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## **The Holocaust in the Memory of the Roma. From Trauma to Imagined Community?**

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***The Roma (as many of those called Gypsies in the English-speaking world prefer to call themselves) were among the main victims in the time of the Holocaust. Although historians argue whether they were targeted on the same racial grounds as the Jews were and whether their suffering may be compared with the tragedy of the Shoah, it is beyond question that hundreds of thousands of European Romanies perished in the Holocaust, many of them in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau and other Nazi death camps.***

***For various reasons, partly related to the peculiarities of Romani traditional culture, partly to their marginalized position in contemporary societies, the suffering of the Roma during WW II did not, until recently, become a part of the collective memories of the Romani communities. It was by and large a repressed trauma, which resurfaced only recently, mostly due to the intellectual and political activities of the Romani elites.***

***It may be argued that the emergence of the memory of suffering among the Roma is a factor that contributes to the construction of a new, transnational Romani identity. Thus, the emergence of the memory of extinction becomes a crucial part of the process in which different Romani communities***

***scattered all over the world may develop a sense of being a single 'imagined community.' This paper aims at presenting the advantages of this process as well as the obstacles it may encounter from various sides.***

## **A People Without a History?**

It is indeed striking that for a long time the academic and public debates regarding Romanies have not referred to Holocaust discourse, even if appropriate evidence has been in principle available. When the Romanies are discussed, it is rather in the contexts of the ethnography of ethnicity and social policy issues, not in terms of the most important event in European history that the Romanies were a part of. As a result, Gabrielle Tyrnauer observes that in the literature on the Holocaust, the 'story of the Gypsy extermination has become an almost forgotten footnote to the history of Nazi genocide' (Tyrnauer 1990 [1982], 366). One can actually speak here of a very unfortunate circle: the way the Romanies have been discussed does not contribute to Holocaust literature, and the marginal role of the Romanies in that literature does not influence those discourses in which the Romanies are present.

One can say that the fate of the Roma has not been debated in the discourse of the Holocaust because this very discourse had to be developed to give voice the specificity of the wartime genocide, which—in the period immediately following the war—was dissolved into generalizing concepts of 'crimes against humanity,' or 'Man's inhumanity to Man' (Rosenbaum 2001, 3). Once the discourse was established, however, it became the frame of the narratives that described the Jewish suffering and focused on its uniqueness, unprecedented character and incommensurability with the suffering of other victims of the war. That led to the view that the extermination of the Jews 'finds...no parallel with the persecutions of the other groups by the Nazis, [it] does not matter whether it happened to Russians, Serbs, Czechs, Sinti, Roma, homosexuals or political opponents' (Wistrich 1992, 21).

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

According to such an understanding of Romani ethnicity, a ‘Gypsy’ is one who was born ‘Gypsy’ (with minor exceptions for co-optation and intermarriage), one who speaks the Romani language or at least appreciates its importance, and one who acts according to the principle of group solidarity. In addition, a ‘Gypsy’ follows the principle of ritual purity and the related concept of the universe as being divided into the spheres of purity and pollution, accepts obligations resulting from the social structure and shows respect to internal authorities, and adopts a way of life that makes it possible to avoid being controlled by the non-Romani environment (for example a peripatetic lifestyle or specific patterns of economic activity: self-employment and engagement in ‘traditionally Romani’ professions) (Salo 1979).

Those features create a stable pattern of ‘being a Rom,’ or *Romanipen* in the Romani language, which may also be rendered as ‘Romness.’ According to the ‘ethnicity’ approach, the Romani identity was created in the framework of culture, not of history: it rested in the manifestations of an perennial value-pattern of *Romanipen*, i.e. ‘being a Rom’ in the surrounding world of ‘others,’ in maintaining ‘horizontal’ kinship relations, ways of life, and patterns of interaction with non-Romanies. While national communities of Europe defined themselves with reference to their respective histories, the ‘need of history was alien to the Romanies and emerged only recently due to the Romani elites...which attempt to create in a divided and sub-ethnically differentiated population a sense of national community’ (Mirga and Mroz 1994, 31-32).

History is thus claimed to be irrelevant for the Romani identity. The latter does not unfold in time, which would involve change. It is rather a permanent reproduction of cultural tradition that becomes extracted from the flow of time and ‘elevated’ to the

status of an extra-historical, eternal ‘truth’ of the Roma. In this extraction, tradition has been denied historicity: it ceases to be the past reality of the group, compared or juxtaposed to the one of the present. Instead, it is perceived as the core ‘essence’ of the group’s identity, which exists apart from time.

