma village community was led by the fear of being victimized as in the Nazi era. They also used war-time expressions when recalling the events. In recent years, a lot has been written on how Roma remember or why they do not remember the Nazi persecution. Approaches vary from collective amnesia to the impact of the Holocaust on current identities of European Roma and nation-building processes.⁹

Nevertheless, few works, whether from a historical or a sociological approach, have attempted to analyse the recollections of Roma as sources for the study of Nazi genocide. In her article on sexual violence perpetrated against Romani women in Transnistria, Michelle Kelso recently argued for the inclusion of Romani experiences in Holocaust studies, which would allow for more “nuanced and sophisticated knowledge” of the phenomenon.¹⁰ Through a close reading of survivors’ testimonies, Kelso shifted from a gender-based to a family-based analysis of sexual violence, demonstrating that not only women were targeted and traumatised by these experiences. At the same time, Kelso pointed to a cultural dimension of Romani experiences in Transnistria. For instance, she showed how the ethnicity of Kalderash Roma from Romania, on the basis of which they had been persecuted, became their survival strategy in the fields of Transnistria (for example through fortune-telling and exchange of traditional clothing and jewellery for food).¹¹

Following these studies, I first argue in support of the inclusion of Romani experiences in the field of Holocaust studies, as well as in the history of their micro-regions. My research shows that Roma were part of the interwar economy and society of the Lithuanian-Belarusian border region and therefore shared many of the war-time experiences of other populations. On the other hand, Roma were persecuted on ethnic grounds, and many of their experiences, as well as responses to the Nazi violence, were culturally defined. This paper examines how Roma from the borderland responded to the Nazi persecution depending on their pre-war lifestyle and patterns of interaction with the non-Roma population.

From Ethnographic Fieldwork to Archives

From a methodological viewpoint, adding voices of ordinary Roma to existing historical research encounters certain difficulties. Anthropologist Paola Trevisan was one of the first to work with family biographies of Italian Sinti in order to reconstruct the history of internment camps for Roma in the province of Modena, Italy. She wrote of her experience: “I realized that as long as they remained just Gypsy sto-

8 Michael Stewart, Remembering without Commemoration: The Mnemonics and Politics of Holocaust Memories among European Roma, in: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 10 (2004) 3, 561-582.

9 Sławomir Kapralski, *Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów* [A Nation from the Ashes. Memory of Genocide and Roma Identity], Warsaw 2012; Huub van Baar, *The European Roma. Minority Representation, Memory and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality* (PhD thesis), Amsterdam 2011; Elena Marushiakova/Veselin Popov, *Holocaust, Porrajmos, Samudaripen ... Tworzenie Nowej Mitologii Narodowej* [Holocaust, Porrajmos, Samudaripen ... Creating a New National Mythology], in: *Studia Romologica* 3 (2010), 75-94.

10 Michelle Kelso, *Romani Women and the Holocaust. Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Romanian-Controlled Transnistria*, in: JoAnn Di Georgio-Lutz/Donna Gosbee (ed.), *Women and Genocide. Gendered Experience of Violence, Survival, and Resistance*, Toronto 2016, 37-71.

11 *Ibid.*, 60.

ries, nobody would be interested in finding any archival evidence, as if their voices were of no value in testifying to the persecution they endured.”¹² After Trevisan had come to local archives to find documentary evidence for the ‘Sinti stories’, she realised the importance of the first phase of her work: “If the Sinti themselves did not tell me what had happened to their relatives, it would have been very difficult to reconstruct the persecution.”¹³ This is a significant methodological hint, as preliminary work in Romani communities can indeed facilitate archival search. Moreover, a combination of the two groups of sources helps overcome the shortcomings of each. While the archival sources, such as the materials of post-war commissions and trials, help clarify details and situate evidence in the local context, family recollections add a narrative to otherwise textually sparse archival documents.

