Lilia Tomchuk

5.1 "And I Gave Them Skirts like the Ones We Used to Wear": Roma Women's Recollections of Helping Jews during the Holocaust in Transnistria

When Raul Hilberg presented his closing remarks at the symposium entitled "Roma and Sinti: Under-Studied Victims of Nazism" in September 2000, he strongly emphasized the interwoven fates between the Jewish, and Sinti and Roma[1] communities before and during the Holocaust.[2] He argued that both, as widely dispersed diaspora people, have been subject of mistrust and expulsion by the majority populations for centuries. Hilberg further pointed out that Roma suffered greatly as victims of Nazi persecution and genocide. Those connections between Jews and Roma transcended borders and crossed various regions of occupied Europe, ending up in concentration camps, gas chambers or ghettos.

As a case study of this, the following chapter leads specifically to a strip of land between the Dniester and southern Bug rivers, formerly part of the Ukrainian and Moldavian SSR and occupied by the German ally Romania between 1941 and 1944. In the region then known as Transnistria, the paths of Roma and Jews crossed in a continuum of deportations, murder, and oppression. Historians characterize the Holocaust in this region as a special form or a "case unto itself"[3] for various reasons. Special attention is paid to the interaction of many initiatives at different levels that led to inconsistency and contradiction regarding the policy and treatment of Jews and Roma. The role of the Romanian state and the emerging status of the Transnistrian governorate as a "dumping ground" for the "ethnically undesirable" is an integral part of this framework. Linked closely to these events is the deportation of Jews, beginning in the summer of 1941, and then of Roma, beginning in

1 "Sinti" refers to members of the minority group who have been resident in Central Europe since the late Middle Ages, "Roma" to those of Eastern or Southeastern European origin. "Roma" – or simply "Rom" (meaning "human") – is also used as a collective name for the entire minority. In my article, I am only focusing on Roma.

2 Raul Hilberg, "Closing Remarks. Roma and Sinti: Understudied Victims of Nazism" (speech recorded at the One-Day Symposium, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, September 21, 2000), accessed May 15, https://www.ushmm.org/research/tools/videos-recordings-and-transcripts-of-past-events/past-conferences-and-workshops.

3 Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, introduction to *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, by Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 15.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110733860-010

the summer of 1942, from the Romanian provinces of Bessarabia, and Bukovina.[4] As for the Roma, the authorities defined two categories to be deported: nomads and sedentary[5] "Gypsies" who were "a burden and a danger to public order."[6] Romanian gendarmes took the deported and local Roma, who had resided in the region, to makeshift camps, mainly along the Bug River. They were dumped "in towns and villages, or on Soviet-style farms. For Roma placed in evacuated Ukrainian homes, housing was miserably overcrowded [...]. Nomads recounted being left in open fields, or crammed into barns, pigpens, and dug-out earthen shelters [...]."[7] Roma and Jews were sometimes grouped together in the same camps, occasionally with separate housing and work facilities.[8]

The mechanisms and institutions addressed above have previously been researched, unlike the subject of this article, the connection between Jewish and Roma victims.[9] These studies have included extended discussions on how the persecution and extermination of Roma could or should (not) be termed and framed in the context of the (Jewish) Holocaust and Memory.[10] Most historians emphasize the racial character of the persecution, linked to the image of Roma as "racial inferiors," "spies," "asocial," and/or "criminal."[11] Given this ongoing debate, it seems important to shift the focus from such large-scaled narratives to studies of individual experiences. The aim of this article is to focus on the recollections of Roma who survived in Transnistria, and to examine two spheres that are neglected in Holocaust scholarship: first, the interethnic relations between Roma and Jews during the Holocaust; second, the perspective of/on Roma women in terms of the integra-

4 Dennis Deletant, "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem'," in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, ed. Ray Brandon et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 157.

5 Thereby, they remained often in family units; the nomadic Roma were mostly driven along with the entire *tabor*. In Russian, the term *tabor* refers to "gypsy tribes."

6 Shannon Woodcock, "The Holocaust and Romani Romanians: Deportation and Resistance," *Genocide Perspectives, IV. Essays on Holocaust and Genocide* (2012): 363.

7 Michelle Kelso, "Romani Women and the Holocaust: Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Romanian-Controlled Transnistria," in *Women and Genocide: Gendered Experience of Violence, Survival, and Resistance*, ed. JoAnn DiGeorgia-Lutz et al. (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016), 46–47.

8 Ibid.

9 Here, the numerous publications by Radu Ioanid, Viorel Achim, Jean Ancel, Michelle Kelso, and Mikhail Tyaglyy are particularly noteworthy.

10 See, for example, Ian Hancock, "Uniqueness of the Victims: Gypsies, Jews and the Holocaust," *Without Prejudice: The EAFORD International Review of Racial Discrimination* 1, no. 2 (1988).