However, such an obliteration of Romani history by relegating it to the domain of a reproduction of a cultural idiom may well be a misconception. The perception of history among Romanies has been—until very recently—based on the oral transmission of knowledge. The scholars of oral cultures indicate that knowledge changes in the course of oral transmission but in a way that is ‘invisible’ (Fentress and Wickham 1992, 40). The same may be said about the accounts of identity. The identity of Romanies may change over the course of time and in this way be exposed to history, but its accounts will emphasize the permanence of *Romanipen* and its insulation from the flow of change.

Another manifestation of the view that history does not matter for the Romanies can be found in the conviction that the Romani identity refers neither to the past, nor to the future, and exists in the present only. According to this view, Romani ‘identity is constructed and constantly remade in the present in relation with significant others, not something inherited from the past’(Stewart 1997, 28). Therefore, what makes the identity of Romanies is neither the ‘myth of shared ancestry,’ nor the ‘dream of future reunion,’ but ‘a place of their own...in which they could feel at home...a social space composed according to their own ethic of relatedness’ (Stewart 1997, 28).

This may well be true for many Romani communities, as for example the one of Harangos in Hungary where Michael Stewart conducted his research. However, it may not be a valid description for other groups, like the Gitanos of Jarana in Spain, studied by Paloma Gay y Blasco, for whom ‘contrary to common assumptions in academia and elsewhere, the past is central to [the] processes of making identity and community’ (Gay y Blasco 2001, 644-5). Moreover, this may not be an appropriate description of the activities of Romani intellectuals and politicians consciously designing a trans-group Romani identity as a project that reaches into the future.

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

between timeless "natural" cultures, locked into themselves, changeable only when disrupted, and culture-bearing, narrative bearing nations, moving purposefully through history towards geographical and ethnic self-realization. In an epoch shaped by nationalist rhetoric, those people who do not claim a land and a written tradition for themselves, who cannot or do not claim a history, are relegated to nature, without a voice in any political process (Trumpener 1992, 884).

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

It seems, however, that what accounts for such a perception of the Romani past is, paradoxically, the issue of the future. The Romanies have been perceived as a people without a history, not exactly because they are believed to have no past, but because they apparently have no future. The assumed incompatibility of the traditional Romani culture with the demands of modern life has made them allegedly unable to survive as Romanies: sooner or later they will disappear through marginalization, assimilation or acculturation.

Such an attitude may account for disregarding the transforming potential of Romani culture, its flexibility and ability to produce viable strategies of adapting to modern conditions without losing its distinctiveness. Regarding this point, the modernist paradigm of anthropology becomes, paradoxically, similar to the anti-modern, romantic visions of the 'primitives' as depositing the virtues of the past time; both have constructed their objects in a similar fashion, as an opposition to modernity. As a result, both may disregard the processes contradicting their approaches, which may lead to an attitude bitterly commented on by Ian Hancock: 'When non-Gypsies go from wagon to automobile, it is called progress; when Gypsies do the same thing, it is disappointment' (Hancock 1991, 138).

At the end of this section it should be added that there is a hidden ethical agenda of the ethnography of Romanies which neglects the historical dimension. This is, to use Eric Wolf's expression, an obliteration of history through the erasure of interconnection. By claiming that Romanies exist outside history, in a world of their own, we tacitly erase hundreds of years of interaction between Romanies and European societies, which have not left Europeans with a clear conscience. The traditional approach to Romanies is therefore based on similar assumptions of most anthropologists of colonial societies: the people studied by anthropologists are a 'people without history,' which 'amounts to the erasure of 500 years of confrontation, killing, resurrection, and accommodation' (Wolf 1982, 18). The 'obliteration of a people's actual and tragic history,' as Kate Trimpener (1992, 861) observes, may be thus attributed to the 'European myth of the Gypsies' (in both 'modernist' and 'romantic' versions), the myth that has animated the traditional ethnography of the Romanies. However, the reverse seems to be equally true: the myth has emerged and is perpetuated as a consequence of the processes of marginalization, subjugation and obliteration of Romani history.