Even more importantly, family narratives reveal the story of Romani suffering and survival from an inside perspective. Throughout their history, Roma have been ‘unruly’ actors in the states where they live.¹⁴ Not only were they not involved in the creation of institutional archives, the Roma generally avoided providing personal data to the representatives of the state (e.g. census takers), anticipating negative consequences. Therefore, archives represent an outside, mostly official, view of Romani history. In the case of Holocaust documentation, this is either a persecutor’s or a bystander’s perspective. While Jewish survivors, who had emigrated to the United States and Israel after the war, wrote memoirs and started collecting Holocaust-related documentation, most Romani survivors never managed to do so. For those who remained in the Soviet Union, memories of genocide never went beyond family circles.¹⁵ Therefore, documenting family biographies seems to be the only way to approach the experiences of Roma under Nazi occupation, even though this approach unavoidably leads to the issue of veracity of second-generation accounts.

The following analysis is based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Romani communities in Belarus and Lithuania. I have been working with Roma as an ethnologist since 2007. For my dissertation project, which had meant to elucidate the effects of sedentarisation on the social structures and identities of Roma, I carried out participant observation and interviews in nine Romani communities.¹⁶ At the beginning of my research, I was not particularly interested in memories of genocide, but soon started recording them alongside other oral histories. Most of my informants were quite open to sharing family histories. However, by this time most survivors had already passed away. More often I met the people who had experienced the genocide as children or had been born in the first post-war years. I found many of them living in poor conditions and lacking access to medical and social care, which gradually resulted in a decline in health and in early deaths. Although I realised the urgency of a project on testimonies, obtaining institutional support and funding, as well as personal challenges as an early-stage researcher and a young mother, inevitably postponed this project.

12 Paola Trevisan, *The Internment of Italian Sinti in the Province of Modena during Fascism*. From *Ethnographic to Archival Research*, in: *Romani Studies* 23 (2013), 139–160.

13 *Ibid.*, 150.

14 For a more elaborated discussion, see: Michelle Kelso/Daina S. Eglitis, *Holocaust Commemoration in Romania. Roma and the Contested Politics of Memory and Memorialization*, in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 16 (2014) 4, 487–511.

15 This is also true of the memory of Jewish Holocaust survivors in the Soviet Union.

16 Volha Bartash, *The Sedentarisation of Roma in the Soviet Union after 1956. A Case Study from the Former Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic*, in: *Romani Studies* 25 (2015) 1, 23–51.

In 2013/2014, I began working more specifically on this project in the collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.¹⁷ Most interviews and observations to which I refer in this paper were made during my fieldwork in the Belarusian part of the border region, in the towns of Ashmjany, Navasjady, and Pastavy, in the summer and autumn of 2015. Along with interviewing Romani families, I conducted research in local archives, surveyed the exhibitions of local museums, and visited mass graves of Roma. I thereby intended to reconstruct the events of the past from a micro-historical perspective and to understand how the genocide of Roma is remembered today both by Romani and non-Romani populations in the border region. Though the methodology of my study has gradually adopted more features from oral history, I have never been able to 'disable' my ethnographic eye, and participant observation in Romani communities has remained an important part of my research. These techniques helped considerably in identifying potential interlocutors, preparing for interviews, and making observations on Romani commemoration practices.

As my fieldwork suggests, two contexts seem to be crucial for the study of the ways in which ordinary Roma remember and reproduce their past. The first is the context of family, which is central to my work both methodologically and from the perspective of memory transmission. The Romani memories of genocide we study today are mostly familial memories. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that even survivors seldom speak of their individual experiences but of the fates of their beloved whom they lost or with whom they survived. In their first-person accounts, narrators often use 'we' instead of 'I' because they shared their experiences with other family members, and they perceive the events from a family perspective today. It is apparent that most of the war-time decisions of Roma were family-based, and survival became an individual challenge mainly for those who either lost their families in the Holocaust or were involuntary separated from them.