11 Michelle Kelso, "Recognizing the Roma: A Study of the Holocaust as Viewed in Romania" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010), 15.

tion of gender as a category of analysis and dimension of experience.[12] Thus, Joan Ringelheim argues that Jews "were not victims in a vacuum. Their lives intersected those of perpetrators, bystanders, and other victims. All these intertwined create the picture of the Holocaust."[13] Ingrid Lewis further remarks that the exclusive focus on Jewish women contributes neglecting the experiences of other groups of victims.[14]

The research is based largely on audio-visual interviews with 16 female and 12 male Roma survivors collected in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA).[15] A documentary complements these testimonies, considering the fates of deported Roma.[16] The starting point is the characteristics within female and male Roma recollections related to Jews. Giving aid to Jews emerges as a significant and rather specific narrative in Roma women's accounts. Moreover, mainly women occupy the role of helpers or rescuers in this narrative. In this article, I will address the underlying narrative elements that accompany these testimonies, and how aid-giving is explained, as well as what role traditional beliefs and gender played in the context of helping Jews. To conclude, I will focus on the question of why the testimonies of Jewish survivors rarely reveal any evidence of the fate of the Roma or of Jewish-Roma interactions.

The great diversity of Jewish and Roma communities, as well as the different settings, holds great complexity in assessing the inter-ethnic relations and attitudes. Given the young age of most of the interviewees at the time of the occupation the specifics concerning memory must also be considered. The formative influence of shared memories and attitudes within Roma communities plays an

12 The only studies available to date that explicitly refer to Roma women were conducted by Sybil Milton and Michelle Kelso: Sybil Milton, "Hidden Lives: Sinti and Roma Women," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer et al. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 53–76; Kelso, "Romani Women and the Holocaust," 37–72.

13 Joan Ringelheim, "Thoughts About Women and the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), 142–143.

14 Ingrid Lewis, *Women in European Holocaust Films: Perpetrators, Victims and Resisters* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 60.

15 Today, the organization, once founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994, presents the largest collection of Holocaust Oral History testimonies worldwide. The collection on the experiences of Roma and Sinti survivors includes a total of 407 interviews (222 from women and 185 from men). They were collected in 18 countries and in 16 languages between 1995 and 1999. Of these, around 35 testimonies relate to Roma victims who survived in Transnistria. The interviews were conducted in Russian, Ukrainian, and Romani languages and with a large proportion of interviewees being of child age at the time of the occupation.

16 Sergiu Ene, *Prigoana din Basarabia: documentar despre holocaustul romilor* [The exile from Bassarabia] (2013, Chisinau: Centrul National alRomilor din Moldova, Center. Stockholm: E Romani Glinda), DVD.

essential role in this framework.[17] Moreover, due to their own specificity, the analysis of the Roma testimonies can lead to certain difficulties. This includes the strong fragmentation within the narratives and a lack of detail regarding the description of certain episodes. Anna Abakunova traces these characteristics in part to widespread illiteracy, or else to the strong control Roma have over what they are willing or able to share.[18] Mikhail Tyaglyy criticizes the methodology of recording interviews with Roma, which not always suited this group of informants, ultimately stressing that the "Roma section of the collection is nevertheless worth its weight in gold, given the disastrous lack of historical sources on the subject."[19]

Basic Elements in Testimonies Concerning Helping Jews

Most of the Roma testimonies of the VHA contain accounts about encounters between Roma and Jews, and the persecution of Jews. Overall, the attitudes toward Jews can largely be classified as friendly and compassionate, and in a few cases also neutral or indifferent. Only a handful of interviewees state they had no contact with Jews at any time or had not heard anything about their fate. Those narrative episodes are usually initiated by the guidelines of the questionnaire, which are segmented into the phases before, during, and after the war.

The recollections of Jewish and Roma fates are often linked together, highlighting the intertwined histories of sorrow. Many witnesses point out that Jews were treated much worse (in terms of the persecution or access to life-saving resources), and that the Roma were next in line after the Jews. Ari Joskowicz states, both groups evaluated their position by the presence of the other, and the "hierarchical relationships that the Nazis created during the war indelibly shaped relations be-

17 Tetyana Storozhko, "Pobut romìv Ukraïni v perìod nacists'koï okupacìï u ditâčih spogadah" [Life of Roma in Ukraine during the Nazi Occupation in Children's Memories] (paper presented at the scientific-practical conference, Kyiv, October 4, 2016).

18 Anna Abakunova, "Extermination of the Roma in Transnistria during World War II: Construction of the Roma Collective Memory," in *The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Anna Wylegala et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). Kindle edition.

19 Mikhail Tyaglyy, *Pereslìduvannâ ta vbivstva romìv na terenah Ukraïni u časi Drugoï svìtovoï vijni: Zbìrnik dokumentìv, materìalìv ta spogadìv* [Persecution and Murder of Roma in Ukraine during World War II: A Collection of Documents, Materials and Memoirs] (Kyiv: Ukraïns'kij centr vivčennâ ìstorìï Golokostu, 2013), 95.

tween Roma and Jews [in Auschwitz, L.T.]."[20] Consequently, these relations affected their post-war accounts. However, the generalization of the worse situation of the Jews in Transnistria partially overshadows the nuances of Roma persecution and their rapidly changing survival conditions.[21] Joskowicz further refers to the anonymity and distance, which manifests itself in the absence of names in Jewish testimonies about Roma. He cites various reasons, such as disinterest of the interviewers or the perception of this information as irrelevant to the survivors.[22] This phenomenon occurs in the remarkably rare case of Hajria Imeri-Mihajic, a Macedonian Roma woman who saved the life of a Jewish child during the war. She was the first and only Roma to be declared Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in 1991.[23] Names of Jews also appear rarely in the testimonies of Roma, despite the questioning by the interviewer. The witnesses mostly claim to have forgotten the names – possibly affected by the perception of child survivors, the way in which shared memories are passed on in Roma communities, and the loss of contact with the saved Jews.