## **A Mute Memory?**

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

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

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

Lazo had first encountered the Holocaust as a young man, during the Eichmann trial, when, like millions of others, he had watched the "man in the glass booth" give his testimony on TV. He then learned that the Nazi terror apparatus had also targeted his people for extermination. This triggered childhood memories of relatives coming to his father's house in the years during and after World War II, talking about the murder of Gypsies in Europe. He did not pay much attention at the time, because he had learned at an early age that persecution was his people's legacy (Tyrnauer 1991, viii).

The story of John Megel is the case of a person living in the US who, like many Americans, witnessed the development of the Holocaust discourse around the time of the Eichmann trial, and subsequently came to understand the fate of 'his people' by integrating the recollections from his childhood into a narrative of the Holocaust. Jan Yoors, a European who spent a large part of his life traveling with Romanies, had similar difficulties with recognizing the fate of his (chosen) people. Reflecting upon the years of WW II, he is rather ambiguous regarding the situation of Romanies. On the one hand, he understands the racial character of the persecutions and their ultimate consequence. On the other hand, for him the idea that Romanies had been an object of a conscious strategy of annihilation remained very much inconceivable (Yoors 1967, 253).

In the follow-up of his memoirs, which focused precisely on the time of the war, Yoors incorporated more elements of Holocaust discourse and presented general facts of the Nazi genocide of Romanies (although in a rather unsystematic and imprecise manner). Nevertheless, his story has remained a narrative of survival against all odds, a tale of the victory of life over death. According to him, the extermination of Romanies has not been documented and remembered, even by the Romanies themselves, ‘due to the Gypsies’ own lack of a sense of history.’ ‘Even though over half a million of them were massacred,’ he continues, ‘they are content to remain forgotten and unnoticed’ (Yoors 1988 [1971], 38).

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

The second problem highlighted by Yoors is related to the traditional Romani strategy of survival, which (with some historical exceptions) is based on keeping a low profile and remaining unnoticed in the non-Romani world. Anything related to the Romanies must not be brought to the attention of the non-Romanies because the historical experience has shown that nothing good results from that. For traditional Romanies it would be thus difficult to fight for a place in the non-Romani historical narrative for it would mean an

‘overlap’ of the two worlds and an unnecessary and potentially dangerous focusing of attention on a generally hostile environment. One can thus speak of two mechanisms, which together have contributed to the silence about the Romani Holocaust. On the one hand, the non-Romani world has not been able to place the ‘people without a history’ in what become acknowledged as a central event of world history. On the other hand, the traditional Romanies have not been able to cross the boundaries and ‘make history’ on their own.

Eventually, the issue of trauma should be mentioned here as one of the factors that has made the Romani memories of the Holocaust voiceless. As we can see, Yoors wondered about the lack of the Romanies’ traumatic reactions to their fate. It should be mentioned that the concept of trauma implies that those who survived a traumatizing event are unable to properly react to it in a psychological sense, and this inability causes long-lasting damage to the psychological structures of the survivors (Novick 2001, 2). The essence of trauma is that we are unable to remember the traumatizing event as such: we repress it in our memory because we cannot integrate it with the image of ourselves we would like to have (Prager 1998, 155-6). This inability can be expressed in forgetfulness, silence, amnesia, or in attempts to reconstruct the past, which would eliminate the memory of the traumatizing event (Misztal 2003, 141).

## **Breaking the Silence.**

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

The discourse of the Holocaust has established a frame of perception for the atrocities of WW II and has become one of the most important narratives of contemporary history. The process of gradually including the Romanies into that narrative as one of

the main categories of victims began in the 1960s as a result of the intellectual pursuits of historians and the practical efforts of the German Sinti and Roma organizations to receive compensation for the Nazi persecutions (Mirga 2005, 97). The impulse for historical research comes from Simon Wiesenthal's pioneering attempts to collect documents of the Romani Holocaust and his first publications on the issue. This was followed by the first monographic work on the persecutions of the Romanies during WW II by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon (1972) and subsequently by Ian Hancock's (1987, 1989, 1991a) passionate defense of the place of Romanies among the victims of the Holocaust.