Orality is the second important context for understanding Romani remembering. Since representations of the Holocaust in Romani oral tradition exceed the scope of this paper, I will confine myself to two brief observations. During my fieldwork, I worked with several generations of Roma, sometimes simultaneously, and it became obvious that in many cases this recollection of the past was not happening for the first time and was not provoked exclusively by my questions. The narration of tragic or conversely heroic episodes often happens in innately natural circumstances such as family dinners followed by long evenings over tea, where several generations are present, or on other family and community occasions, such as commemorative holidays, funerals, and so forth. Younger generations often help survivors recall certain episodes which were obviously known to them from previous family conversations. During my fieldwork, I observed how Romani families privately tend to mass graves and visit them during seasonal commemorative holidays, thus including the victims in a broader circle of commemorated ancestors. For senior people, the process of discovering the burial places of their relatives (or the failure to find them), as well as raising family memorials, is very emotional and is accompanied by rituals of communicating with their spirits.

I observed a considerable difference in the generational representations of the Holocaust. While for the survivors and the second generation, the memories of genocide are deeply personal and painful, the third generation is more inclined to

¹⁷ My research in the museum's collections was possible thanks to my Jeff and Toby Herr Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, USHMM in 2013/2014.

carry collective interpretations and images of Romani suffering, without situating them in the local context. I also observed the work of memory, as described by Stewart, among younger Roma. For instance, in Ashmjany, I organised my research through a group of young women who helped me communicate with their senior relatives. The women themselves seemed too pre-occupied with their daily tasks and community life to be interested in the events of the past. However, any discussion of the injustices that Roma currently face evoked comparisons with Nazi genocidal policies.

For generations of Roma, family has provided a context and the means by which knowledge of the past has been reproduced. It seems that under-representation of the Romani genocide on a public level through the Soviet era might have contributed to the preservation of Romani memory within the family circle.¹⁸ A certain isolation of Romani memory in the Soviet Union and in post-Soviet Belarus may also explain why current memories remain mostly unaffected by the on-going Holocaust discourses in the Romani international movement.

The Place of Roma in the Pre-war Border Region

My research focusses geographically on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border region. In the interwar period, this was part of the so-called *Kresy Wschodnie* (Eastern Borderlands) and belonged to the Polish Wilno Voivodeship, one of the largest and most sparsely populated areas in interwar Poland. Besides the city of Wilno (Vilnius), all the towns had small populations of less than ten-thousand people. The region was among the most economically underdeveloped in interwar Poland, with a very low level of literacy (almost thirty per cent were illiterate). Ethnic minorities were subjected to Polonisation and did not have access to education in their own languages, even in places where non-Poles were in the majority. These are all reasons why Jan Gross called the Kresy “the backward half of a backward European country”.¹⁹

At the same time, Gross has acknowledged that “despite all of this and more, the material, spiritual, and political life of the national minorities in interwar Poland was richer and more complex than ever before or after”.²⁰ Most places in the voivodeship were multicultural, consisting of people from different ethnic groups and religions. A common picture of a pre-war town in the borderland included the Jewish centre with shops, a market place, a synagogue, a yeshiva; or Polish administration buildings, and a Catholic and an Orthodox church, one opposite to another. The rural areas of Wilno Voivodeship were populated mainly by Belarusian and Lithuanian peasants. According to the Polish census of 1931, which was however much criticised for its bias towards ethnic minorities, about sixty per cent of the population of the voivodeship identified themselves as Poles. Belarusians (22.7 per cent), Jews (8.5 per cent), Lithuanians (5.5 per cent), and Russians (3.5 per cent) constituted ethnic minorities. As the census did not list Romani as an individual language, it is difficult to determine the number of Roma in the Wilno Voivodeship. Moreover, it is difficult to count nomadic and seminomadic Roma.

¹⁸ On representations of the Roma genocide in the Soviet Union, see: Andrej Kotljarchuk, *Invisible Victims. The Cold War and Representation of the Roma Genocide in Soviet Feature Films, Teleplays and Theater Performances*, in: Alexander Friedman/Frank Jakob (ed.), *Russische und Sowjetische Geschichte im Film. Von bolschewistischen Revolutionären, antifaschistischen Widerstandskämpfern, jüdischen Emigranten und “Kalten Kriegern”*, New York 2016, 129-151.