Constructing the female recollections in this context is important. In the examined interviews, half of the women recall aid-related activities on the part of the Roma. Some of the testimonies are more non-specific and concern the Roma community in general. In most cases the witnesses recall concrete situations, in which the help was mainly provided by their mothers or other Roma women.[24] In the documentary "The Exile from Bessarabia" Ioana Matrache, who was deported to Transnistria when she was in the age of eight, recounts: "My mother was hiding so many Jews. God bless them! She saved them from death. They were tortured a lot. We were all like brothers and sisters. They were shot more often than Gypsies."[25] This is a common pattern, namely that the worse treatment of Jews, compassion for them or a kind of inner bond are cited as explanations for the aid-giving. A few interviewees also implement the faith in God in the explanatory framework of aid-giving like the survivor Nina Shvets, who grew up in a nomadic Ukrainian Roma family in Kudriavtsevka:

---

20 Ari Joskowicz, "Separate Suffering, Shared Archives: Jewish and Romani Histories of Nazi Persecution," *History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016), 119.

21 For more on the situation in Transnistria: Mikhail Tyaglyy, "Nazi Occupation Policies and the Mass Murder of the Roma in Ukraine," in *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration*, ed. Anton Weiss-Wendt (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 132–133.

22 Ibid., 121.

23 Joskowicz, "Separate Suffering, Shared Archives," 121–22.

24 Here, the large proportion of survivors who were children at the time of the occupation should be considered.

25 Ioana Matrache, in *Prigoana din Basarabia* (00:34:12–00:34:30).

> I believe in God and everyone can say whatever he wants, it doesn't matter, even when the Soviet power led the country against God, we all believed in God, we also saved Jews. There was a small settlement here and a lot of Jews were gathered there, and my mother […], cooked potatoes and threw them in, she was very good-hearted, […].[26] She was very compassionate and also believed in God, well it's like that in our whole family.[27]

Narratives on the Christian faith in general have a powerful meaning when it comes to counteracting anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices, for example, when the interviewees try to express that "Roma people mean no harm to anyone."[28] In this example, helping Jews confirms to a certain extent the good nature of Roma in the sense of a collective representation.

Even though Transnistrian Roma were not as systematically persecuted as Jews, they also had to face various hardships and acts of violence. Consequently, their adaptation methods and survival strategies had a direct impact on the survival of the Jewish victims whom they tried to save. While the sedentary Roma mainly used their housing opportunities, nomadic, or deported, women relied on the method of mimicry, providing the Jewish victims with traditional clothing. Mariia Preida, who was deported from Romania to the Vradievka camp at 18 with her nomadic *tabor*, recounts four Jewish children who stayed with them until the end of the war: "And I gave them skirts like the ones we used to wear, not like the ones now, back then the skirts were around twenty meters and around thirty meters there were some skirts as well, and this is how we struggled to get here."[29] Overall, the appearance and especially the length of Roma women's skirts is a relatively common identity-forming motif which reflects certain cultural gender patterns, partly in light of their process of change over time.

The Impact of Traditional Beliefs and Gender Roles

Regarding the motives and decisions to help Jews, the answers are sought in the traditional ideas and gender roles of the Roma. The outlined characteristics may be rooted in the traditional Roma culture and its inherent patriarchal structures,

26 Nina Shvets, Interview 49704. Segment 13. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
27 Ibid., Segment 29.
28 Ibid., Segment 27.
29 Mariia Preida, Interview 49812. Segment 18. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.

family being regarded as the strongest and most important institution.[30] Those family units have always been led and protected by a dominant male figure.[31] The patriarchal norms thus generally imply a subordinate status of Roma women, who traditionally were "supposed to love, give birth and raise children, and take care of the nutrition of the family, as well as the household."[32] Agnieszka Barszczewska and Lehel Peti state, however, that Roma women held great power in practical life because of their core function within the family as mothers and mediators of the Roma culture.[33]