More recent literature on the issue can be divided into three groups. First, there is a growing number of publications documenting the suffering of the Romanies in particular countries of Nazi occupied Europe or focusing on the fate of the Romani victims of death and concentration camps (Parcer 1993, Fings, Heuss, and Sparing 1997, Thurner 1998, Dlugoborski 1998, Kenrick 1999, Rosenberg 1999, Ioanid 2000). A much smaller number of texts has been devoted to explaining the general pattern of the Nazi persecutions of Romanies and to the status of the Roma as victims of the WW II genocide (Zimmermann 1996, Lewy 2000). Eventually, the problem of the Romani fate during the Holocaust has slowly made its way into the literature devoted to the contemporary Romani identities. Here, the results are still far from being satisfactory. David Mayall, for example, offers an exhaustive list of the ways in which the Holocaust discourse as the cornerstone of the 'tradition of persecution' may consolidate the ethnic identity of the Romanies and reveal their 'living memory,' only to conclude that this is a 'problematic link' that may result in a 'demise of difference and a separate identity' (Mayall 2004, 234-37). Zoltan Barany presents a short section on the Romani Holocaust as a part of the chapter called 'Gypsies in Imperial and Authoritarian States,' in which he mostly compares various estimates of the Romani victims of Nazi terror, but draws no conclusion on how that period may influence the present situation and identities of the Romanies in Eastern Europe (Barany 2002, 103-10). Ian Hancock (2002), on the contrary, gives the issue of the Romani Holocaust a very important place in his textbook-like presentation of the Romani identity for non-Romani readers. The Holocaust, or 'O Baro Porrajmos,' a controversial term coined by Hancock on the basis of the vocabulary of the Romani language, becomes in this approach one of the crucial periods which have formed the Romani identity. This

gives an impression that it is an unproblematic fact among the Romanies themselves. However, as Yaron Matras has rightly observed, Hancock's work is rather an attempt to construct Romani historiography, an attempt which is subsequently presented as an analysis of the well established sense of experiencing history among Romanies (Matras 2004, 199-200). Even in the most recent publications there is little progress. Tcherenkov and Laederich devote to the Holocaust thirty pages out of more than 1,000 of their two-volume patchwork collection of the historical, linguistic, cultural, and social-structural aspects of Romani identities (Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004, 154-85). In Brian Belton's book, written with theoretical ambitions, the issue of the Holocaust and identity is virtually nonexistent (Belton 2005).

At the same time, the traditional approach to Romanies received substantial criticism from a new generation of scholars (sometimes referred to as 'constructivists'), who undermined most of the assumptions of traditional scholarship (Lucassen 1991 and 1996, Willems 1997). They pointed out that the identity of various Romani groups might have been a result of several contingent factors and external influences, and not necessarily of the preservation of the ancient and fixed ethnic features.

Contrary to radical 'constructivism,' we may assume that there are certain characteristics of the Roma that are not merely products of external or internal conscious strategies, but which developed more or less spontaneously in the long historical process of mutual influences between different groups. On the other hand, contrary to traditional scholarship, we should avoid the 'reification' of certain characteristics that were products of a particular time and space. Nevertheless, as a result of the 'constructivist challenge,' the Romanies appear as a people 'with a history' that was largely the history of their interactions with European societies and the persecutions Romanies suffered from them. The Holocaust may be perceived as the culmination of the persecutions that the Romanies experienced after their arrival in Europe and as a condensation of different forms of discrimination to which they were subjected. As such, the Holocaust creates the linearity of Romani history, dividing it into periods 'before' and 'after', and gives this history meaning as a continuous unfolding of the persecution pattern (Hancock 1991a).

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

The presence of the Holocaust discourse in the strategies of the Romani movement indicates the changes of the traditional patterns of Romani identities and the corresponding need for a history that has been expressed among Romani intellectuals. Economic transformations in postwar Europe have meant for the Romanies, among others, a voluntary or coerced shift to a settled style of life, assimilation processes, and the growing role of formal education. All these factors made traditional Romani culture, based on replicating in the present the non-historical model of 'the way of a Rom,' more and more anachronistic and incompatible with a reality in which Romanies ever more frequently had to come into contact with the non-Romani society around them on terms set by the latter. In the absence of options, such as the effective integration of Romanies into the communities in which they lived, the disintegration of traditional Romani culture meant that intellectuals and Romani activists faced the problem of developing new cultural forms with which Romanies could identify in the changed reality. One such cultural form has been the vision of the Romanies as a nation in diaspora, having their own history and grounding their modern identity in it.

