



# UNDERSTANDING THE CLASHES

**BETWEEN HISTORIANS & ROMA ACITIVISTS**

by **David Gaunt**

“As I say, it’s a pity you’re not a historian. You could have separated the truth from the lies and written it down.”<sup>1</sup>

“History does not belong only to its narrators, professional or amateur. While some of us debate what history is or was, others take it into their own hands.”<sup>2</sup>

A few years back I was bouncing in a white mini-bus along a dirt road in rural Ukraine. Also in the bus were Swedish, French, and Romanian historians mixed in with representatives of Romani organisations from Sweden and Romania. The mission, which I was leading, was to locate massgraves of Romani victims of the Nazi genocide during World War II. I had put this group together and they were my responsibility. Things had gone reasonably well on the first day in the field, at least as far as I could tell. We had located two sites and even managed to interview some elderly people who as children had witnessed shootings. I began believing that the mission might end up successful in another respect: that I could get historians to cooperate with Roma activists who had begun using history as part of their nationalist and unification politics. Had I been a little less pleased with myself I might have noticed signs that this hope of cooperation would not be realized, indeed was ill-founded.

Bringing together Romani representatives and genocide scholars had been possible through two intellectual trajectories. One approach emerged from the growing insight among historians that memory, previously shunned, could enrich and deepen historical narrative based on archival sources. A shift from “history to memory” has been praised as a “welcome critique of compromised teleological notions of history”. Memory is not to be seen as “simply anti-historical, relativistic, or subjective”.<sup>3</sup> Saul Friedländer has been a pioneer of seriously integrating all sorts of memory into the study of Nazi Germany.<sup>4</sup> In recent years Columbia University’s Historical Dialogues, Justice, and Memory Network has revealed the multidisciplinary breadth of memory research on issues of contended history, politicized history and socio-historical injustices. Even I integrate memory into my research on the Armenian and Assyrian genocide in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Another, completely different, trend grew out of the Roma side, reacting to the fact that scholars who were not Roma dominated Romani studies, with an increasing demand to participate in research on all levels. The slogan “Nothing about us without us”, long expressed only informally, has now been formalized by leading Roma human rights activists.<sup>6</sup> The insistence on coparticipation implies a learning process on both sides that has proven difficult.

Without a doubt, there was a genocide of Roma perpetrated in

Germany and German-occupied areas of Europe during World War II. Very few of the Roma and the related group Sinti survived the war and most of the German and Austrian Roma were sent to Auschwitz. The memory of this genocide is now subject to a political use. In order to unify the myriad of different ethnic, linguistic, regional, and cultural groups, Roma nationalists are expanding the genocide to include countries and territories outside Nazi German control and to include non-Germans, such as Czechs and Romanians, among the perpetrators. The thrust is to make the Roma genocide and persecution more or less universal throughout all of Europe based on a “racist” perception. Many of the Roma and pro-Roma activists identify the Roma population as “racially black” because of dark skin color and adopt anti-white, anti-racist, anti-colonial, or postcolonial interpretations.

THE FOLLOWING IS a story of and reflection upon the dilemmas scholars can run into when they encounter the conflict between political activists and what can be proven by evidence. This is particularly the case when historians and activists clash over the political recognition of genocide. Professional historians tend to look on the use of history by activists with displeasure. Often the latter’s narrative is marked by the use of legends, tales, and memories, sprinkled with disregard for known facts. The activists meanwhile, tend to think the historians’ conservative insistence on archival documentation is narrow and ungenerous, ignores memory, and underestimates the extent of the catastrophe. The dispute with historians revolves around what the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot terms “Silencing the past”, that is, the facts that history is produced in a series of unequal power relationships and that the voices of some groups are in the end simply excluded from the making of history.<sup>7</sup> This is certainly true in the case of the Roma in very few countries do they have a public voice, and where they do, it is weak. What complicates the case of the Roma is that a long-standing memory that could challenge the historians’ writings does not yet exist, but is part of a still on-going political activist campaign to build a recognized memory for all of Europe’s Roma on the basis of the experience of genocide, which in turn can be integrated into a narrative of perpetual victimization since the arrival of the Roma in Europe. The foremost thinker behind the victimization narrative is Ian Hancock, a professor of linguistics at the University

of Texas with Hungarian-British Romani ancestry. He is also the leading figure in the battle, which is detailed in this article, to get the Romani genocide politically recognized as part of the Holocaust.<sup>8</sup>

A distinction made by the philosopher Avishai Margalit may be useful. He distinguishes between common memory and shared memory.<sup>9</sup> A common memory means that all people who have experienced an event as individuals later remember that episode more or

## abstract

This paper deals with the dilemmas scholars can run into when they encounter the conflict between political activists and what can be proven by evidence. The dispute with historians revolves around what the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot terms “Silencing the past”. This is certainly true in the case of the Roma and genocide. What complicates the case is that a long-standing memory is part of a still ongoing political activist campaign to build a recognized memory for all of Europe’s Roma.