Haunted by constant prejudice, the Roma developed their own value system built around a cultural socio-hygienic code, the *marime.*[34] David Crowe conceptualizes this code by dividing the body into pure and impure parts, stating that this division of values could be applied to all aspects of life, including interactions with *gadje* (i. e. non-Roma).[35] It is assumed that non-Roma do not follow the rules of purity, and Roma therefore define themselves as distinct from *gadje* resulting in distrust and boundary.[36] Walter Weyrauch and Maureen Bell define those beliefs as highly relevant for women: "the character and quality of a Gypsy woman is largely judged by whether she is perceived to be respectable, which is determined by whether she follows Gypsy laws and customs."[37] The authors point out that it would be a serious violation of the code for a Roma woman to marry a *gadje.*[38] Finally, how did these beliefs affect the opportunities and decisions to help Jews, particularly by Roma women? It is hardly possible to give an adequate answer due to the lack of research in this area, but also because of the diversity of the Roma communities and individuals. The testimonies indicate that traditional norms were practiced and passed on with varying degrees of strictness. Michelle

30 Sandrine Charlotte Bartos, "Romani Women: The European Union's Most Stigmatized Minority," *Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union* 2017, Article 3 (2017): 3, accessed February 10, 2021, doi:10.5642/urceu.201701.03.

31 Agnieszka Barszczewska and Lehel Peti, *Integrating Minorities: Traditional Communities and Modernization* (Cluj-Napoca: Romanian Institute For Research on National Minorities, 2011), 162.

32 Alena Kajanova, David Urban, and Pavlina Adamcova, "The Status of the Romany Woman in the Family and in Society," *Journal of Nursing, Social Studies, Public Health and Rehabilitation* 3–4 (2020): 160.

33 Barszczewska and Peti, *Integrating Minorities*, 163.

34 David M. Crowe, "Roma in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa: Migration, Staatsbürgerschaft und Asyl" [Roma in East-Central and Southeast Europe: Migration, Citizenship and Asylum], *Osteuropa* 52, no. 6 (2002): 776.

35 The impurity refers mainly to the female genital area, to menstruation and giving birth.

36 Crowe, "Roma in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa," 776.

37 Walter O. Weyrauch and Maureen A. Bell, "*Autonomous Lawmaking: The Case of the 'Gypsies'*," *The Yale Law Journal* 103. no. 2 (1993): footnote 107.

38 Ibid., 9–10.

Kelso confirms this by stating that subgroups of Roma had different social norms regarding gender.[39]

The question arises to what extent Jews are classified as "gadje." In the Roma testimonies, the terms "Jews" and "gadje" are applied separately. While the respective local population is referred to as gadje, the Jews are given a distinct position.[40] In accordance with Hilberg's remarks, Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago point to the parallels in the long history of persecution of Jews and Roma and the symbolic ethnic boundaries they have thus created.[41] Noteworthy are the traditional Jewish laws of ritual purity and impurity (*tumah* and *taharah*), which can be traced back to the Torah and have been reinterpreted over throughout history. The immersion in the ritual bath (*mikveh*) has been at the center of this concept. Although not exclusively, the *mikveh* played a particular role regarding female purity.[42] The existence of these codes, regardless of whether they were observed by the Jewish communities, could be an explanatory factor for the differentiation described.[43] The ethnic boundaries on the Roma side seem to blur when it comes to Jews, thus affecting the experiences and recollections concerning Jews. The underlying dynamics require more in-depth research within the Holocaust historiography.

Overall, it is difficult to determine to what degree Roma women followed traditional norms and gender roles and to what degree they may have even refused them by helping Jews. The witnesses themselves generally do not reflect on the above questions, at least not explicitly. For one, the gender structures may have enabled them to demonstrate solidarity and sympathy toward Jews. One could assume that they acted according to their acquired and expected gender roles, shaped by the attribute of caring women.[44] This reflects in survivors' choice of attrib-

39 Kelso, "Romani Women and the Holocaust," 45.

40 See, for example, Ekaterina Chebotar, Interview 49372. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998; transcript and translation from Romani provided by the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.

41 Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago, "The Politics of Memory Jews and Roma Commemorate Their Persecution," in *The Roma: A Minority in Europe*, ed. Roni Stauber et al. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 118–19.

42 For more information see Beth Wenger, "Mikveh," in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women's Archive, last modified June 23, 2021, accessed June 30, 2021, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/mikveh.

43 This refers to the wide spectrum, from fully assimilated to Orthodox Jewish communities. Regional specifics (Romanian provinces and Ukraine) must be considered. This includes the repression of Jewish religious life in the Soviet Union before the Holocaust.

44 The historian Vladimir Solonari comes to similar conclusions in connection with his study of the behavior of male and female Ukrainian neighbors in Transnistria: Vladimir Solonari, "On the Persistence of Moral Judgment: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Survivors and Their Christian Neighbors," in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, ed. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttmann (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019), 198.

utes when remembering their mothers. The closeness of girls to their mothers and other Roma women, who served as important role models, and the involvement in various gender-related responsibilities, may be the reason why memories of mothers and women helping Jews have become deeply rooted, especially among female child survivors.