¹⁹ Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad. The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia*, Princeton 2002, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

From ethnographic data, we know that most Roma who had lived there before the Second World War belonged to the Litovska Roma group who spoke the local Romani dialect and tended to observe group endogamy. Polska Roma were the second-most numerous Romani group in the border region. In spite of some ethnographic differences and the rules of internal endogamy (marriage rules that prohibit marrying a partner from another group), the dialects and traditional cultures of these groups were quite close and intermarriages occurred. While Polska Roma travelled all year, with occasional overnight stays with local farmers, the Litovska Roma led a seminomadic lifestyle. This means that they travelled only in the summer, earning their livelihoods from trading horses, veterinarian art, fortune-telling, and begging in villages. Their travelling was rather short-distanced, with each mobile group following virtually the same route every year, since the chances for earnings were higher in well-known places. In wintertime, many Litovska Roma took up residence in the towns and villages of the borderland and adjusted to a great degree to the lifestyle of peasants. The latter often let Romani families into their homes in exchange for their help in keeping the household and to use their horses for seasonal work. Their interaction with the local peasants was not exclusively economic. Roma took part in winter festivities and their children often went to school together with children of other ethnic backgrounds. Annual fairs and weekly markets in towns where Roma traded in horses were another important contact zone with other populations. Like the majority population, the Roma consisted of both Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

I argue that understanding the place occupied by Roma in the pre-war border region is the key to understanding their plight under German occupation. One of the most important but simultaneously complicated things to realise about the pre-war borderland is that it was another world, to which the Soviet invasion of 1939 and then the German occupation in 1941 put an end. A reconstruction of that reality, with its different property relations, food production, and social hierarchies can also shed light on the history of the Holocaust. It is obvious that many of the tensions which existed among ethnic and social groups and individuals on the local level determined people's choices and motivations during the war. Oral histories of people of different ethnic backgrounds can potentially add to our understanding of this important issue.

In the case of the Roma, the context of the countryside seems to be crucial. At first glance, their interaction with the rural population was relatively peaceful and they were quite well integrated in the pre-war picture of the borderland. On the other hand, there is plenty of sources, such as Belarusian folklore texts, which show how the seminomadic Roma were perceived. Many of these texts point directly to the fact that Roma did not work the land, which also means that they did not participate in the food production chain but had access to it through services.²¹ In the eyes of peasants, only the labour associated with working the land counted, and most village activities, as well as relations among neighbours, were built around food production and exchange. The set of concepts of land, work, and food production created a sort of prism through which Belarusian peasants perceived their entire reality.

From this viewpoint, the seminomadic Roma who offered occasional services to farmers and received payments in food could not be considered equals. Neverthe-

21 In economic terms, the economy of seminomadic Roma may be characterised as non-productive. In relation to Roma, this concept has been elaborated by Michal Ruzicka, *Political Economy of Marginalization. The Case of Roma/Gypsies in East Central Europe* (PhD thesis), Plzeň 2010.

less, not all Roma were poor in the sense of lacking land and permanent homes. The internal structure of the local Romani community was also affected by material and social stratification, even though their concept of well-being was different from that of the sedentary population. The families who had high-quality means of transportation, such as purebred horses and covered wagons, who had roomy tents and expensive carpets, could be considered well-off. It is worth mentioning here that such luxuries remained beyond the means of the rural population.

