The Joy and Burden of Living: Roma Communities in the Western Borderlands of the Postwar Soviet Union

Volha Bartash

Introduction

Most chapters in this volume address sedentary populations, albeit displaced by war and ethnic cleansing. But what did postwar reconstruction and healing look like in the case of people on the move?

Edward Dębicki (Krzyżanowski), a Polish Romani musician, recalled the end of the German occupation for Roma in the Polish-Ukrainian border regions:

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> Every day someone from our family was found. Many were, nevertheless, killed by Germans and Banderites[1] in ghettoes and forests. The *Cyganie* (Pol. Gypsies)[2] who had managed to escape death gathered together in Hrubieszów, while looking for their beloved ones. We camped in the forest like we used to before. But the difference was that there had been a lot of merriness by the campfire the last time—there had been singing and dancing; and now it was crying and mourning.[3]

Edward's parents Władysław Krzyżanowski and Franciszka Raczkowska, managed to survive the Nazi genocide and World War II together with their children in the forests and marshes of Volhynia. Malnourished and physically exhausted, they left their forest hideout in the spring of 1944 only to find that many of their relatives and a large part of the pre-war *Polska Roma* (Rom. Polish Roma) community of Volhynia were gone. Most had perished in the Nazi genocide or at the hands of Ukrainian pro-nationalist partisans.[4] Others had died while hiding in the wilderness—from starvation, infectious diseases, natural threats, and severe weather. These unbearable losses, along with their own physical and mental condition, prevented the Romani survivors in Volhynia from feeling the joy of liberation.

In which direction to move? How to make a living? Where to look for disappeared family members and lost children? How to take care of parentless minors, elderly, and disabled relatives? Just like the Krzyżanowski family, communities of Roma throughout the western borderlands of the Soviet Union—in the Baltic States, western Belarus, and western Ukraine—faced similar challenges and had to make difficult choices. To complicate this picture even further, these decisions were having to be made by individuals and families who found themselves devastated by the war, in the midst of overall postwar destruction, and often in a hostile environment.

[1] Here, *banderowcy* or Banderites is used in the sense of "Bandera fighters" or fighters of the Ukrainian nationalist underground, that is, followers of Stepan Bandera, ideologist and leader of the Ukrainian ultranationalists since the 1930s.

[2] It was the preference of Edward Dębicki to use the term *Cyganie*, instead of Roma or *Romowie*, in his memoir. Edward Dębicki, *Ptak umarłych* (Warsaw: Bellona, 2004), 6.

[3] Dębicki (2004), 203.

[4] Few works so far have sought to examine the attitudes and practices of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army towards nomadic Roma. For the pioneering research of Mikhail Tyaglyy, see "'Problem cygański' w ideologii i praktyce ukraińskiego ruchu nacjonalistycznego podczas II wojny światowej," *Studia Romologica* 11 (2018): 211–25.

The effects of the Nazi persecution on Roma communities went far beyond physical destruction, human losses, and the collapse of community life. Historical patterns of interaction between Roma and non-Roma were broken. As I have shown in my earlier publications on the interwar period, most Roma in the region under consideration were semi-nomadic, although there were some fully sedentary families. This means they traveled in summer, offering their services to the local population, and took up residences in winter, renting and even sharing peasant homes and taking part in village social life. Even if only seasonally, traveling families changed from commercial partners, fortune-tellers, and random acquaintances into neighbors. Given the fact that most traveling groups took the same route each year, they had local networks of contacts. These patterns of interaction resulted in interethnic marriages and symbolical family ties, such as godparenting.[5] Moreover, sedentary Roma were part of their local communities, often valued for their professional skills—as blacksmiths and veterinarians. After the war their local communities lacked these professionals of Romani origins in the same way they lacked Jewish doctors and traders (see Anna Wylegała in this volume).

Nevertheless, the war challenged these patterns of co-habitation. Roma families became targets for the Nazi genocidal violence and had to go into hiding, while peasants were reluctant to host them for fear of personal repercussions from the Nazi police.[6] After the war, it was challenging for Roma to draw on the same mobility patterns, as many of their pre-war local contacts had been displaced or killed.

The effects of the Nazi persecution on Roma communities were long-lasting, and the processes of family reunification, (mobile) home making, community reconstruction, and trauma healing lasted for many years, even decades. Drawing on the oral histories and published memoirs of Roma genocide survivors, I outline the lived experiences of Roma in the western borderlands of the postwar Soviet Union. Since 2005 I have

[5] For more on these patterns of interaction, see Volha Bartash, "The Romani Family before and during the Holocaust: How Much Do We Know? An Ethnographic-Historical Study in the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region," in *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Katerina Capková and Eliyana R. Adler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 17–41.

[6] For more on the survival experiences of Roma, see Nikolay Bessonov, "Tsyganje SSSR v okkupatsyi. Strategii vyzhivanija," *Holokost i suchasnist'. Studii v Ukraini i Sviti* 6, no. 2 (2009): 17–52; Piotr Wawrzeniuk, "'Lwów Saved Us': Roma Survival in Lemberg 1941–44," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 3 (2018): 327–50.

conducted ethnographic fieldwork and oral history interviews in western Belarus and, since 2016, in eastern Lithuania. During my field trips to the border regions, I had a chance to converse with visiting Roma from Latvia and Ukraine about their families' pasts. Most of the people whom I interviewed did not see the war with their own eyes or were too young to remember. They recounted the histories of their families, who survived the war and genocide in the western borderlands of the Soviet Union. My survey often took a form of family conversations, involving several generations of Roma. Therefore, the family biographies I have documented are multi-layered and reflect different aspects of intergenerational transmission and family memory.