However, both Roma women and men did not merely comply with their traditional roles – by helping Jews they showed great courage and forms of resistance. Roma were mostly aware of the Jewish persecution and consequently they had to realize that helping them would mean great risk. It is important to take a closer look at the framework of the decision-making. The survivor Lidiia Zolotareva indicates that her father had to give his consent to hiding Jews. In doing so, the men consciously chose to risk themselves, their families or even communities. The witness belonged to a settled Ukrainian Roma family living in a house in Griegorivka and tells about hiding a Jewish woman with her little daughter. Her father would accept them out of compassion, despite the Germans nearby. Zolotareva implies that while her father created the framework for the aid, it was her mother who took care of the Jewish escapees from a practical (meal and clothing) and emotional point of view.[45]

On the other hand, Roma women sometimes remained without men during the war, since there were also men among the Roma who were in the army, or who were partisans.[46] There are still unresolved debates in historical scholarship regarding gender. Given that in many European countries women made most rescuers, one side points to the war-related shortage of men as the main reason, while the other claims that gender itself was the leading force.[47] Due to the extended family concept of the Roma and the deportations usually involving the entire *tabor*, it was far less common for Roma women to be on their own. Yet the testimonies refer to a few such cases where Roma women – possibly for the very first time – acted and decided more autonomously. This applies in particular to the settled Ukrainian Roma, who used to live in small units and somehow managed to stay in (their) houses during the occupation.

Mariia Koval, a settled Roma, was seven years old at the beginning of the war in Ivanovka. She tells about her father’s death at the war front, and her mother Dunja remaining with the children. From then on, her mother went to work in the corn fields, before that she used to tell the fortune and make herbal medicine.

---

45 Lidiia Zolotareva, Interview 49615. Segment 25. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.

46 See, for example, Nikolai Bessonov, “Cygane SSSR v okkupacii: Strategii vyživaniâ” [Gypsies of the USSR under Occupation: Survival Strategies], Golokost i sučasnist’ 6. no. 2 (2009): 45.

47 Johanna B. Michlic, “Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland: Preliminary Observations,” *Polin Studies in Polish Jewry* 30 (2018): 412.

Koval's recollections implement many adaptation and survival methods that also benefited in the subsequent rescue of a Jewish woman: the witness' mother gained the opportunity to work by passing Aryan and due to false papers that identified her as Ukrainian. The survivor recalls how her mother hid the 45-year-old Jewish woman from Odessa throughout the war:

> During the war, a Jewish woman came, brought some ribbons, combs, threads, and said to my mother 'Dunjechka, this is for Manja (diminutive of Mariia) and Katja. I am Jewish, here take my documents Manja and hide them'. Mama then hid the woman in the earth cellar. […] She asked me: 'Go, little daughter, see if anyone is coming.' […] She hid with us for three years. She was like a sister to my mother.[48]

While Koval's mother was working, the Jewish woman took care of the household. Most noticeable is the family-forming terminology. Historians who address the topic of women in the Holocaust confirm widespread narrative of a surrogate family in women's testimonies. Goldenberg describes the concept in the context of female memoirs of Auschwitz: "Social bonding, the formation of groups of two or more, encouraged women to struggle to survive. These groups functioned as surrogate families that took on the responsibility of gathering food, 'organizing' necessities, building hope, and sustaining life in any way possible."[49] Agnes Grunwald-Spier emphasizes that such bonding, while not exclusive to women, is particularly related to the extraordinary caring of one woman for another.[50] These findings concern Jewish women's collectives, but such connections also occurred among Roma and Jewish women. This example shows a detachment from traditional family structures. Moreover, it becomes apparent that helping Jews was not necessarily initiated by the Roma, but Jews rather actively decided to increase their chances of survival.

Another aspect is related to the fact that Roma women did not exclusively help Jewish women or children, even if they made up the majority. Nina Shvets recalls a Roma woman from the sedentary Ukrainian neighbourhood who saved a Jewish man during the war. The interviewee indicates that the Roma woman went through a lot of anguish by saving the Jewish man, but her narrative focusses more on the fact that he married his rescuer. The hints in Shvets's account

48 Mariia Koval, Interview 49614. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998; transcript and translation from Romani provided by the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.

49 Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 336.

50 Agnes Grunwald-Spier, *Women's Experiences* in the *Holocaust: In Their Own Words* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2018), 59.

could indicate a romantic-related motivation of providing help.[51] Though this assumption can only be read between the lines, one could assume that Roma women acted against the traditional norms by entering a relationship with a non-Roma man.[52]

The Blank Space in the Recollections of Jewish Survivors

Jewish survivors rarely recall the linked fates of Roma and Jews in Transnistria. An important question remains: how can this blank space within the recollections of Jewish witnesses be explained? A basic interpretation of this phenomenon refers to the frame conditions of the interviews. Noah Shenker states that "testimonies are not fixed capsules of meaning, but rather parts of a process shaped by the encounter between witnesses and interviewers and by intertwined institutional, technological and archival factors."[53] In the case of the USC Shoah Foundation, several factors play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the interview, starting with the technical decision of either letting the interview unfold freely or the interviewer asking rigid and chronologically bound questions.[54] Following the chronological structure, Roma survivors are asked about their awareness of the Jewish persecution or relations to Jews in most of the interviews. In contrast, the questioning of Jewish witnesses about the fate of Roma is rather inconsistent. However, it is difficult to assess whether it is a question of conscious non-consideration of Roma.[55]

Karola Fings[56] confirmed the mentioned gap for other types of sources.[57] The early reports of the commissions set up in the Soviet Union are worth mentioning. Tyaglyy examined the reasons for the extremely poor integration of information

51 Nina Shvets, Interview 49704. Segment 27–28. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.

52 Regarding the motives for helping Jews by female rescuers, Michlic draws attention to additional subjective determinants, such as feelings of loss, insecurity, as well as decisions based on romantic feelings. Michlic, "Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland," 425.