Second, a small part of the local Roma were landowners themselves. During my fieldtrips, I met the families whose current prestige in Romani communities is still based on their high social status under Polish rule. Some sedentary Roma families were well-off farmers who not only owned a plot of land but hired workers and had connections among the local landowners, as well as in Warsaw. This group of Roma was among those affected by the Soviet invasion in 1939. In order to avoid Stalinist terror and deportations, some families chose to give up their properties and join nomadic relatives. It is worth mentioning here that, through their history, Roma have demonstrated great flexibility in their lifestyle. Under external circumstances, they could turn nomadic, or become sedentary. For instance, there was a considerable return to nomadism in the first post-war decade because mobility allowed Roma to survive the post-war hardships, and because the horse trade experienced increased demand among the rural population.²²

Two years of Sovietization following the 'revolution from abroad' of 1939 not only effected the transformation of the local rural economy and lifestyle but, in some sense, also prepared the border region for the future German invasion. As Per Anders Rudling noted: "German troops entered a land that was paralysed with fear and was populated by people who were, to a certain degree, indifferent to political violence. There was already nothing unusual in acts of killing in 1941."²³ Though the Soviet terror primarily targeted the former Polish administration, landowners, and military, as well as the Catholic clergy, 'ordinary' people of different ethnic and social backgrounds were also affected. Nevertheless, the borderland was prepared for a new wave of violence not only psychologically. The Soviets created an infrastructure of torment that, after some re-equipment and modernisation, suited the purposes of the German invaders. Many later victims of the Holocaust, including Roma, had previously been interned and tormented in the former People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) prisons in Lukishki, Hlybokayje, Vileyka, and Kaunas, and were eventually murdered in Barok, Panary, and in the Ninth Fort. Having been used multifariously – first for the killing of political opponents by the NKVD and then in the Holocaust – such sites of bitter memory exist close to just about every city in the borderland.

First Reactions to Nazi Violence

According to Nikolaj Biessonov, who examined the Soviet Roma under occupation, Roma from western parts of the Soviet Union hardly anticipated any danger from the German invaders, which Biessonov explains by the fact that elderly people remembered the German occupation during the First World War and did not asso-

²² Bartash, *Sedentarisation*, 23-51, here 29.

²³ Per Anders Rudling, *Neprykmetny Genatsyd. Halakost u Belarusi [Invisible Genocide. The Holocaust in Belarus]*, in: *ARCHE* 2 (2013), 122.

ciate it with any particular danger.²⁴ Few Roma in the border region had contacts among other Roma groups in Germany or German-occupied Europe and were thus unaware of the racial policies being implemented against Roma and Sinti since the 1930s.²⁵ Moreover, it seems that the fear of victimisation on ethnic grounds was hardly known to the local Roma, since they had not faced any organised persecution since the time of their first arrival in these lands from Western Europe in the late fifteenth century.²⁶ From this perspective, it is no wonder that the question ‘why’ remains unanswered for many Romani survivors and their families into the present day, which has given birth to multiple popular interpretations. The most common opinion is that “Germans started to murder Roma because many of us had joined partisans”.

According to the new administrative division, most of the former Wilno Voivodeship was included in the Generalbezirk Litauen of the Reichskommissariat Ostland (with the exception of Hlybokaye, which belonged to the Generalbezirk Weißruthenien). Killings of Roma began there very early, with the retreat of the Red Army in the summer of 1941. For instance, a large nomadic group who had intended to move eastwards were murdered near Medniki/Medininkai in the first months of the German occupation.²⁷ Although there was not yet an organised campaign against Roma at that time, nomadic groups were killed by the Einsatzgruppen wherever they came into contact. Evidence of the first planned action against Roma emerges from Hlybokaye in the autumn of 1941. According to eyewitness testimonies and memoirs of Jewish survivors, more than a thousand nomadic Roma, including disabled persons and children, were killed there in the autumn and winter of 1941. The victims had been repeatedly brought to Hlybokaye from the countryside and, following a short-term internment in the yard of the local police and gendarmerie, were driven to the execution site in Barok.²⁸