In addition, I refer to the published memoirs of Roma who spent the postwar years in the Soviet western borderlands. As well as the memoir of Edward Dębicki (2004) cited above, this includes the memoir of Ivan Korsun, who survived the war as a child in western Ukraine.[7] Korsun's individual journey, which started with his mother's death, covered several countries: Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and Latvia.

The postwar situation in the western borderlands was different from that in the rest of the Soviet Union. First of all, these regions were heavily affected by the military confrontation between the nationalist insurgencies and the Soviet counterinsurgency.[8] The roots of this conflict(s) go back to 1939/40 when the Soviet Union annexed Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Eastern Poland (at present, western Ukraine, and Belarus). Political repression and mass deportations immediately followed the annexation. As the Soviets sought to re-establish their rule after World War II, they faced significant anti-Soviet resistance. Pro-nationalist partisans who had been based in the woods attacked Soviet activists, militaries, and educators, thus sabotaging the Sovietization and collectivization policies in the countryside. Moscow sent experienced secret police officers to suppress the resistance in the West. The so-called war after the war lasted well into the 1950s and cost the lives of thousands of civilians. In this chapter, I

[7] Ivan Korsun, "Tsyganskaja doroga. Vospominanija Ivana Korsuna. Vstuplenije, publikatsija i primechanija Nikolaya Bessonova," *Holokost i suchasnist'. Studii v Ukraini i Sviti* 6, no. 2 (2009): 172–210.

[8] For more on this military conflict, see Alexander Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For more on the Soviet deportations from the Baltic States, see Violeta Davoliūtė and Tomas Balkelis, eds, *Narratives of Exile and Identity: Soviet Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2018).

analyze how the "war after the war" affected the Roma groups who kept on the move and tried to rebuild their relations with the countryside population.

The history of Roma in the Soviet Union suggests a chronological scope for this chapter from the end of the German occupation in 1944 to the beginning of the Soviet sedentarization campaign in 1956.[9] During this period, most Roma in the region under consideration kept on the move. Even formerly sedentary families joined nomadic groups. How can we explain the socio-cultural phenomenon of nomadism revival that happened amidst the overall postwar destruction and the "war after the war"? My analysis of Romani postwar mobility employs a community lens, examining the relationship between nomadism and postwar community reconstruction.

Finally, let me introduce the people in focus: the Roma community or, to be more precise, communities. The groups who name themselves *Polska Roma*, *Litovska Roma*, *Ruska Roma*, *Lotfitka*, and others had historically traveled in the regions that were to become the Soviet western borderlands. Their self-naming can be traced back to different historical periods and is closely linked to the multi-ethnic history of these lands. A big part of what was now the "western borderlands" of the Soviet Union had been the "eastern borderlands" of Poland in the interwar years (1921–39), and earlier the "western provinces" of the Russian Empire (1795–1917). In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, these lands were central to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Roma families indeed crossed cultural and linguistic borders as they traveled, engaging in interethnic contact on a daily basis. Although all of them spoke related dialects of the Baltic branch of Romani, there were some cultural differences in customs and daily life, professional occupations, and religion. To a large degree, these differences were cultural and linguistic borrowings from the populations among whom they lived. For instance, most *Polska Roma* were Catholic and used Polish as their language of external communication, while *Ruska Roma* were Orthodox Christians and spoke Russian with their contacts outside the community. Ukrainian Servy were to a greater degree acculturated by Ukrainian culture and often resided in cities. As rightly noted by Bessonov, these group differences and, primarily, the level of

[9] See Volha Bartash, "The Sedentarisation of Roma in the Soviet Union after 1956: A Case Study from the Former Belarussian Soviet Socialist Republic," *Romani Studies* 25, no. 1 (2015): 23–51.

acculturation came to play a role during the German occupation.[10] Arguably, sedentary Servy had a higher chance of survival than nomadic *Polska Roma* in Ukraine. As "*Polska*," the latter found themselves affected not only by the Nazi persecution but also by the Ukrainian-Polish interethnic conflict. After the war, *Polska Roma* faced a dilemma: whether to stay in the Soviet Union or join one of the Polish-Soviet population transfers. In this, they shared their experiences with ethnic Poles.

As I will show in this chapter, the postwar experiences of Roma in the Soviet Union were different and yet also similar to those of others. As pointed out by Romani studies scholars, the exoticization of Roma presents one of the most widespread methodological problems.[11] Even though their cultural peculiarities, such as their (semi-)nomadic lifestyle, suggest a unique place for Roma in European history, it would be a mistake to consider them outside the context of their regional histories. Like all other populations, Romani families and communities were influenced by micro- and macro-socio-political processes and shared many of their postwar experiences with people of other ethnic backgrounds, for example, Jewish Holocaust survivors who struggled to rebuild lives and reconstruct families after the war.

Where to? Postwar Mobility from a Community Perspective

Already during my first ethnographic field trips, I met several Roma families who had lived a sedentary lifestyle before and during the German occupation and started traveling only after the war. While traveling seemed a reasonable option for "roofless" nomadic families after the war, the story of my sedentary acquaintances posed a major empirical puzzle: why would one start a life on the road amidst the postwar destruction and ongoing military conflict? My interlocutors did not provide me with a clear answer, talking instead mainly about family reunions that had happened on the move.