53 Noah Shenker, "Through the Lens of the Shoah: The Holocaust as a Paradigm for Documenting Genocide," *Testimonies, History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 144.

54 Ibid., 146–147.

55 In any case, it is noticeable that in several cases the interviewers who had interviewed both experience groups, explicitly asked Jewish survivors about Roma.

56 Curator of "Voices of the Victims," a project on the European Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma as part of the digital RomArchive.

57 Karola Fings, e-mail message to author, February 8, 2021.

about Roma victims in the documentation of the Extraordinary State Commission.[58] He identified a total of six underlying factors, such as the non-awareness of the disappearance of Roma in urban society due to the fact that "they were little visible in the socio-political and cultural reality of the pre-war era."[59] He refers to the widespread stereotypes and prejudices about "Gypsies" in the collective perception of Soviet society, even before the German invasion and then in the post-war period.[60] Attitudes carrying negative connotations are also reflected in some of the VHA testimonies of Jewish survivors, like the myth of the child-stealing. Elizaveta Viner, born in Vinnitsa in 1930, recalls: "Well, apparently once I was stolen by gypsies, they took me away, I went with them and then whenever I saw gypsies, I was always afraid of them, because I was told that they took me away."[61] Expressions such as "apparently" or "I was told" reveal the socially constructed character of this shared image. In several testimonies of Jewish survivors, it seems conflicting with the antisemitic stereotype that Jews were stealing children for religious ceremonies.[62] Another motive concerns distancing oneself from the methods used by Roma to survive during the war period, as stealing from the local population. Tyaglyy considers the view of "Gypsies" as those who did not want to work, who were lazy, and preferred to steal as one of the most formative stereotypes.[63] Besides this, there are numerous Jewish accounts on stealing from the Ukrainian population as a common method of Jewish survival. However, the attitudes outlined could certainly have contributed to many Jewish survivors not paying attention to the fate of the Roma. Even in cases in which Roma have helped Jews such negative social images may have meant it was considered inappropriate to talk about them.

---

58 The Extraordinary State Commission for the Determination and Investigation of Nazi and their Collaborators' Atrocities in the USSR was established in November 1942 to investigate the damage inflicted on civilians, public organizations, factories, and state institutions in the USSR. In addition, the ChGK collected evidence of Nazi war crimes and assessed damage to the economy in the Soviet territories liberated from Nazi occupation.

59 Mikhail Tyaglyy, "'Tragedìâ vinnih žertv'? Pam'ât' pro genocid romìv u povoênnìj Ukraïnì. Častina 1" ['Tragedy of the Guilty Victims?' The Memory of the Roma Genocide in Post-War Ukraine. Part 1]. *Ukraïna Moderna* (2020), accessed February 10, 2021, https://uamoderna.com/pdl-min/tragediya-vinnix-zhertv-pamyat-pro-genoczid-romiv-u-povoennij-ukraini-chastina-1.

60 Ibid.

61 Elizaveta Viner, Interview 31309. Segment 7–8. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997.

62 Nikolai Bessonov, "Gypsies of the USSR," 31.

63 Mikhail Tyaglyy, "'Tragedìâ vinnih žertv'? Pam'ât' pro genocid romìv u povoênnìj Ukraïnì. Častina 3" ['Tragedy of the Guilty Victims'? The Memory of the Roma Genocide in Post-War Ukraine. Part 3]. *Ukraïna Moderna* (2020), accessed February 10, 2021, https://uamoderna.com/pdl-min/tragediya-vinnix-zhertv-pamyat-pro-genoczid-romiv-u-povoennij-ukraini-chastina-3.

Yet, these negative attributions are also countered with positive attitudes by the Jewish witnesses. Particularly outstanding is the narrative of friendships between Roma and Jewish women. This narrative is closely related to aid activities. Roza Khasina describes crossing paths with Ukrainian Roma, which she refers to as "our Ukrainian gypsies" in the Transnistrian camp in Karlovka. She recalls her mother's friendship with a Roma woman.[64] Of particular interest is the differentiation between the Roma "from back then" and those representing the time of the interview. By drawing a distinction from "today's gypsies who walk the streets and steal from the market,"[65] Khasina seems to justify the friendship with the Roma. Her brother Avraam Khasin also remembers her: "And they even helped us, especially Pelageya, who made friends with my mother, always gave her some of the food."[66] The peculiarity of Khasin's account is the presence of the name of the woman. Another example of aid-giving can be observed in the testimony of Elizaveta Berlin, who confirms that Jewish children were surviving among the deported Roma.[67] Berlin points out that Roma arrived as "very wealthy" and had compassion for the Jews, so they shared their cornmeal with them until they themselves had nothing left.[68]

