

Tracing the Legacies of the Roma Genocide. Families as Transmitters of Experience and Memory

Veranstalter: AHRC Research Network on Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945, University of Liverpool; Prague Forum for Romani Histories, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences; Celia Donert, University of Liverpool; Eva Rosenhaft, University of Liverpool; Helena Sadílková, Seminar of Romani Studies, Department of Central European Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague; Kateřina Čapková, Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences

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Part of a series of events exploring the legacies of the Romani genocide in postwar European history, this conference took the 'family' as a lens for exploring Romani history, memory, and experience. In their introduction, CELIA DONERT (University of Liverpool) and KATEŘINA ČAPKOVÁ (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague) explained that the conference aimed to bring anthropological perspectives and cultural insights from Romani studies into dialogue with historical scholarship. It raised the possibility of co-production of knowledge by including Roma activists and second- and third-generation survivors who reflected on the politics of memory and the impact of the Romani Holocaust on the lives of Roma in the postwar period. Third, and more broadly, it sought to overcome the tendency to write histories of Roma in isolation from national and European histories.

Panel I, entitled „Families as Transmitters of Experience and Memory“, asked how scholars might search for the traces of genocide in the subjective and material experiences of Romani families since the end of the Second World War, how they can trace and narrate the legacies of the Roma genocide within families of first-, second- and third-generation survivors, and to what extent we can compare the memories of per-

secution of Roma with those of other survivors. All papers in this section reflected on the intergenerational production of family memories against a common backdrop: the general marginalization of the Romani Holocaust in the public memory in East Central European societies and lack of political will to address the issue of non-existent commemoration sites. Historian and anthropologist VOLHA BARTASH (University of Uppsala) drew on her oral history research to explore the transmission of memories and forms of commemoration among Romani families from the Belarusian-Lithuanian borderlands. HANNA ABAKUNOVA (Sheffield University) compared the memory and narration of the persecution of Roma in Ukraine by Roma and non-Roma (including Jewish) actors. LADA VIKOVÁ (University of Pardubice) used archival research and oral history to reconstruct the forgotten experience of the Holocaust in a Romani family from the former Czechoslovakia. Since the first-generation survivors' post-war coping strategy was to remain silent about their experience, the second and third generations had previously learnt only bits and pieces about the painful family history in the context of family gatherings.

The evening program started with an opening of the exhibition called „... don't forget the photos, it's very important ...“ created in collaboration by EVE ROSENHAFT (University of Liverpool) and JANA MÜLLER (Alternatives Jugendzentrum e.V. Dessau). This was followed by a public discussion with first- and second-generation Roma and Sinti survivors from Germany and the Czech Republic, most of whom were experienced narrators involved in various youth education projects in their regions. HERMANN HÖLLENREINER (Mettenheim) shared his memory of the „death march“ from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and his experiences after the Second World War in France. ELSA HÖLLENREINER (Mettenheim) spoke about the sterilization of Romani and Sinti women in Ravensbrück. JIŘINA SOMSIOVÁ (Olomouc) recalled her parents' experiences in the concentration camp Hodonín near Kunštát and other camps in the Third Reich. JAN HAUER (Beroun) explained that his parents – Czech Sinti – were largely silent about

their wartime experiences of internment in the concentration camp in Lety near Písek and later in Auschwitz. Silence was also the response of ZDENĚK DANIEL's (Jablonec nad Nisou) parents from a Moravian Roma family. For Daniel the topic of the Roma and Sinti genocide remains extremely painful and beyond expression in words. The discussion, which attracted a large Czech audience, concluded with MARIO FRANZ's (Bad Iburg) story of his Sinti parents. The lively discussion demonstrated participants' consciousness of continuing discrimination in the present; memories of genocide constitute an important part of the collective identities of German, Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti.

The second panel of the conference was entitled „Memory, Family Histories, and the State“. It sought to explore continuities in discriminatory practices within local and national welfare agencies, police, health and education authorities in post-1945 Europe and the ways in which they influenced memories of persecution among Roma communities and families. ARI JOSKOWICZ (Vanderbilt University) reflected on the unequal power dynamics that shaped Romani testimonies produced by the state attorney's office in West Germany for the second Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in the late 1960s. These sources demonstrate continuities in surveillance and knowledge production about 'Gypsies' in postwar Germany, but also bear significant traces of Romani agency. Joskowicz reminded the audience that, in viewing the 'Romani family' as a site of authentic experience, historians might be unwittingly replicating states' efforts to control Roma populations. PETRE MATEI (Elie Wiesel National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania) explored how the Romani Holocaust entered into public discourse in Romania through the efforts of Roma activists, but also due to the Romanian state's interest in claiming compensation from West Germany. Testimonies recorded since the early 1970s for these purposes, though limited in scope and content by formal requirements of the compensation application, represent an important source for studying the history of the Romani Holocaust. ESZTER VARSA (University of Regensburg) dis-

cussed the post-1945 continuities in surveillance and normalizing practices of the Hungarian state, as it targeted Roma in the realms of family policies and child care. Nonetheless, she argued against seeing the parents of children in institutional care solely as victims. Her research shows that on numerous occasions, parents made use of the state institutions when their economic situation or other circumstances prevented them from taking care of their children.