The phenomenon of postwar nomadism has also caught the attention of other scholars. For instance, Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov

[10] Bessonov Nikolay (2009).

[11] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, "Between Exoticization and Marginalization: Current Problems of Gypsy Studies," *BEHEMOTH: A Journal on Civilisation* 4, no. 1 (2011): 86–105.

proposed to understand it as an economic strategy: the rural population needed horses to work the land, and Roma were able to meet this demand, engaging in their traditional occupation of horse trading.[12] Keeping on the move allowed them to quickly recognize new opportunities and travel from one fair to another.

But is the economic perspective sufficient to explain this socio-cultural phenomenon? As noted by others, historical and ethnographic studies often overlook personal and familial aspects of Romani mobility.[13] This section seeks to offer a more nuanced picture by examining the role of mobility in community life. I do not confine the postwar mobility of Roma to nomadism, and organize my analysis in several subsections: postwar nomadism; internal migration within the Soviet Union; and cross-border mobility. This is, however, a conventional division. While (semi-)nomadism was a lifestyle, the latter two were, indeed, migration patterns. They were not, therefore, mutually exclusive. For instance, some *Polska Roma* families who had traveled for several years in the Soviet western borderlands after the war later migrated to Poland or moved to Middle Asia, to take part in Soviet agricultural projects.

For the sake of historical accuracy, it should be noted that there were Romani families who did not travel after the war. The decision on whether or not to travel depended largely on their wartime experiences. This was especially relevant for those who had survived the occupation in the Soviet partisan units. In my earlier publications, I outlined the partisan experiences of the extended Yanovich family from the north-west of Belarus, many of whom were active in local partisan detachments.[14] After the war, some of the family settled in Braslaŭ, where they were offered temporary housing by the town administration. It is likely that partisan families were able to rely on their partisan networks and the references of partisan commanders. Moreover, their life in multi-ethnic partisan communities prepared them for integration into postwar Soviet society.

[12] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, "Gypsies in USSR: Ethnic Identities and Economic Strategies of the Gypsies in the Countries of the Former USSR," *Mitteilungen des SFB "Differenz und Integration"* 4, no. 1 (2003): 289–310.

[13] See, for instance, Michal Růžička, "Researching and Politicizing Migration: The Case of Roma/Gypsies in Postsocialist Czecho-Slovakia," in *Boundaries in Motion: Rethinking Contemporary Migration Events,* ed. Ondrej Hofirek, Radka Klvanova, and Michal Nekorjak (Brno: Centrum pro demokracii a kulturu, 2009), 79–103.

[14] Bartash (2020), 35–6.

Nomadism Revival

To understand the nomadism revival, one must first understand what traveling was about. Traditionally, Romani families who spent the winters in villages would prepare their mobile households and means of transportation and gather in caravans, or traveling groups, in the spring. Traveling groups consisted of around 50–100 members, often relatives. Merry celebrations at forest encampments and weddings marked the new nomadic season. Traveling was certainly not only about economic strategies but about social interaction and cultural life.

The war and genocide turned everything upside-down. Survival was an individual and family task, traveling was no longer possible, community life collapsed, and extended families disintegrated. The memoir of Edward Dębicki, quoted in the introduction above, describes how the Romani survivors who had left their forest hideouts organized in new traveling units. These newly formed communities were based on the principles of cooperation, mutual help, and solidarity. Keeping on the move, they sought to survive through small-scale trade and horse barter. Nevertheless, the early postwar years were extremely challenging. In addition to the devastating effects of the Nazi persecution, Roma groups experienced daily danger and robbery on the road and often fell victim to the military confrontation between the Soviets and the anti-Soviet resistance. According to Ivan Korsun, it was not possible to avoid dangerous encounters while traveling through the rural terrain of western Ukraine. His memoir describes one such scene. While crossing the fields in the summer of 1951, their caravan witnessed the victimization of an unknown man. The man was hanging from a tree but still alive. As several Roma stepped towards the victim in an attempt to save him, they found themselves under fire from gunmen who were guarding their victim from a hideout in the bushes.[15]

Likewise, one of my informants lost her father in a road attack in the north-west of Belarus in the early postwar years, during which most adults from their caravan were killed. She and several other children survived, hiding in the river. Although they were extremely frightened and one girl was wounded, the children managed to make their way to a nearby village.[16]

[15] Korsun (2009), 191.

[16] Interview with a Romani survivor, born 1938, conducted in Minsk in June 2015 by Volha Bartash.

It seems that the very lifestyle of nomadic Roma, with their visibility on the roads and at local markets, drew unwanted attention. According to Korsun, their encampments in the suburbs of Ukrainian cities attracted different groups of visitors, not all with good intentions. In addition, the anti-Soviet fighters who were based in the woods might view passing caravans as undesirable witnesses or potential spies.