The evidence from Hlybokaye is remarkable for several reasons. First, it reveals an active participation of police and gendarmes in this first wave of persecution of the Romani population. Second, this information somewhat contradicts the accepted chronologies of the genocide of Roma in the Soviet Union, according to which a systematic extermination of Roma began in the spring of 1942.²⁹ It seems that this date correlates rather with the beginning of the organised campaign against the entire Romani population, including sedentary families from the countryside. Nomadic groups were then the first to fall victim to Nazi persecution, given their visibility on the roads and unawareness of danger. At the beginning of the occupation, they tried to keep on the move, earning their livelihoods by their usual trades and by services

24 Nikolaj Biessonov, *Nazistowskie Ludobójstwo Cyganów na Białorusi* [The Nazi Genocide of Gypsies in Belarus], in: *Studia Romologica* 2010 (3), 21-40; *Tsyganskaja tragedija. 1941–1945. Fakty, dokumenty, vospominanija* [Gypsy Tragedy. Facts, Documents, Memories]. Vol. II. *Voorużennyj otpor* [Armed Resistance]. Saint Petersburg 2010.

25 See for instance: Sybil Milton, *Nazi Policies toward Roma and Sinti, 1933–1945*, in: *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 2 (1992) 1, 1-18.

26 This despite the fact that every state (the Belarusian-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Polish Kingdom, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union) regularly initiated campaigns aimed to settle local Romani groups and use them as a work force. See: Bartash, *Sedentarisation*, 23-51.

27 The only survivor of the group, from whom we know the story, is Lubov Pasevich, born 1927. She was rescued by her father who managed to push her down the hill while the executors were taking a smoking break.

28 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 7021/92, RG-22.002M, Extraordinary State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes Committed on Soviet Territory from the USSR, 1941–1945.

29 The beginning of the planned extermination of the Romani population of the Reichskommissariat Ostland is commonly associated with the order of Reichskommissar Hinrich Lohse of 24 December 1941, which prescribed that all ‘Gypsies’ be treated in the same manner as Jews. See: Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg 1999, 1063.

to the local population. Moreover, most Roma did not try to avoid contact with German military units, and some even tried to earn money with musical performances for German soldiers.

It is worth mentioning that Hlybokaye and the nearby towns of Pastavy and Braslaw were areas of seasonal migrations of Roma. Not only local families but also groups from other parts of the Soviet Union travelled through the region during the warm nomadic season. The executions in Hlybokaye began in the autumn, the time when Romani families would normally look for winter homes in villages. It is very probable that non-local Roma were among the first victims, as they were caught by the occupation in an area where they did not have local contacts. Through my fieldwork in the region, I have come across mass graves of 'unknown' Roma which are not tended to by local Romani communities and, most probably, do not belong to their relatives.

Interaction with the Local Population

My observations in no way intend to question Holler's thesis that nomadic and sedentary Roma experienced the same treatment by the Nazi authorities. Rather, I argue that the occupation regime needed more time to organise the extermination of the latter. As my research shows, sedentary families were better integrated into their local communities and often did not differ significantly in lifestyle and sometimes appearance from their neighbours. In the region under consideration, there were almost no exclusively Romani settlements. More often, Romani families lived in Belarusian neighbourhoods. Therefore, the identification of sedentary families required more data collection and knowledge of the local situation and was not possible without the collaboration of the local population. Nevertheless, conversations with Romani families reveal that many sedentary families could rely on the support of their local communities. Through my fieldwork, I have met families who survived the war in their home places, staying unidentified until the end of the war.³⁰ In this sense, their experiences of survival through the hardships of the war were not much different from those of the non-Roma population.

Since the rural population played an important role in the survival of Roma, it is important to realise the conditions under which peasants experienced the war. The expression 'between two fires' seems well-suited to describe the plight of local peasants. Germans and Soviet partisans based in the forests were the main belligerent parties in the occupied territories, and they fought not only in armed actions but in competition for local resources, too. Needless to say, the local population, including Roma, often fell victim to this competition without consciously taking the one or other side. For instance, the people who supported partisans, providing for them involuntarily (the so-called partisan tax), were at a high risk of being killed by Germans. Some partisan activities could be seen as counterproductive, as a small action against Germans turned into a large-scale punitive action against the local population. For instance, in the Vidzy district alone, 22 villages were destroyed in 1942, several of them along with their populations.³¹

30 Interview of the author with Josef Golovacki, Petrykau, September 2009; interview of the author with Barbara Gasparovich, Eishishkes, October 2016.