The third panel, called „The Destruction and Reconstruction of Community“, dealt primarily with Roma voices in written or oral sources and thus sought to contest the image of Roma as silent victims. VIOREL ACHIM (Nicolae Iorga Institute of History, Romanian Academy of Sciences) presented rich archival sources created between 1943 and 1944 in the region of Transnistria by Roma who were deported there from Romania. These documents include individual as well as collective petitions and applications for return to Romania, for permission to practise trades, or for food, clothes and work. As well as reflecting the contemporary process of Roma ghettoization and persecution in the region they also show a variety of Roma agency during the Second World War in the face of mass expulsions and genocide. GRÉGOIRE COUSIN (Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme) offered an anthropological perspective on family narratives of Bessarabian Roma currently living in France, with a focus on the traces of the Holocaust in their testimonies. Family oral history and questions regarding the role of memory in constituting a recent community identity led Cousin into archives in Romania. With the help of archival sources he was able to reconnect the memories with past events and to identify a connection with the past on the basis of the names used in the community. HELENA SADÍLKOVÁ (Charles University) and MILADA ZÁVODSKÁ (Museum of Romani Culture, Brno) explored the first written testimonies about the genocide by Roma in Czechoslovakia after the end of the Second World War. Their research reveals that at least two Roma activists in Czechoslovakia who were members of the resistance fighters' organisations spoke out about what had happened to them during the war. They were al-

ready actively seeking ways of sharing their experiences with a wider public audience in the 1950s. Pointing out that there are probably more written testimonies in the possession of Roma families, Sadílková argued that we may be overestimating the need to rely on oral history to gain access to the genocide experience.

The last panel, „Private Memories and Commemorative Cultures“, further expanded the scope beyond oral testimonies and the unit of the family to representations of Roma and Sinti genocide in popular culture shortly after the Second World War, outlining the development of commemorative institutions and providing insight into current educational programs. Papers by colleagues from the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno made clear that the general assumption of the „forgotten-ness“ of the Holocaust and the „empty years“ of communism in this respect calls for critical scrutiny: DUŠAN SLÁČKA (Museum of Romani Culture, Brno) explored the representation of Roma and Sinti genocide in a Czechoslovak movie produced in 1960. The establishment of the Czech Museum of Romani Culture and its current activities were the focus of the presentation of JANA HORVÁTHOVÁ (Museum of Romani Culture, Brno). As a second generation survivor of the genocide of Roma and Sinti in the Czech lands herself she connected the institutional history with her individual experiences of remembering and forgetting the genocide in the family circle. She made it clear that it was the survivors themselves who were the driving force behind the creation of a commemoration site which would present the culture and history of their community in public, and that they managed to achieve this at least partially as early as the early 1970s. THORSTEN FEHLBERG (Bundesverband Information & Beratung für NS-Verfolgte e. V.) and ANNE KLEIN (University of Cologne) were concerned with educational methods which could communicate the fact and meanings of the genocide to people who were not affected by it, especially youth.

The closing round table and discussion drew out a range of issues and prospects for further research that can engage and cut across the disciplines engaged in the study of Romani history. TARA ZAHRA (Univer-

sity of Chicago) cautioned against universalization, that is imposing Jewish narratives on the Romani experience. As a further avenue for research, she proposed turning to material culture, or objects or property passed down to later generations, as transmitters of memory. Helena Sadílková warned that conventional perceptions about Roma as producers of oral rather than written sources only serves to legitimise unequal power relationships with majority societies. IULIUS ROSTAS (CEU) emphasised the need for critical dialogue between the academy and the Romani NGO sector. Rostas commented that research rarely addresses the persecution of Roma on the grounds of sexual identity, and identified Romani resistance during World War II as an under-researched area.