The hostility of local peasants often added to the plight of nomadic families. As mentioned above, the war unrecognizably changed the ethnic and social picture of the western Soviet borderlands. Many of those who had previously hosted Roma families in wintertime were now displaced or killed. Building new local networks and relationships of trust was not easy. This is not to mention the general atmosphere of fear and suspicion that dominated the region, which was jeopardized by the military conflict and continuing ethnic tensions. Korsun gives us another hint about why "the locals" might have seen nomadic Roma as unwanted tenants: because they kept on the move, they knew too many "dirty" local secrets, secrets which the locals did not want to reveal to the Soviets, for example the fact of collaboration with the Germans.[17]

Roma families recall that it became more difficult to find winter accommodation. A *Polska Roma* family who traveled in the western regions of Belarus shared this story with me:

> Even now, people tell a joke about my dad who was known for his passion for horses. Once in winter he and his family continued travelling in spite of the severe weather. Peasants did not want to let them stay overnight—they were always afraid of being robbed by Tsyganje (Russ. Gypsies); while Tsyganje were afraid of being killed by peasants. So it was a cold night and peasants did not want to shelter them. My father decided to drive the family to the woods, as it was warmer there. He gathered some dry brushwood and made a fire to melt the snow around him. Then he made a shelter of fir tree branches and comforted himself, while my mother and the kids lay covered under feather pillows in a warm wagon. So my dad said to her:
>
> – Stick your hand out and feel how cold it is!
>
> She reached her hand out and said:
>
> – How cold, Misha, how cold!
>
> The lesson is that a Tsygan can find a way out of any plight.[18]

[17] Korsun (2009), 181.
[18] Bartash (2015), 30.

Despite its anecdotal style and optimistic ending, the plot clearly shows the difficulties that Misha's family experienced in finding seasonal housing, and the hostility they encountered.

Little research has been done on how postwar Soviet policies affected nomadic groups, and whether they fell victim to a new wave of Stalinist repression. Based on the testimonies and memoirs at my disposal, it seems that Roma were not targeted as a group, although there were incidents of expropriation of horses by Soviet militaries following the liberation (see below). Individual arrests did take place. For instance, Dębicki mentioned regular identity checks on caravans carried out by the Red Army. Family members who had been active in the Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK), which stayed in opposition to the Soviet partisan movement, immediately fell under suspicion and were subsequently arrested. Likewise, several family members had been drafted into the Red Army and never returned.[19] However, nomadic Roma shared these experiences with other populations in the region. As paradoxical as it may sound, the centralized campaign against nomadic Roma began after Stalin's death, during Khrushchev's Thaw.

Despite all of the difficulties and dangers associated with traveling in the postwar years, Korsun described this time as a revival of nomadism in the Soviet Union:

> At that time, Roma lived—what can I say—simply on wheels. In one month they found themselves in different regions. For instance, those in Ukraine knew that there would be a fair in the city of Velikie Luki (V. B.—Pskov region of Russia). So the whole caravan came from Ukraine. After a successful barter, we celebrated. New contacts were made. Girls were married off. New friendships were made. By the campfire, Roma decided where to go next and how many families would gather. Besides (our) *caravan*, other Roma also came to the fair. They always came to the (nearby) village and asked:
>
> – Have you seen Roma passing by?
>
> They answered:
>
> – Yes, they came by last week. Their tents are based outside the city, close to the river.

[19] Dębicki (2004), 220–21.

> Everyone knew where a *caravan* was—they could tell by the campfire, by the sounds of songs. Women from the city headed there to tell their fortune. And Romani women went to the city to tell fortunes at the marketplace. They came back with eggs, meat, potatoes, milk and honey for their children.[20]

Nostalgic in mood, this piece mirrors the overall atmosphere of Romani nomadism after the war. When I interviewed the generation of Roma raised in caravans in the decade after the war, many recalled that time with nostalgia. One of my interlocutors, for instance, said: "Despite all the difficulties, I had a childhood like in fairy tale." In her narrative, she further emphasized the closeness to nature and the beauty of Romani cultural traditions.[21] For many Roma of that generation, memories of postwar hardship overlap with memories of cultural revival.

Internal Migration Within the Soviet Union

The Soviet collectivization campaign and the transformation of the countryside soon challenged the reviving nomadism in the Soviet Union. These policies destroyed the natural peasant economies to which the Roma's nomadic lifestyle and main occupations—horse barter and trade—were connected. All of this unavoidably led to the impoverishment of nomadic Roma. By the beginning of the 1950s, large groups of Roma had gathered in the suburbs of major Soviet cities in search of opportunities in industry and construction.[22] This is reflected in archival documents. The records of the Soviet Council of Ministers from 1952 to 1953 contain a significant number of letters from nomadic Roma asking for help with employment and housing.[23]

[20] Korsun (2009), 192.

[21] Archive of the Institute for the Study of Arts, Ethnography and Folklore, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus (AISAEF), Fond 8, Opis 2010, File 1, Ethnographic field trips of Volha Bartash, 1.

[22] See Nikolay Bessonov, "Tsyganje v Rossii: prinuditelnoe osedanie," in *Rossia i ee regiony v* XX *veke: territoria – rasselenie – migracii*, ed. O. Gleser and P. Poliana (Moscow: OGI, 2005), 631–40.

[23] Elena Marushiakova and Veselin Popov, "'Letter to Stalin': Roma Activism vs. Gypsy Nomadism in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe before WWII," *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020): 272.

Thus, the contact zones between Roma and non-Roma gradually moved from the countryside to the cities. Unlike the rural dwellers who had been living with nomadic Roma for centuries, city dwellers often demonstrated hostility towards them. Korsun recalled how nomadic groups were falsely accused of robbery and had to deal with the Soviet militia.[24]

In the light of Romani impoverishment, it does not seem surprising that young individuals and families decided to look for opportunities within the enlarged Soviet Union. For instance, one of my interlocutors mentioned that his traveling group headed from the south of Belarus to Moldova, where they intended to find work in agriculture.[25] Other young Roma families from Belarus and Ukraine joined the Virgin Lands campaign in Kazakhstan in 1954. Several of my interlocutors were born in Kazakhstan, where their parents had been working in agriculture and collective farming.[26] These families nevertheless returned to Belarus; the failure of the campaign was obvious by the 1960s, and ordinary workers were living in extremely poor conditions in the Virgin Lands settlements.

