LET THE VICTIMS SPEAK

Memories of Belarusian Roma as Sources for Genocide Studies[1]

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In the last twenty years the National Socialist persecution of European Roma and Sinti has become a core issue of Holocaust studies. The academic discourse in the field includes a wide range of questions. Researchers extensively debate on an appropriate term for the National Socialist policy towards Roma, the number of victims, the differences in persecution of nomadic and settled Roma, etc.

Nonetheless, large geographic regions where large-scale exterminations of Roma took place remain empirically under-studied. Not much is known about how Roma in the countries of the former Soviet Union experienced the National Socialist genocide; incomprehensive archival sources complicate the evaluation of the persecutions that took place.[2] In this situation family memories of Roma acquire particular importance. This article intends to discuss the ways in which oral history study could contribute to the research on the National Socialist genocide of Belarusian Roma. The overarching goal is to draw the attention of the scientific community to the survivors' reminiscences and to inspire more active research on the subject. As Stewart has rightly suggested, the opinion that Roma "forget rather than remember their history" still prevails within the scientific community.[3] In spite of the growing scholarly interest in the post-Holocaust memories and identities of Roma, most authors focus on the commemorative acts of national elites, bypassing common remembering practices.[4]

1 I am grateful to Alexander Friedman for his appropriate and helpful comments on the first draft of this paper. I also wish to thank Federico Buccellati, University of Frankfurt/Main for his corrections.

2 Cf. discussion in 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 (14.3.2013).

3 Michael Stewart, Remembering without commemoration: the mnemonics and the politics of Holocaust memories 1among European Roma, in: Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N. S.) 10 (2004), pp. 561–582, cf. p. 561.

4 Cf. Gabrielle Tyrnauer, Holocaust History and the Gypsies, in: Alice L. Eckardt (ed.), Burning Memory: Times of Testing and Reckoning, Oxford 1993, pp. 283–295; Slawomir Kapralski, The Voices of a Mute Memory. The Holocaust and the Identity of the Eastern European Romanies, in: Felicitas Fischer von Weikersthal et al. (eds.), Der nationalsozialistische Genozid an den Roma Osteuropas, Cologne, Weimar, Vienna 2008, pp. 93–114; Huub van Baar, Cultural policy and the governmentalization of Holocaust remembrance in Europe: Romani memory

The interviews used in the paper were conducted during my ethnographic fieldwork in nine Romani communities in Belarus between 2005 and 2010. My Ph. D. research was primarily aimed at the social structures of Roma but it was impossible to avoid discussing World War II during the interviews. The National Socialist genocide was considered by my informants as the main event of their modern history. The majority of Belarusian Roma had not managed to escape the rapid approach of the Nazi troops in 1941 and found themselves under occupation until 1944. During the occupation, hundreds of them were exterminated individually and in groups, deported to Germany for forced labor or interned in concentration camps. The number of Roma uprooted during the National Socialist occupation in Belarus was discussed in several historical studies.[5] According to the calculations of Gerlach, at least 3 000 Belarusian Roma were murdered by different sections of the Nazi forces.[6] In his preliminary study of Soviet archives Bessonov has counted about 1 000 Romani victims, acknowledging that this number can increase after a careful investigation of the Soviet and German sources.[7]

Though the number of victims is uncertain so far, the interviews conducted demonstrate that each Romani family, no matter whether it was sedentary or nomadic, has its survivors, victims or heroes to remember. On the other hand, Roma do not confine themselves to family memories. In different localities where I carried out my research, the stories under the general theme "how Roma survived the war" contained common interpretations of the events. It seems that in the course of oral narration Roma have been elaborating the concept of their past, which once more testifies against the conclusions about their indifference towards native history.