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

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

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

## **Inventing Tradition for the Sake of the Future.**

The relation between the Holocaust discourse and identity among the Romanies excellently illustrates the dialectics of identity and history as described by David Lowenthal. In his view, a commonly shared past creates a necessary component of identity among those who adhere to that past: the easiest answer to the question ‘who are we?’ seems to rely on some reference to ‘who we were.’ On the other hand, it is precisely the group’s identity which makes that past real: the viable past is always someone’s past; it is a historical image, filtrated through and sedimented in the collective memory, which proves useful for the identity constructs existing at a given time among some group. Such a viable past, which we may call tradition, is of particular importance for those groups whose identities are threatened: ‘Identification with a national past,’ Lowenthal writes, ‘often serves as an assurance of worth against subjugation or bolsters a new sovereignty. Peoples deprived by conquest of their proper past strive hard to retrieve its validating comforts’ (Lowenthal 1985, 44). The same is definitely true not only in the case of a conquered nation but also in the case of marginalized peoples and, in general, in all those situations in which a group’s identity has been denied, situations to which the Romanies are particularly vulnerable.

The situation, however, becomes more complicated when there is no obvious tradition to which the threatened identity could refer, or when there are several competing traditions. In such a case traditions have to be invented. The ‘element of invention is particularly clear,’ Eric Hobsbawm writes, where the ‘history which became part of the fund of knowledge or the ideology of nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so’ (Hobsbawm 1983, 13).

Applying the model of national memory formation presented by James Fentress and Chris Wickham to the process of inventing traditions, we may distinguish the following stages: (1) the construction of tradition by elites; (2) the creation of a ‘rhetorical discourse’ related to a given tradition and ‘directed at internal or external opponents;’ and (3) conveying the tradition to the collective memory and the creation

of popular discourses that ‘make up the substructure of national historical consciousness’ (Fentress and Wickham 1992, 129).

If the first two tasks seem to have already been successfully accomplished by Romani organizations and intellectual elites, the third remains a task for the future. Legal and political attempts to achieve recognition as a nation, together with the intellectual efforts to write the Romanies’ own history, have to be accompanied by actions on the social and cultural level which, on the one hand, legitimize these attempts, and, on the other hand, lay the foundations of a common, historically grounded, identity. In this way the present-day generations of Romanies may unite with their ancestors and various contemporary Romani communities may develop a sense of solidarity and of belonging to one ethnic-national group—by building up a linkage with the past. The past in question was a traumatic one. But in the present-day circumstances of a gradual transformation of traditional culture and the sometimes radical changes of lifestyle, as well as of the hostility of non-Romani environments, ‘working through’ the traumatic past may help to find strength to endure traumatic present. The division of Romanies into communities that often do not have much in common will probably remain a specific feature of this group. A certain sense of commonality is, however, necessary to advance the survival potential of the group and to make the Romani political agenda feasible.

The leaders of Romani organizations are clearly aware of that need and address it by envisaging various factors which may contribute to the construction of contemporary Romani identities. In expanding upon the program of the International Romani Union, the Romani intellectuals Andrzej Mirga and Nicolae Gheorghe write that

Romani political elites were never driven to demand their own territory and state. Thus, to legitimize their claim, they advanced other elements of the concept of nation—the common roots of the Romani people, their common historical experiences and perspectives, and the commonality of culture, language and social standing. The experience of the Porrajmos—the Romani holocaust during World War II—played an important role in providing the Romani diaspora with its sense of nationhood (Mirga and Gheorghe 1997, 18).

In other words, we may say that the task of the Romanies is to imagine the Roma as a community, regardless the existing divisions and differences. Imagining through ‘inventing tradition’ is a strategy that has been successfully employed in the history of European nationalisms (Anderson 1991). The problem for the Roma is that their

‘invented tradition’ draws—among others—upon events and processes that have a traumatizing effect on those Romani communities who experienced them. Trauma is usually not a good material out of which commonality may be built. In the psychological approach it may lead to the deconstruction of the self, and in the sociological perspective—to the deconstruction of community. However, recent events show that the experience of destruction of WW II can be (as far as it is possible) turned into a ‘usable past.’ This becomes possible first of all because of various academic and educational strategies, the politics of memory, the rituals of remembrance, and an increased density of communication networks (including electronic media) in which the mute memory of the wartime persecutions finds its way to be expressed out loud. We may conclude, therefore, that in case of the Roma the process of imagining community and inventing tradition also means the de-traumatization of the past: by creating discourses in which the past can be discussed, and by creating institutional frameworks in which the memory of destruction can be turned into a means of survival.

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