31 National Archive of the Republic of Belarus, Database of Belarusian Villages Destroyed during the Second World War, <http://db.narb.by/> (27 March 2017).

After being robbed by Germans and partisans, peasants were often left without any means of subsistence. From this viewpoint, the local population may have perceived the visits of nomadic groups as a further burden. The capturing of a nomadic group on its way to or upon arrival at a village was a typical circumstance for how nomadic Roma perished. A fragment of an interview recorded by Biessonov with a woman whose family was murdered near Pastavy reflects the shock of the nomadic Roma who found themselves in such a situation:

“Perhaps someone reported that our caravan had come to the village. Germans arrived on their motorcycles and started rounding people up. Peasants locked themselves in their homes, but where could the Roma go? Our ways were barred. The women ran into orchards and pretended they were working there. But was it possible to pretend? Roma had colourful skirts, and their children were running around naked.”³²

A close reading of oral histories, as well as a closer look at archival sources, plainly reveals the tensions in the relations between nomadic groups and peasants. Oral histories with Roma reveal that they often failed to receive food from peasants in exchange for their services and possessions and had to steal from farms at night.³³ This often resulted in open confrontations. The perpetrators’ archives provide information on the arrests and executions of “Gypsies who terrorised the rural population”.³⁴ Nevertheless, there is a high probability that the police used the excuse of “terrorising the local population” to execute genocidal policies against Roma.

On the other hand, every story of survival points out the support of the rural population. The scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed consideration of this issue, but it seems that there were three main ways in which the non-Roma population could rescue Roma. In the case of sedentary families, this was mainly through support of their local communities in concealing their identities. In the case of nomadic Roma, this was either through warnings about a threat or through rescuing Roma in times of persecutions. In November 1942, the Nazi police carried out raids in the Ashmjany County of modern-day Belarus and identified an extended family of Roma numbering over forty people, who were trying to survive the winter among the local peasants. The Roma were killed in the forest near a village cemetery. Only three small children survived the execution. They were rescued by a local woman from Norshty who managed to hide them on her own farm. Despite police warnings, the woman refused to affirm the presence of Romani children on her farm. It goes without saying that she thereby put her own life, as well as the lives of her children, at risk.³⁵

In the Woods

During the Second World War, a large part of the borderland consisted of swampy forest, which provided a natural shelter for thousands of endangered people. Since the beginning of the war, there was a constant stream of people looking for a hiding place in the woods. These included Soviet soldiers who had found themselves encircled, deserters from the Red Army, Jewish escapees from ghettos, and other population groups who, for one or another reason, could not stay in the towns and cities

³² Biessonov, *Nazistowskie Ludobójstwo*, 21-40, here 37.

³³ Interview of the author with Dmitrij Brylevich, Sluck, October 2008.

³⁴ Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 1065.

³⁵ Interview of the author with Galina Vantsevich, Minsk, June 2015.

under German control. On the other hand, the forest was a high-risk zone. More than ten Soviet partisan units were active in the Belarusian part of the border region since 1942, but there were also other military and paramilitary groups. Though their political orientation was often unclear (sometimes they were in confrontation with both the Germans and the Soviet partisans), the paramilitary groups took part in the competition for zones of influence and local resources. Thus they presented a danger to the local population.

Any attempt to place nomadic Roma in the above context leads us to the question of how they could be affected by the competition among the fighting parties. Because of the lack of sufficient evidence, an answer would at this stage be premature. Nevertheless, the analysis of oral histories shows that nomadic groups were deeply affected. Several of my interviewees have mentioned the caravans of Roma who perished at the hands of armed groups in Belarusian forests and, for one interviewee, it was a personal experience.³⁶ Though nomadic Roma could be killed for different reasons, including robbery, it is likely that their very presence in the forest might have been seen as a danger by other sides.