Some scholars have expressed the opinion that the period during which oral history data remains reliable is rather short, usually no more than eighty years after the event.[8] Although almost seventy years have passed, survivors (at least those who were children during World War II) remain available for personal interviewing. Some survivors were able to pass their reminiscences to their children with precise details such as names of the victims, their age and family status, places and time of executions. The historical value of Roma' family memories has been confirmed by the recent work of Bessonov[9] which couples them with data derived from archives. This approach seems to be fruitful since it permits us to consider the events not only from an outsider's point of view but from the perspective of the

between denial and recognition, in: International Journal of Cultural Policy, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2011), pp. 1–17.

5 Christian Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde: die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941 bis 1944, Hamburg [2]1999; Nikolaj Bessonov, Nazistowskie ludobójstwo Cyganów na Białorusi [The Nazi Genocide in Belarus], in: Studia Romologica, Vol. 3 (2010), pp. 21–40.

6 Cf. Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde (fn. 5), p. 1063.

7 Cf. Bessonov, Nazistowskie ludobójstwo (fn. 5), p. 39.

8 Jan Assmann, Das Kulturelle Gedächtnis, Munich 2007, p. 51.

9 Nikolaj Bessonov, Tsyganskaia tragediia1941–1945. Fakty, dokumenty, vospominaniia, Vol. II, Vooruzhennyĭ Otpor [The Gypsy's Tragedy 1941–1945. Facts, Documents, memoires, Vol. 2, Armed resistance], Moscow 2010.

persecuted as well. Apparently, many significant factors of Roma' survival on the occupied territories have been under-estimated; traditional lifestyle and internal organization of each Romani group, its relations with local population and survival strategies are among them. In order to assess these factors, the article analyses the remembrances of Belarusian Roma as well as historical and ethnographical data.

LIFESTYLE AND RELATIONS WITH SURROUNDING POPULATION

Most Roma who were traveling in Belarus during World War II had inhabited Belarus for centuries. As far as the medieval sources go, first groups of Roma reached Belarusian lands in the late 15th and early 16th century during their first migration wave from Western Europe.[10] During centuries of living together, Romani language and culture have been heavily influenced by Slavic surroundings. The term "seasonal traveling" proposed by Matras[11] is very suitable to characterize a lifestyle of Belarusian Roma. In the region under consideration winters are cold and snowy which makes winter traveling impossible. In winter, Roma were sheltered by peasants at their cottages and therefore participated in village economies which were based on bartering food for goods and services among neighbors. Instead of rental payments, Roma assisted their hosts in running farms and put their horses at peasants' disposal. Many families acquired cattle for themselves and turned their small farms mobile in spring. During winter festivities Roma who were talented dancers and musicians participated in cultural events of village communities. This, nevertheless, does not mean that Roma were perceived as native village dwellers. For instance, the masks of a *Tsyhan* (Bel. "Gypsy man") and a *Tsyhanka* (Bel. "Gypsy woman") were used by peasants in ritual games along with the masks of other „aliens", such as a Jew, a priest and a doctor.[12]

During the warm nomadic season contact zones between Roma and peasants remained but were restricted to economic purposes. Roma set their camps close to villages in order to allow their women to earn livelihoods by fortunetelling, healing and begging. The men involved in horse-dealing carried on business with the rural population at weekend county fairs. Seasonal specifics in the Roma – peasants' relations are well-illustrated by Romani folklore which lacks spring and summer calendar poetry, while Christmas songs are performed in Belarusian or Polish. A part of Roma in Belarus was sedentary and entirely adopted the lifestyle of peasants.

10 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, De l'Est à l'Ouest. Chronologie et typologie des migrations Tsiganes en Europe (du XVème siècle jusqu'à présent), in: Études Tsiganes, No. 27–28 (2006), pp. 10–25.

11 Yaron Matras, Romani Migrations in the Post-Communist Era: Their Historical and Political Significance, in: Cambridge Review of International Affairs, No. 13/2 (2000), pp. 32–50.

12 Cf. Tatsts'jana Kukharonak, Maski ŭ kaliandarnaĭ abradnastsi belarusaŭ, Minsk 2001, pp. 29, 43–45, 58, 59, 69, 80, 107, 108, 133, 135, 136, 146, 158–160, 169, 170, 173, 216.