Conclusion

The recollections that have been presented within the framework of the present article reflect the linked fates of Jews and Roma during the Holocaust. The shared suffering as victims or rather the lens of perpetration and victimhood is extended by interpersonal and inter-ethnic relations between Roma and Jews, which in turn depended on dynamical historical, political, and social factors. Their reactions to the genocide in terms of helping Jews and adopting creative strategies to ensure the survival for both sides show that Roma not only showed compassion, but participated in the resistance against the persecution and extermination policies. The hierarchies artificially created by those in power, to which Joskowicz referred, were in this context both the precondition and an explanatory narrative for the help provided to Jews. Transnistria, as the specific sphere, established the framework for those (inter-)actions. The disorganized situation in the region not only af-

64 Roza Khasina, Interview 49672. Segment 57. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
65 Ibid.
66 Avraam Khasin, interview 49333. Segment 110. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
67 Elizaveta Berlin, interview 12732. Segment 105. USC Shoah Foundation, 1996.
68 Ibid., Segment 104.

fected survival conditions of Roma and Jews, but also created new spaces and opportunities for providing help.

Ultimately, these recollections are a mirror for the parallels in the history of the two groups even before the Holocaust and its effects on the attitudes and choices of Roma concerning Jews. In relation to this, the impact of the attitudes within the memory of families and communities is also significant. In particular, Roma women's recollections of helping Jews also reflect gendered experiences based on traditional beliefs and gender roles. They reveal different contexts, showing on the one hand the correspondence and observance of those norms, but also cases of re-created roles or border crossings, which required courage, especially from women. They also uncover forms of surrogate families that crossed interethnic boundaries and traditional family structures. Some signs of distancing, however, cannot be resolved, such as the widespread namelessness in the testimonies on both sides.

After all, the recollections also illustrate the negative anti-Roma stereotypes and prejudices that persist to this day. This applies to the Roma survivors, who weave in their belief in God and aid given to Jews as a kind of protective shield, and to the described blank space within the Jewish testimonies in the context of the image of "Gypsies" in the collective perception. The examination of these testimonies contributes to a deconstruction of these social images and its ongoing continuity. Despite potential pitfalls that oral history testimonies may entail, the findings of this research have proven their immense value in revealing personalized perceptions, reactions, and attitudes of inter-ethnic relations during the Holocaust.

Bibliography

Abakunova, Anna. "Extermination of the Roma in Transnistria during World War II: Construction of the Roma Collective Memory." *In The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine*, edited by Anna Wylegala and Malgorzata Glowacka-Grajper. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020. Kindle edition.

Barszczewska, Agnieszka, and Lehel Peti. *Integrating Minorities: Traditional Communities and Modernization.* Cluj-Napoca: Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities, 2011.

Bartash, Volha. "Family Memories of Roma as Sources for Holocaust Studies Insights from the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region." *S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation.* 4, no. 2 (2017): 4–17.

Bartos, Sandrine Charlotte. "Romani Women: The European Union's Most Stigmatized Minority." *Claremont-UC Undergraduate Research Conference on the European Union* 2017, Article 3 (2017): 1–12. Accessed February 10, 2021. doi:10.5642/urceu.201701.03.

Bessonov, Nikolai. "Cygane SSSR v okkupacii: Strategii vyživaniâ" [Gypsies of the USSR under Occupation: Survival Strategies]. Golokost i sučasnisť 6. no. 2 (2009): 17–52.

Brandon, Ray, and Wendy Lower. Introduction to *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, by Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, 1–23. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Crowe, David M. "Roma in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa: Migration, Staatsbürgerschaft und Asyl" [Roma in East-Central and Southeast Europe: Migration, Citizenship and Asylum]. *Osteuropa* 52, no. 6 (2002): 774–788.

Deletant, Dennis. "Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the 'Jewish Problem'." In *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, edited by Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, 155–190. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Goldenberg, Myrna. "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender." In *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, 327–339. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Grunwald-Spier, Agnes. *Women's Experiences* in the *Holocaust: In Their Own Words. Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2018.*

Hancock, Ian. "Uniqueness of the Victims: Gypsies, Jews and the Holocaust." *Without Prejudice: The EAFORD International Review of Racial Discrimination* 1, no. 2 (1988): 45–67.

Joskowicz, Ari. "Separate Suffering, Shared Archives: Jewish and Romani Histories of Nazi Persecution," *History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016), 110–140.

Kajanova, Alena, David Urban, and Pavlina Adamcova. "The Status of the Romany Woman in the Family and in Society." *Journal of Nursing, Social Studies, Public Health and Rehabilitation* 3–4 (2020): 159–164.

Kelso, Michelle. "Recognizing the Roma: A Study of the Holocaust as Viewed in Romania." PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010.

Kelso, Michelle. "Romani Women and the Holocaust: Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Romanian-Controlled Transnistria." In *Women and Genocide: Gendered Experience of Violence, Survival, and Resistance*, edited by JoAnn DiGeorgia-Lutz and Donna Gosbee, 37–72. Toronto: Women's Press, 2016.