However, departures to Middle Asia were not only economically motivated. One of my interlocutors shared the story of her mother Anna, a genocide orphan. Anna was the only child survivor of her nomadic group, her parents, several siblings, and other relatives all having been killed by the local police in the forest massacre near Vidzy (Vidze) in (presumably) the autumn of 1943. Anna, whose survival was seen as miraculous, was later adopted by an Orthodox priest and his wife. According to my interlocutor, the loss of her biological parents and the trauma she experienced overshadowed Anna's childhood and youth, even though her adoptive parents took good care of her. After finishing school, Anna trained as a tractor driver and joined the Soviet agricultural venture in Kazakhstan, taking advantage of the Soviet gender policies and mobility opportunities. According to her daughter, Anna's wartime experience informed this decision.[27] While some families and individuals saw mobility within the Soviet Union as an opportunity to improve their economic condition, others were determined to leave the place where they had endured such persecution.

[24] Korsun (2009), 185.

[25] As my interlocutor eventually decided to resign and return to his home, the outcome of this venture is unknown to me. AISAEF, Fond 8, Opis 2010, File 1, Ethnographic field trips of Volha Bartash, 61.

[26] AISAEF, Fond 8, Opis 2010, File 1, Ethnographic field trips of Volha Bartash, 60.

[27] Interview with a second-generation survivor, conducted in Narach in August 2017 by Volha Bartash.

Cross-border Mobility

After the war, many *Polska Roma* families who had lived in the western Soviet borderlands (formerly the so-called Eastern Borderlands of interwar Poland) faced a dilemma: whether to stay in the Soviet Union or join one of the postwar population transfers to Poland (1944–46; 1955–59). Although these were initially planned as mutual population exchanges between the Soviet Union and Poland, the reality on the ground was different. Much depended on the attitudes of the local authorities. For example, the population transfers from the Vilnius region and the western parts of Ukraine were de facto an expulsion of the local Poles, as part of Ukrainization and Lithuanization policies. At the same time, the Soviet authorities in Belarus, where ethnic tensions were arguably less sharp, agitated Polish peasant families against a potential move.[28]

It is possible to trace the regional differences in the decision-making processes among *Polska Roma* as well. To a large degree, their decisions can be traced back to their wartime experiences. *Polska Roma* from Volhynia who had experienced persecution from the Ukrainian pro-nationalist partisans were inclined to migrate, while *Polska Roma* from the western regions of Belarus were more considerate in their decisions. My ethnographic data show that a large part of the local *Polska Roma* community remained.[29] Many families who were either sedentary or traveled only locally could not imagine leaving their homes, even if they were no longer part of Poland.

Nevertheless, the question "Where to?" was often understood by Roma as "With whom?" Family interests came before political and economic considerations. For instance, Edward Dębicki recalled that his family remained in western Ukraine for several years after the war because they were looking for his grandmother. Despite their painful memories of the persecution they had suffered at the hands of the Ukrainian pro-nationalist

[28] For a concise history of the "repatriation" from the former eastern borderlands of Poland, see Jerzy Kochanowski, "Gathering Poles into Poland: Forced Migration from Poland's Former Eastern Territories," in *Redrawing Nations: Ethnic Cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944–1948*, ed. Philipp Ther and Ana Siljak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 135–55. For a more sophisticated and personalized account of the resettlement from Ukraine and its aftermath, see Anna Wylegała, *Displaced Memories: Remembering and Forgetting in Post-War Poland and Ukraine* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019).

[29] My ethnographic survey carried out between 2005 and 2009 revealed about ten patronyms (kin names) typical for *Polska Roma* in Belarus.

partisans, the family continued to travel in the region from the spring of 1944 to the spring of 1946. During that time, they continued to experience hostility from the local population, as well as the daily threat of the ongoing military conflict and sometimes disturbing encounters with the Red Army and Soviet militia.[30] All of this added further distress and anxiety to their plight.

According to his memoir, it took considerable effort for Edward's parents to obtain Polish identity papers (under a different name) and accumulate the material resources needed for a cross-border move, such as a means of transportation. Carrying a baby girl at her breast, Edward's mother went to local marketplaces and villages every day, offering fortune-telling and healing services, while his father traded in horses at local markets. On several occasions, the family had been ready to move but different circumstances intervened with their plans. For instance, on one occasion the family experienced a robbery, and on another, Red Army officials expropriated their horses without explanation. It was therefore not until the spring of 1946 that the Krzyżanowski (now Dębicki) family made their way to Poland in a group of about 50 carts.[31]

Additional research is needed to clarify where in Poland those who had left finally settled, and how they felt in their new places; or how those who had chosen to stay faced the departure of other community members. During my field trips to Lithuania in 2016 and 2018, I met several *Polska Roma* families. The subject of "repatriation" naturally came up in our conversations. For example, one lady in her eighties talked with regret about her and her husband's decision to stay in Soviet Lithuania, pointing out the loneliness they experienced after the majority of their community, including her parents and siblings, had left.[32]

Other survivors, nevertheless, faced more immediate and perhaps more dramatic effects from the Soviet-Polish mutual border politics. For instance, one of the life stories from my collection narrates the postwar separation of orphaned siblings; two of them remained within their relatives' circles in Soviet Belarus and Lithuania, while one was adopted by a Polish family and migrated to Poland in 1946. The siblings reconnected only after the fall of the Soviet Union.[33]

[30] Dębicki (2004), 192–222.