Similarly to other regions where Roma interacted with non-Roma farmers[13], each side discoursed upon the other's cultural differences, asserting their own moral superiority. The narratives of the 19th and early 20th centuries portray *Tsyhany* (Gypsies) as dangerous thieves, tricky horse-dealers and fraud healers.[14] They were condemned for religious ignorance[15] and for using faith for personal purposes – by gaining well-to-do godparents for their children, for instance. The intercommunication was accompanied by lots of myths. Elder Belarusians who live in villages still believe that nomadic Roma stole children from peasants. Roma on their side composed the anecdotes about "greedy" and "suspicious" peasants, praising their own intellectual superiority and the traditions of collectivism. Nonetheless, it seems that the parties possessed the patterns of a quite peaceful living together. How those patterns operated under the threat of extermination, -was a factor of crucial importance for Roma' survival. "Local" Roma, indeed, had many more chances to be sheltered by farmers than the groups who migrated from other places. Few of approximately two hundred *Kelderari* who had moved to Belarus before the war survived.[16]

In the interwar period most Roma in western Belarus continued traveling. Since the region was a part of Poland in 1921–1939, it was not affected by the Soviet policy of collectivization that consolidated the family economies of peasants into collective farms. In the BSSR (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic) seasonal traveling was more complicated – the natural economy to which traditional lifestyle of Roma had been linked was being destroyed by forced involvement of the rural population in collective farming. Soviet government launched projects of Romani cooperative farms; however the attempts to settle Roma in the interwar period failed.[17]

The partition of Belarus into "western" and "eastern" sectors is well remembered by Roma due to its impact on their identities.[18] The ancestors of those who call themselves *Polska* (Polish) *Roma* today traveled on the territory of western Belarus and were Catholics. The *Ruska* (Russian) *Roma*, on the contrary, were orthodox and traveled in the regions close to Russia. In the interwar time many Roma

13 Cf. Ada I. Engebrigtsen, Within or outside? Perception of self and other among Rom groups in Romania and Norway, in: Romani Studies, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2011), pp. 123–144.

14 Cf. Aleksandr Dembovetskiĭ, Opyt Opisaniia Mogilevskoĭ Gubernii, Mahilëŭ 1882; Kirill T. Anikievich, Sennenskiĭ Uezd Mogilevskoĭ Gubernii, Mahilëŭ 1907, pp. 102–104

15 Like in other countries, Roma in Belarus follow the religion of the majority population. Most Belarusian Roma are Orthodox Christians, some of them are Catholics and, more recently, Protestants.

16 Bessonov, Nazistowskie ludobójstwo (fn. 5), p. 22.

17 Cf. Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, Ethnic identities and economic strategies of the Gypsies in the countries of the former USSR. Mitteilungen des SFB ‚Differenz und Integration', 4/1: Nomaden und Sesshafte – Fragen, Methoden, Ergebnisse, in: Orientwissenschaftliche Hefte (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg), 9 (2003), pp. 289–310.

18 Cf. Vol'ha Bartash (=Volha Bartash), Tsyganje Belarusi: skvoz' prizmu transformacii [Roma in Belarus: in the light of transformation], in: Interstitio. Eastern European Review of Historical and Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 2, No. 2 (4) (2008), pp. 17–29, http://gypsy-life.net/etno-06.htm (12.3.2013).

from western Belarus managed to immigrate to Poland; some of them were repatriated to Poland as "native Poles" after the war. Official registration as Poles or Belarusians helped many sedentary Roma survive the National Socialist occupation. In the eyes of persecutors the "official" nationality of settled Roma was confirmed by their lifestyle, and sometimes by their "blue eyes and blond hair" appearance, the result of marriages with peasants.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATION

Memories and post-memories of nomadic Roma give us the idea of how they were organized.[19] When leaving villages in late March or early April Romani families gathered in traveling groups called *tabors*. Each *tabor* consisted of several nuclear families, usually tied by kinships. *Tabors* of Belarusian Roma were not as large as *tabors* of the *Kelderari* mentioned above. Usually there were no more than about forty to fifty members. Non-relatives also could join a traveling group; however Roma from other subgroups[20] were not welcome. Each family was quite independent at the level of family decisions and was free to join another traveling group in spring. Nuclear families occupied separate tents in encampments; they had their own transport (usually a horse and a wagon), kitchen utensils and beddings.