ČENĚK RŮŽIČKA (Committee for the Reparation of Romani Victims of the Holocaust, Czech Republic) remarked that, unlike Jewish communities, Roma lack the social, cultural and economic capital necessary to engage in independent research and add to or challenge the dominant narratives. JAN GRILL (Universidad del Valle) problematized the focus on family, asking what it allows us to achieve analytically. He proposed not only to approach the family as a site of refuge but also as a site of struggle, tension and renegotiation. Grill further drew attention to the ambiguity of data that sometimes preclude the drawing of clear boundaries between categories and deciding who is Roma and who not, who is the perpetrator and who the victim. Ari Joskowicz suggested the need for further comparative and transnational research, and argued in particular for the relevance of the East-West divide in the context of transfer of knowledge in the divided Cold War World. Joskowicz further asked whether there is a way to productively rethink the convenient post-war chronology. He also invoked the value of producing a relational, not just comparative, history of the Jewish and Romani persecution, while acknowledging that this relationship will not necessarily be recognized by the groups in question. Finally, Joskowicz, along with Eve Rosenhaft, touched upon the question of co-production of knowledge. They argued that the very process of collaboration between researchers and

respondents during which the actors get to know each other has a human and heuristic value, but also that we need to be aware that sometimes the outcome of the collaboration is not interesting to or compatible with the interests of the respondents. The roundtable opened up a variety of questions that will be discussed in more detail at follow-up events organised by the Prague Forum on Romani Histories, and at the next conference of the AHRC research network on the legacies of the Roma genocide, to be held in Paris in May 2018.

Conference Overview:

Welcome and Introduction

Celia Donert (Liverpool)
Eve Rosenhaft (Liverpool)

Panel I: Families as Transmitters of Experience and Memory

Chair: Kateřina Čapková (Prague)

Volha Bartash (Uppsala): The Holocaust in Three Generations? Transmitting Memories and Communicating Trauma in Romani Families in Belarus and Lithuania

Hana Abakunova (Sheffield): Memories of Persecution of Roma in Ukraine during the Second World War: Roma vs. non-Roma Perspectives

Lada Viková (Pardubice): „Not being others“ and „Forgetting the Auschwitz Trauma“ as two chosen strategies in the postwar history of a Czech-Moravian Roma family

Exhibition Opening

“... don’t forget the photos, it’s very important ...” The National Socialist Persecution of Central German Sinti and Roma
Eva Rosenhaft (Liverpool)
Jana Müller (Dessau)

Discussion

The Roma Genocide: Living with the Past
Chairs: Jana Horváthová (Brno), Jana Müller (Dessau)
Participants: Zdeněk Daniel (Jablonec nad Nisou), Mario Franz (Bad Iburg), Jan Hauer (Beroun), Hermann (Mano) and Else Höllenreiner (Mettenheim), Jiřina Somsiová (Olomouc)

Panel II: Memory, Family Histories, and the State

Chair: Yasar Abu Ghosh (Prague)

Ari Joskowicz (Nashville): Judicial Testimony and Communal Memory: Pretrial Interviews with Romani Survivors in the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials

Petre Matei (Bucharest): Roma in Romania and their Memories of the Holocaust – a Complicated Interplay between Survivors, Families, Activists and State

Eszter Varsa (Regensburg): Child protection authorities’ perception of Romani and non-Romani families in early state socialist Hungary

Panel III: The Destruction and Reconstruction of Community: Family Narratives

Chair: Ilse About (Paris)

Viorel Achim (Bucharest): Roma deported to Transnistria speaking about their suffering in petitions from 1943-44

Grégoire Cousin (Paris): Creating a community, sharing a history: family narratives of Bessarabian Roma in France and Romania

Helena Sadílková (Prague)/ Milada Závodská (Brno): „After the liberation from the camp I returned to my country“ (Leon Růžička). Two written testimonies (1958,1980) by Romani Holocaust Survivors in Communist Czechoslovakia: Asserting a presence outside the private sphere

Panel IV: Private Memories and Commemorative Cultures

Chair: Krista Hegburg (Washington)

Dušan Slačka (Brno): The Circumstances of Creation of Miroslav Bárta’s Short Documentary Motion Picture *Nezapomeňme na tohle děvčátko* (Don’t forget this little girl)

Jana Horváthová (Brno): Holocaust as Both a Family Trauma and an Impulse for the Institutionalisation of Research and Documentation, Remembrance and Assistance with Compensation Claims

Anne Klein (Cologne)/ Thorsten Fehlberg (Cologne): Who speaks? Tracing the transmission of the Roma Genocide in private

memory and commemorative culture

Roundtable Discussion

Chair: Celia Donert

Participants: Jan Grill (Cali), Ari Joskowicz, Iulius Rostas (Budapest), Čeněk Růžička (Prague), Tara Zahra (Chicago)

Tagungsbericht *Tracing the Legacies of the Roma Genocide. Families as Transmitters of Experience and Memory*. 20.09.2017–21.09.2017, Prag, in: H-Soz-Kult 17.04.2018.