[31] Ibid., 224.

[32] Interview with a Romani survivor, born 1936, conducted in Eišiškės in October 2016 by Volha Bartash.

[33] Interview with a Romani survivor, born 1938, conducted in Minsk in June 2015 by Volha Bartash.

Last but not least, one may wonder whether eastward migration of Roma took place in the first decade after the war. The mass return to Lithuania of Roma survivors from labor camps in France and Germany is a good example in this regard (about 1000 Roma from Lithuania were deported).[34] During my field research in Vilnius and Panevėžys, I talked to some children of deportees. Our conversations revealed how family-oriented the survivors' decisions were; Lithuanian Roma were returning from DP camps in Western Europe in the hope of reuniting with their families. They wished to do this despite the notoriously suspicious attitudes of the Soviet authorities towards the returnees and the system of filtration camps.

In the context of this volume, it seems remarkable that the internal dynamic within the Roma population mirrors that of the general population in the Vilnius region. The expulsion of ethnic Poles took place in the context of the Soviet Lithuanization policies. Likewise, *Litovska Roma* from the former independent Lithuania (1918–40) were gradually taking the place of the *Polska Roma*, leaving for Poland. This again illustrates the interconnectedness of Romani and local histories. Estonia who lost its almost entire Roma community in the genocide (*Lause Roma*) saw a wave of Romani migration from Latvia in the postwar years.[35]

Reconstructing Communities, Healing Traumas

Signs of Community Dysfunction

When sisters V., concentration camp survivors, were eventually able to return to Indura (near Hrodna), where they had been separated from their family, they found no-one of "theirs" alive. They learned from the locals that almost all their family members—parents, grandparents, and siblings—had been killed in a forest massacre. Sisters V. also heard a rumor that one "Gypsy boy" had survived and been taken in by a childless Polish woman who lived in the countryside. When the sisters went to the village

[34] Vytautas Toleikis, "Lithuanian Roma during the Years of the Nazi Occupation," in *Murders of Prisoners of War and of Civilian Population in Lithuania 1941–1944*, ed. Christoph Dieckmann, Vytautas Toleikis, and Rimantas Zizas (Vilnius: Margi Raštai, 2005), 275.

[35] Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz, "(In)visibility and the (Unheard) Voice of the Roma in Estonia: the Depiction of Roma History and Culture in Museum Exhibitions," *Journal of Baltic Studies* (Special issue "Memory and recognition of the Nazi genocide of Roma in the Baltic context"), forthcoming.

to meet the boy, they recognized their little brother Lauren. Lauren, about nine years old, now called the Polish woman mother and had another Polish-sounding name.

Sisters V. managed to get the boy back quite quickly. As it turned out, his foster mother had been in a relationship with a German officer during the occupation and, afraid of potential repercussions, was set to leave the Soviet Union. For little Lauren, it was a heart-breaking separation. Throughout his life, he cherished the memories of his rescuer. When he recounted the story of his survival to his children years later, he would refer to this woman as his second mother.[36]

Lost children constituted one of the biggest challenges for Roma communities, as did the reintegration of "found" children into the community. Like Lauren, children adopted during the war developed strong attachments to their rescuers. Despite their relatives' efforts, some were unable to reintegrate into their native communities and eventually left. In one family history that I recorded in western Belarus, a girl who had been claimed back by her relatives left their caravan soon afterward and returned to her adoptive non-Roma family.[37]

How does one find her/his kin in the midst of postwar chaos and population movement? Just like the sisters V., many relatives returned to the places where they had been separated from their loved ones. They talked to the locals about the fates of their family members, and often discovered horrible details. The so-called Romani post also played a role in spreading information among Roma and enabling family reunions. Ivan Korsun recalled his brief reunion with his mother before she passed away:

> At the end of the war, my mother was liberated from her camp in Belorussia. I was in Ukraine, and Roma knew that. Roma used to pass such kind of news (that someone saw someone) from one to another. So she started to tell passing caravans her whereabouts. And this is how we met in the place of Spirovo of the Kalinin oblast.
>
> I have a photograph of us together. There, my mother was just 30 years old. But she was exhausted and somehow suddenly got older. I was found in April; and in early May she died.[38]

[36] Interview with a second-generation Romani survivor, conducted in Radun in July 2018 by Volha Bartash.

[37] Interview with a second-generation Romani survivor, conducted in Braslau in August 2017 by Volha Bartash.

[38] Korsun (2009), 182. Kalinin oblast is now Tver oblast of Russia.

The fate of Ivan, nine years old, after his mother's death illustrates the situation of orphans in Roma communities. Although the boy stayed within his circle of relatives, he was passed from one guardian to another and changed (mobile) homes and countries of residence several times, living in Ukraine, Russia, and Latvia. During his stay with distant relatives in Valka, Latvia in (presumably) 1945–46, Ivan and other Romani children from their multi-family barrack were placed in a school by the local authorities. As an orphan, he received additional benefits, such as lunches and warm clothing. Nevertheless, Ivan's maternal aunt soon took him from Valka to Ukraine. Between 1946 and 1953 Ivan traveled with his maternal relatives in different parts of Ukraine and the south of Belarus. It was only in 1954 that he was able to start living on his own, enrolling in a construction training program in Estonia.[39]

Ivan shared his fate with other Romani children whose life was split between relatives and Soviet institutional care. My conversations with orphans of the Roma genocide revealed another under-researched issue: the separation of siblings.[40] In the previous section, I mentioned the story of three siblings separated by the state boundary between Poland and Soviet Belarus and Lithuania. In another case, four siblings stayed in Belarus but were "divided" (according to the survivor) among relatives, each taken in by a different family. Two of them later landed in an orphanage.[41] Use of the expression "divided" reveals how, for siblings, adoption marked yet another round of separations, adding further anxiety to their lives.