The *tabor* relations were based on the principles of cooperation, solidarity and mutual support. There was a strict differentiation of responsibilities between men and women. Women cooperated for cooking, mushroom gathering and begging in villages. Men were responsible for social life. All important decisions regarding the relations with other *tabors* or surrounding populations were taken at the gatherings of married men. Internal disputes were settled by the institute of Romani traditional law *sendo* (court).[21] Being accepted, a family found itself under protection of the community but had to submit to the mechanisms of social control. In case one of its members breaking traditional moral or collective decisions, the family could be punished by social exclusion. For instance, if an unmarried girl had lost her virginity her family was excluded from the *tabor* and had to travel on their own. It was almost impossible for them to join another traveling group in the same locality since effective communication networks permitted everybody to be informed about their shame.

Mutual dependency made nomadic Roma strong enough to uphold their rights while being surrounded by other populations; but this turned out to be a disadvan-

19 Belarusian Roma who had survived the war continued to travel during the post-war decade. They began to settle after the Soviet decree of 1956 which had ordered them to take up permanent residences. Therefore I had the opportunity to interview the people raised in nomadic groups.

20 Migrations and living in multiple cultural surroundings caused significant ethnographic and linguistic differences among Roma. To define cultural and linguistic communities of Roma, scholars use the term „Romani groups ".

21 Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, The Gypsy Court in Eastern Europe, in: Romani Studies, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2007), pp. 67–101.

tage during the National Socialist occupation. The persecutors were aware enough of the communal nature of nomadic Roma to elaborate a proper policy towards them. Nomadic Roma were detained and exterminated in groups.

TORTURES AND SURVIVALS IN MEMORIES AND POST-MEMORIES

The National Socialist occupation was sudden for Belarusian Roma as well as for the majority of civilian population remote from the centers of Soviet propaganda; no one, indeed, could foretell the consequences. The percentage of Roma who joined the stream of refugees was very small even in the eastern regions of the country. In his book Bessonov explains this fact by the mechanisms of collective memory. In 1941 many Belarusian Roma remembered German occupation during World War I (1914–1918) and therefore did not associate the new invasion with any serious danger.[22] Moreover, it seems that the threat of ethnic persecution was hardly known to them. Since the time of Roma' arrival in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania there had not been any historical evidence of their victimization. Many informants hardly realize the "racial" motives of the Nazi persecutions even at present, naïvely supposing that they provoked the aggression in some way. The most common opinion is that "Germans started to murder Roma because many of them had joined partisans".[23]

Historians emphasize that there were not any concrete plans or orders to persecute Roma, whether sedentary or nomadic, at the beginning of the occupation.[24] The "death squads" slaughtered nomadic groups on their own initiative when coming in contact with them. Mass extirpations started in spring 1942. Survival strategies initiated by Roma varied greatly or, to be more precise, each sedentary family or nomadic group was guided by its own logic. According to the Nazi ideology, settled Roma seemed to be more advanced "racially and culturally" than nomadic. However not all of them preferred to stay in villages, mingling with other populations. Some families who had been sedentary for several generations joined *tabors*. The newcomers considered sheltering in the woods to be a safer strategy than staying in the places controlled by the Nazi administration. Others, whose houses had been burnt, had no other choice than to join nomadic relatives. Hiding in the woods is one of central motives in the reminiscences of my informants. The stories tell how they survived severe winters, covering their wagons with pine branches.[25]

The vulnerability of nomadic Roma was that, like in peacetime, their subsistence depended on peasants. The Roma – peasants' relations during the war is a de-

22 Cf. Bessonov, Tsyganskaia tragediia (fn. 9), p. 23.

23 Archive of the Institute of Arts, Ethnography and Folklore (hereafter AIAEF), National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, F. (= Fond) [fund] 8, O. (= Opis') [inventory] 2010, D. (= Delo) [file] 1, Materials of Ethnographic Expeditions of Volha Bartash (2005–2010), p. 42.