Lewis, Ingrid. *Women in European Holocaust Films: Perpetrators, Victims and Resisters.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Michlic, Johanna B. "Gender Perspectives on the Rescue of Jews in Poland: Preliminary Observations." *Polin Studies in Polish Jewry* 30 (2018): 407–426.

Milton, Sybil. "Hidden Lives: Sinti and Roma Women." In *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, edited by Elizabeth R. Baer, and Myrna Goldenberg, 53–76. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.

Ringelheim, Joan S. "Thoughts About Women and the Holocaust." In *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 141–149. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990.

Shenker, Noah. "Through the Lens of the Shoah: The Holocaust as a Paradigm for Documenting Genocide." *Testimonies, History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 141–175.

Solonari, Vladimir. "On the Persistence of Moral Judgment: Local Perpetrators in Transnistria as Seen by Survivors and Their Christian Neighbors." In *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, edited by Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttmann, 190–208. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019.

Stauber, Roni, and Raphael Vago. "The *Politics* of *Memory Jews* and *Roma Commemorate Their Persecution.*" *In The Roma: A Minority in Europe,* edited by Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago, 117–133. *Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007.*

Storozhko, Tetyana. “Pobut romìv Ukraïni v perìod nacists’koï okupacìï u ditâčih spogadah” [Life of Roma in Ukraine during the Nazi Occupation in Children’s Memories]. Paper presented at the scientific-practical conference, Kyiv, October 4, 2016.

Tyaglyy, Michail. “Nazi Occupation Policies and the Mass Murder of the Roma in Ukraine.” In *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration*, edited by Anton Weiss-Wendt, 120–152. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013.

Tyaglyy, Mikhail. Pereslìduvannâ ta vbivstva romìv na terenah Ukraïni u časi Drugoï svìtovoï vìjni: Zbìrnik dokumentìv, materìalìv ta spogadìv [Persecution and Murder of Roma in Ukraine during World War II: A Collection of Documents, Materials and Memoirs]. Kyiv: Український центр вивчення історії Голокосту, 2013.

Tyaglyy, Mikhail. “‘Tragedìâ vinnih žertv‘? Pam’ât’ pro genocid romìv u povoênnìj Ukraïnì. Častina 1” [‘Tragedy of the guilty victims’? The memory of the Roma Genocide in Post-War Ukraine. Part 1]. Ukraïna Moderna, 2020. Accessed February 10, 2021. https://uamoderna.com/pdl-min/tragediya-vinnix-zhertv-pamyat-pro-genoczid-romiv-u-povoenni-j-ukraini-chastina-1.

Tyaglyy, Mikhail. “‘Tragedìâ vinnih žertv‘? Pam’ât’ pro genocid romìv u povoênnìj Ukraïnì. Častina 3” [‘Tragedy of the Guilty Victims?’ The Memory of the Roma Genocide in Post-War Ukraine. Part 3]. Ukraïna Moderna, 2020. Accessed February 10, 2021. https://uamoderna.com/pdl-min/tragediya-vinnix-zhertv-pamyat-pro-genoczid-romiv-u-povoenni-j-ukraini-chastina-3.

Weyrauch, Walter O., and Maureen A. Bell. “*Autonomous Lawmaking: The Case of the ‘Gypsies’.*” *The Yale Law Journal* 103. no. 2 (1993): 323–399.

Woodcock, Shannon. “The Holocaust and Romani Romanians: Deportation and Resistance.” *Genocide Perspectives, IV. Essays on Holocaust and Genocide* (2012): 353–380.

Online Encyclopedia

Wenger, Beth. “Mikveh.” In *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Jewish Women’s Archive. Last modified June 23, 2021. Accessed June 30, 2021. https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/mikveh.

Audio Recordings

Hilberg, Raul. “Closing Remarks. Roma and Sinti: Understudied Victims of Nazism.” Speech recorded at the One-Day Symposium, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, September 21, 2000. Accessed May 15. https://www.ushmm.org/research/tools/videos-recordings-and-transcripts-of-past-events/past--conferences-and-workshops.

Documentaries

Ene, Sergiu. *Prigoana din Basarabia: documentar despre holocaustul romilor* [*The exile from Bassarabia*]. Chisinau: Centrul National alRomilor din Moldova, Center. Stockholm: E Romani Glinda, 2013. DVD.

USC Shoah Foundation Interview Excerpts

Berlin, Elizaveta. Interview 12732. USC Shoah Foundation, 1996.
Chebotar, Ekaterina. Interview 49372. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998; Transcript and translation from Romani provided by the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.
Khasin, Avraam. Interview 49333. Segment 110. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
Khasina, Roza. Interview 49672. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
Koval, Mariia. Interview 49614. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998; Transcript and translation from Romani provided by the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.
Preida, Mariia. Interview 49812. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
Shvets, Nina. Interview 49704. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.
Viner, Elizaveta. Interview 31309. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1997.
Zolotareva, Lidiia. Interview 49615. VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, 1998.