This plight made many Romani families seek protection from the Soviet partisans. Biessonov's book is the only work to date that deals with the theme of Romani resistance in the Soviet Union. It presents multiple examples of the participation of Roma in the Soviet partisan movement, where they fulfilled different tasks from scouting to active combat. The fact that Roma were accepted in Belarusian and Russian partisan units is, of course, remarkable in and of itself, since the same was not always possible for Jewish escapees from ghettos.³⁷ Nevertheless, the local context requires a more critical discussion of the Romani participation in the partisan movement. Indeed, heroic memories of Roma hold an important place in the Romani narratives of the Second World War and are also reflected in their folklore, social structures, and practices.³⁸ Simultaneously, it is probable that the memories of Roma have been affected by the Soviet memory culture of the Second World War, which portrayed the partisan movement in an exclusively heroic light.

In reality, joining a partisan unit was a survival strategy for many inhabitants of the border region. As mentioned above, many sedentary Roma families suffered from the German extermination actions along with the rest of the rural population. Through my fieldwork, I have met several Romani families who lost their homes and possessions in fire and went to the local forests to seek help from partisans.³⁹ Nevertheless, most of my interviews, as well as those conducted by other scholars, recount either individual experiences of Roma in partisan units or those of sedentary families. This leads to the question what the chances for acceptance of an extended family were, and how the groups of Roma who stayed in the forests under partisan control interacted with the partisans. According to Biessonov's interviewees, partisans often asked caravans to hide or transfer their wounded in wagons.⁴⁰ It goes without saying that any co-operation with partisans, even if not fully voluntary, significantly

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Anika Walke writes about young Jewish escapees from the Minsk ghetto who were rejected by partisan commanders because of their antisemitic attitudes. Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans. An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia*, New York 2015.

³⁸ After the war, the Roma who were engaged in the partisan movement had a high social status in their native communities and often led nomadic groups. Many of them also had characteristic nicknames. On the level of social organisation, there is a group of Roma called *Partizany* (Partisans).

³⁹ Interview of the author with Pavel Yanovich, Pastavy, September 2015; Interview of the author with Pavel Grohovsky, Ashmjany, July 2015.

⁴⁰ Biessonov, *Nazistowskie Ludobójstwo*, 21-40, here 22.

increased the vulnerability of nomadic Roma from other sides. On the other hand, it seems that one should be cautious when dealing with such narratives, since Roma are often inclined to overestimate their co-operation with the partisans as the cause of the Nazi persecution.

Conclusions

This contribution aimed to demonstrate the historical value of the first- and second-generation accounts of the Roma who survived the Nazi persecution in the German-occupied Belarusian-Lithuanian border region. My analysis has shown that family biographies not only contribute new knowledge on Nazi policies towards Romani populations but shed new light on Romani suffering and survival. The survival experiences of Roma evidently depended on their lifestyle (sedentary or nomadic), pre-war patterns of interaction with the local population, and their support during the Second World War.

Moreover, an integrated approach helps differentiate Romani experiences. Though the Nazi policies were aimed equally at the extermination of sedentary and nomadic communities, it seems that the plight of nomadic Roma was more complicated. They were the first to fall victim to Nazi persecution and were more vulnerable because of their visibility, mobile lifestyle, and the more hostile attitudes of the local population. Non-local Roma, who did not speak the languages of the border region and had hardly any local contacts, had even less chances of survival.

In this article, I have argued for the inclusion of Romani experiences in the history of their micro-regions. On the one hand, placing family memories of Roma in their local contexts allows for a better understanding of Romani experiences, as in the case of sedentary families who suffered from the German extermination actions against the rural population. On the other hand, taking a Romani perspective, or looking at local history through Romani eyes, helps better understand what was happening on the ground and understand the history of the Second World War in the Soviet Union more generally.

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