24 Cf. Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde (fn. 5); Michael Zimmermann, The Soviet Union and the Baltic States 1941–44: the massacre of the Gypsies, in: Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon (eds.), In the shadow of the Swastika: The Gypsies during the Second World War, Vol. 2, Hatfield 1999, pp. 131–148.

25 AIAEF (fn. 23), pp. 1–66.

manding issue. On the one hand, each story with happy end recounts how a Romani man or woman was sheltered by some family, or a *tabor* was informed by peasants about the danger.[26] Indeed, people who had lived together with Roma for centuries could not ignore the extermination of the latter. Nevertheless, the peasants went through the war in extremely hard conditions, since all parties – the invaders, the partisans and the bands of deserters, all of them – regularly demanded supplies. As the informants recollect, the men from *tabors* used to steal from peasants in order to survive. Unlike in peacetime, when women had practiced pickpocketing during the day time, men came to the farms tonight. This probably provoked the complaints of the rural population. The murders of Romani thieves by the Nazi police have been mentioned to me by several informants. The archival evidence is provided by Gerlach.[27]

The tortures which the victims underwent before death occupy an important place in family memories of Roma. Relatives of the deceased used to gather eyewitness testimonies afterwards. According to the testimonies, the "death squads" practiced a typical model for exterminating Roma. *Tabors* were often captured either *en route* or during their stays in villages. Then the victims were driven to some remote places (fields or woods) with an armed escort. They were forced to dig a collective grave for themselves, or the grave was dug by the locals, often those who had tried in vain to shelter them. Then, after terrible tortures and humiliation, persecutors or their auxiliaries from the local population shot the grown-ups on the edge of the grave. Pregnant women and children were murdered with especial cruelty. Executors used to strike pregnant women in the abdomen with their legs and did not spoil any cartridges for killing children; bayonets or simple beating to death came into play instead.[28]

Pregnant women, children, old people and people with physical disabilities can be regarded as the most defenseless members of *tabors* because of their physical limitations for escapement. Moreover, the lives of these people were often sacrificed for the survival of healthy adult individuals, irrespectively of the differences in attitudes towards old age, disability and pregnancy in Roma communities.[29] Writing on the National Socialist genocide of Belarusian Roma, Bessonov cites his female informant who has recounted her father's reminiscence of the extermination of a nomadic group near the town of *Pastavy*. During the Nazi raid upon the village, the informant's father, grandmother and a brother sheltered in a bathhouse: "My dad was not alone at the bathhouse. His mother and his son, a baby, were with him

26 Ibid.

27 Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde (fn. 5), p. 1063.

28 AIAEF (fn. 23), p. 1–66.

29 Roma usually took pity on orphans and people with physical or psychical disabilities. Excluded from their own families, non-Roma with disabilities often obtained new homes in Romani families. Elder people, both men and women, were respected as family advisors and major experts in Romani traditional law. On the contrary, women of reproductive age were considered to be impure, and their impurity considerably increased during pregnancy. Men avoided contacts with pregnant women in order to prevent the pollution. The same attitude extended to babies – men were candid about nursing.

(she held the baby in her arms). If the baby cried, it would be the end for my dad. He could not stand that and decided to creep away from the bathhouse. The Germans had not noticed him. When the dad saw their motorcycles moving away he came back [to the bathhouse]. His mother and son survived because the Germans had not checked the building"[30].