These oral histories point to the structural dysfunctions in the community life. Under normal circumstances, a parentless child would be permanently placed with a guardian, usually a maternal aunt or grandparent. Now the situation was different. Often, no close relatives had survived, and those who did were not in a position to take care of a child. What would happen if prospective guardians were themselves suffering from chronic diseases, psychological disorders, or living in poverty? Oral history

[39] The reconstruction of Ivan Korsun's biography here is based on his memoir (2009).

[40] A sibling perspective is often missing in studies on Holocaust orphans, as pointed out by Laura Hobson Faure. See Laura Hobson Faure, "Siblings in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath in France and the United States: Rethinking the 'Holocaust Orphan'?" in *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Katerina Capková and Eliyana R. Adler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 103–14.

[41] Interview with a Romani survivor, born 1943, conducted in Ashmiany in September 2015 by Volha Bartash.

research shows that it was not rare for biological parents to be unable to care for their children, having to rely on institutional childcare. One of my informants shared the experience of her family. Her mother, a concentration camp survivor, and father, a former partisan, had to temporarily place their children in a shelter, as both of them needed hospitalization.[42]

Yet becoming a step-parent was seen by many as a rewarding and healing experience. Taking care of a child and focusing on its needs helped in coping with wartime losses and provided much-needed healing for wounded souls. In the case of Lauren discussed above, the older sister who had lost her young child in the concentration camp stepped into the role of Lauren's primary caregiver.

"Surrogate" Families

The war and genocide caused the separation of families and the dysfunction of Roma communities. In their efforts to survive, individuals often had to rely on their own survival skills, cooperate with people of other ethnic backgrounds, and turn to them for help. Not only did children find themselves adopted by non-Roma; adults, too, bonded with the people with whom they shared the daily experiences of surviving life-threatening situations and harsh environmental conditions. The intensity of those experiences evoked a whole range of human feelings and emotions: fear, anger, and despair on the one hand, and hope and gratitude on the other. All of this enabled personal attachments and family-like bonds between "strangers," people who would likely have little in common in times of peace. Drawing on her analysis of the memoirs of Jewish Holocaust survivors, Natalia Aleksiun calls new family-like relations "surrogate families": "These new bonds included stepping into the role of murdered spouses, parents, children, and siblings; taking on responsibility; sharing and providing resources such as food and money; and providing a degree of protection, sexual relations, and emotional comfort."[43]

The memoir of Edward Dębicki offers an excellent example of such relations. His family developed a close friendship with a non-Romani man,

[42] Interview with a second-generation Romani survivor, conducted in Ashmiany in September 2015 by Volha Bartash.

[43] See Natalia Aleksiun, "Uneasy Bonds: On Jews in Hiding and the Making of Surrogate Families," in *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Katerina Capková and Eliyana R. Adler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 98.

Mishka. Mishka was a Red Army soldier who had found himself in a German roundup in Volhynia and went into hiding along with a small group of other men. Edward's family came into contact with the group while hiding in the same area. After Mishka had lost his comrades to a Nazi raid, he joined Edward's family, taking on a role comparable to an older son. Mishka accompanied the father of the family on his daily missions, such as hunting for food, surveying the area, and guarding the small family camp—all with a high level of risk. Having another adult man in their group enhanced their sense of safety and protection, and helped secure means of subsistence. Soon after the Soviet "liberation" of the region, Mishka was recruited into the Red Army reserves. This is what their farewell looked like:

> When he came to us, he was unable to say a word and cried like a young child. And we cried together with him. He asked us to stay with him at that military post for a day. We fulfilled his wish. He said that we were the best family in the world for him—we had survived Hell together, and, therefore, he would remember us forever.[44]

Healing and Reconstruction

As Roma survivors searched for family members and gradually discovered the truth about their fate, they joined distant relatives and acquaintances on a temporary or longer-term basis. In this way, postwar mobile communities were born. Although survivors brought their sorrow with them, there was potential for healing in these new social units. As well as (economic) cooperation, they provided a sense of collectivity, protection, and emotional comfort. All of this fostered the processes of healing and reconstruction.

At the same time, the life of nomadic groups was, to a large degree, focused on the needs of the present. As outlined in the previous section, nomadic life was challenging and full of daily threats and dangerous encounters. Nevertheless, it seems that it was that very focus on the present that helped survivors cope with their traumas and difficult memories, as did familiar cultural settings and closeness to people who had suffered similar fates. New encounters that took place in the context of nomadism revival resulted in new friendships and marriages. Despite the postwar hardship, Roma communities saw a marriage boom, followed by a baby boom. Young

[44] Dębicki (2004), 198.

people as well as widows and widowers with children came together. Younger people who had shared experiences—war orphans or former child prisoners of concentration camps—created families. It is likely that the similarities in their wartime experiences brought people closer.