Likewise, the story I have recorded in the town of *Ashmiany* tells how a man left his wife and a daughter during the Nazi raid: "There is the village of *Slabada* not far from here. People remember a beautiful Romani woman who lived in *Slabada*. She was killed during the war but her husband survived because of her beauty. When the Germans came to the village he fled and left her at home alone. They entered the house and were amazed by her beauty. First they had raped her and then shot her down. Her daughter of five years old was also slaughtered".[31]

Women's fates during the occupation are a favorite theme of narration. Women recount these stories especially willingly. In the performance of the third generation the narratives considerably loose in their preciseness, focusing on ideas. The details of executions are often hyperbolized and poeticized ("moving graves", "blood oozed out the ground" and etc.). Thus the moments of suffering continue to live in the collective memory of Roma. It is a well-known psychological phenomenon that human memory is not inclined to cope with humiliation. Anguished memory of a people always tries to "restore its grace".[32]

This story has been told to me by the woman of 34 years in *Ashmiany*: "My grandmother was killed during the war when a 'death squadron' came to the village [the informant's grandmother was from a sedentary family]. She was pregnant and could not escape. She and her sister had been sheltered by one man under the stove but the Germans found them. They compelled the man to dig a grave for my granny and her sister. One German had struck my granny in the belly with his leg. The strike had been so strong that the baby was delivered. Before being killed my grandmother asked to sing a song, perhaps, to cope with fear. When the song was over they slaughtered her (it was the man who told us everything afterwards). Just at the same moment other Roma from my granny's village who sheltered in the wood were telling her fortune by the sand. [To imitate a grave] they filled a basin with sand and put a wooden cross into it. Then they took my grandmother's nightshirt and put it on the cross. To call the ancestors' ghosts, they said: 'If she is alive, then let us hear a clatter of hoofs. If she is dead, then let us hear a shot'. They heard the shot. Everybody ran to take the nightshirt off the cross. If they did not manage to do that they would be suffocated by the ghosts".[33] In spite of some imaginary mystical details the above story represents a remarkable sample of the genocide memory in the third generation. Of course, we do not know whether the part about fortunetelling was composed during the war or later, or whether the fortunetelling had taken

30 Bessonov, Nazistowskie ludobójstwo (fn. 5), p. 35.

31 AIAEF (fn. 23), p. 34.

32 Lawrence L. Langer, Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory, Yale 1993, p. 186.

33 AIAEF (fn. 23), p. 33.

place.[34] Moreover, in the context of Romani culture, the use of sorcery does not seem paradoxical at all.

Holler stresses that for the Soviet Roma "the direct personal perception of the war was not exclusively connected with sorrow and pain, but was also associated with a feeling of pride and triumph" because of the "contribution to the defeat of the German invaders, no matter whether they were soldiers, partisans or workers".[35] Indeed, many of the Belarusian Roma participated in the partisan movement in the German-occupied territories of the Soviet Union. Some nomadic groups had connections with partisans from the very beginning of the movement, though Roma usually joined partisan groups after their *tabors* had been destroyed or villages had been burnt. The families of former partisans are very proud to have their own heroes. They preserve old pictures and local newspapers which mention the names of their ancestors at family archives. To have partisans in a family was especially prestigious in the post-war decade. The informants remember the former partisans who led *tabors*; some of them even got characteristic nicknames, for instance, "Basyl, The Force".[36] Participation in the partisan movement is one of the main reasons for Roma' pride at present. "Do you know that Roma used to beat the Nazi?" informants asked me starting the conversation.

Post-Holocaust memories of Belarusian Roma surely deserve a thorough study. This article deals with the outcome of my preliminary research and does not cover the recollections of Roma who were interned in concentration camps or deported to Germany. Nothing is known about the destinies of those who had managed to join the stream of refugees in 1941. The projects on collecting war remembrances of Roma remain in high demand.

34 Cf. Anna Bravo, Lilia Davite and Daniele Jalla, Myth, Impotence and Survival in the Concentration Camps, in: Raphael Samuel und Paul Thompson (eds.), The Myths We Live By, London 1990, pp. 95–110 for a more elaborate discussion on the role of myths and fortunetelling in extreme conditions.

35 Holler, The National Socialist Genocide of the Roma in the German-occupied Soviet Union (Anm. 2).

36 AIAEF (fn. 23), p. 62.