In a way, these new families were seen to compensate for those lost. There was a tendency to name new-born children after lost relatives; these children were seen not only as a "physical" continuation of one's kin but as living memorials to the dead.[45]

Actual memorials had, nevertheless, to wait. At the same time, it would be a mistake to say that there were no attempts to memorialize the dead in the years after the war. Archival documents show that several locations of mass killings of Roma in western Belarus were marked with wooden crosses. Likewise, there were documented applications for reburial permissions.[46] My conversations with Romani families confirm this. Several families reburied the remains of their loved one in their local cemeteries, so they could visit their graves on commemoration days, namely All Saints' Day (1 November), or *Radunica*, in the case of Orthodox Christians.[47] Nevertheless, the challenges of the present and the lack of financial and administrative resources prevented many sedentary and nomadic communities from commemorating their relatives in the form of a memorial.

According to oral histories and memoirs, the older generation of nomadic Roma sought to avoid painful memories in their daily lives. Nonetheless, even if not articulated, difficult memories would often overcome survivors in the most unexpected situations. In his memoir, Ivan Korsun describes an episode that took place by the campfire during their stay near Novohrad-Volynskyi in (presumably) 1950. Their caravan was enjoying the performance of two young dancers:

> It felt like time stopped. All forgot their difficulties and the war was behind us. Only the old Romani woman Nelly, who was sitting away from the fire, started wiping her eyes with the end of her handkerchief. Her daughter anxiously asked:
>
> – Mama, what is the matter?

[45] I am grateful to Tara Zahra for articulating the idea of children as living memorials during our post-conference conversation in Prague in September 2017.

[46] Volha Bartash, "Towards Ethnography of Archival Silence: Romani Memory of Nazi Genocide Confronts the Soviet Records," *La Ricerca Folklorica* 2, no. 74 (2019): 21–2.

[47] *Radunica* is the main commemorational day in Orthodox Christianity (observed on the Tuesday of the week after Easter).

The mother answered:

– Nothing, really. It's just…

The daughter kept on asking her:

– Tell, tell me!

But the mother had already wiped her eyes and was pretending that nothing had happened. The performance was going on. The boy and the girl were dancing […]. Although I was watching them, I had noticed that the woman was crying. I came closer and heard how the daughter was trying to comfort her:

– No need, no need to cry. So many years have passed.
– I cannot… I cannot forget. Your sister danced in the same manner. And the girl [the dancer] looks so much like her! Her legs are as skillful as hers were; and the hair is that thick… Oh, I cannot, cannot!

She was weeping now…[48]

As it turned out, Nelly's daughter, of whom the girl reminded her, had been captured during the roundup of their group near Rivne. While their family tried to escape, the grandmother got stuck in long grass and fell down. Nelly's daughter had gone to help her but was herself captured by a German. He killed the grandmother on the spot and brought the girl to the group of arrested Roma. All of them were killed. At night, the relatives took the girl's corpse from the mass grave and buried her in the village cemetery.

This episode provides an illustrative example of memory work. An event that Nelly was supposed to enjoy together with other Roma of her caravan evoked her most painful memories. The scene took place about seven years after the events, when Nelly's sorrow was still fresh. Nonetheless, most of my interviews with children of the war show that, no matter how much time has passed, wounds from the loss of a loved one never fully heal. Arguably, the older a survivor is, the more inclined they are to turn to memories of their childhood and youth. As an informant in her nineties told me, "How will I rest in peace after I die when I did not bury my parents? Those Germans killed and burnt them…."[49]

Some survivors had been so traumatized by the loss of their family members that their journey to the sites of bitter memory was postponed

[48] Korsun (2009), 189–90.

[49] Interview with a Romani survivor from Ukraine, born 1923, conducted in the Lida region in July 2018 by Volha Bartash. Here, the interviewer expresses her unease at not having an opportunity to bury her parents in accordance with ritual.

for decades, or never happened. For instance, one of my interlocutors talked of the intergenerational silence in her family, which had left her unaware of the place where her parents were killed.

Conclusion

To return to my initial question: what did the postwar reconstruction and healing look like for Roma, and how did their experiences differ from those of "others"? My analysis of Romani postwar mobility has shown that the revival of nomadism in the western regions of the Soviet Union was associated with processes of community reconstruction. In fact, this is what the rebuilding and healing looked like for Roma: new mobile units provided social spaces within which Romani traditions were reproduced, traumas healed, and families restored. Roma mobilized their networks to reunite family members and take care of orphaned children. At the same time, their mobile lifestyle, with its daily challenges, along with the lack of material resources and administrative access, inevitably delayed the memorialization of the dead. In this, Roma communities differed from the local sedentary populations.

Family and community motivations played a role in the internal and external migration of Roma as well. Nevertheless, these mobility patterns were shared with "others." Throughout the western borderlands, families and individuals left their homes, seeking new opportunities in the depths of the Soviet Union or returning to their roots in Poland. Even if Romani cross-border movement looked different and took the form of caravan border crossing, the nature of the migration was the same.

These observations point to the importance of reading Romani experiences in the local historical context and alongside demographic developments. Like all others, they found themselves affected by a situation in which former neighbors were no more. As demonstrated above, it became difficult to find winter accommodation in the countryside when so many of their local contacts—former hosts, neighbors, and commercial partners—had disappeared. Structural changes in their societies affected nomadic Roma too. In particular, the Soviet transformation of the local countryside gradually leveled their historical patterns of interaction with peasant families, displacing their contact zones from the countryside to the city.

Yet the postwar lives of Roma communities, and especially the ways in which they sought to cope with their losses and rebuild families, were similar to those of other populations affected by the Nazi genocide, interethnic violence, and displacement, for example, the Jewish Holocaust survivors attempting to rebuild their lives in the postwar Soviet Union.

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