**KEYWORDS:** Genocide, Roma, memory studies, historical truth.



PHOTO: PHIREN AMENCA

Phiren Amenca was part of the project 'Roma Genocide – Part of European History', coordinated by the Roma Youth Center in Macedonia, which was aimed at preserving the memory of the Roma victims of Nazism and strengthening remembrance and awareness about the Roma Genocide.

less in the same way. This is the case with the Jewish Holocaust. However, in the case of the Roma, what is being produced since the 1970s is a shared memory. A shared memory is a consciously constructed and distributed retrospective view of the past rather than an aggregate of individual remembrance. Sharing involves persons who lack direct experience – such as the descendants of survivors or members of Roma groups who for various reasons were not caught up in the genocide. Communication between individuals is necessary to build a shared memory out of certain individuals' fragmentary experiences. The concept of shared memory also involves learning through the dissemination of knowledge about the past. Thus several Roma associations establish a shared memory through publications, media products, exhibitions, and conferences dealing with genocide. In the following I will have occasion to speak of "Roma activists": these are a heterogeneous mix of intellectuals, NGO representatives, human rights advocates, and those working for the unification of the diverse Roma and Traveler populations into a "nation".<sup>10</sup> They also include pro-Roma activists of non-Roma origin.

During the above-mentioned expedition I found myself caught up in the grey conflict zone between the competing front-lines of history and memory, with a feeling that neither shared memories nor academic histories could be seen as fully objective. My moral responsibility was to the Roma as victims of

large-scale massacres, deportations and genocide. But I also had a strong ethical relationship and responsibility to my fellow historians and their methods. The rest of this article deals with my attempt to deconstruct my problem in order to see if I can find some sort of middle position. I do not claim to have solved this dilemma, but rather to explore it.

### **Back in Ukraine**

I should have noticed the quarrel going on in the front of the bus, but I didn't. After all it was a typical situation. Several Roma activists were insisting on two issues that a Romanian historian refused to confirm. The quarrel was about the role played by the Romanian government officials and army in the fate of tens of thousands of Romanian Roma who had been forced into southern Ukraine. Incriminating Romanian authorities in the murder of these Roma is part of a wider effort to make the genocide universal in Europe. In addition the activists claimed that the number of Roma estimated deaths must have been very much greater than documents showed. This the historian rejected vehemently.

Already at the first site on our excursion, the Romanian historian (a non-Roma), who is one of the few academics to write a monograph on the history of the Roma in any country, showed resistance to the idea of the expedition. This site

**Most activists tend to stress what supports their cause. It is problematic.**

was a field on the outskirts of a small town near the Ukraine-Belarus border. In the middle of the field was a large indentation, not a hole, not a pit, but just an indentation of a few feet. According to German documents this was a place where a group of wandering Roma had been shot during the world war. They had been buried just where the indentation now was. The French historian knew that in the nearest farmhouse an old bedridden man lived who as a child had witnessed the shooting. So we all went to the little house to hear what the old man had to tell. All crammed into the doorway and the small chamber where the old man lay in his narrow bed. It was quite crowded as one of the activists even had a video camera to record the interview.

But the Romanian historian remained outside sitting on a log, and when I went outside to get some fresh air, he cornered me. He began to lecture me on how useless witness testimonies were, how listening to the old man would be a waste of time, and concluding with a rant on how impossible Roma activists could be. Through this long tirade he hindered me from going back into the house. That was alright, I thought, since the video recording would inform me. I also thought maybe by listening to him and in dialogue, I could get him to see the importance of working together and climb down from his elevated position.

At the Pedagogical University in Kiev we hold our seminar in the office of the rector. We speak of hitherto unused archive materials, deal with other types of sources, and speak finally about the possibility of further cooperation. The French historian vows that his organization in Paris will work together to search for testimonies and documents on the Roma part of the Holocaust. He is being diplomatic, not wanting to start an open quarrel. However, this promised cooperation never materializes, and after a few months we will read on the organization's website that they were making their own investigations of the Romani genocide without informing others. Later efforts by the Romani representatives to get into contact with the French unit will be met with silence. As the meeting is breaking up, the Romanian button-holes me and speaks very close to my face so that no one else can hear. Pointing at the Roma participants, he whispers, "I will never work together with these people. Never. Never. Never."

**SO, MY SUBLIME GOAL** of creating a joint historian-activist cooperative research team was dead on arrival. If Agatha Christie had been writing this story I imagine that the Romanian historian would have been found dead in the university basement and the French historian pushed in front of a tram. And all the other participants in the expedition would be suspects.

But this was not a crime novel, it was an attempt to find dialogue. After this fiasco, my position was as fuzzy as it was real. I had dreamt of bringing academics and activists together

and had failed despite a good beginning. The conflict over how to interpret historical events was simply unbridgeable. What should I do? My ethics told me to go with the other professional historians, abandoning contacts with the activists. I had been a professional historian for forty years, I had been in and out of countless archives, I believed that there were unquestionable facts. However, my morals said that I should stay and aid the activists, who obviously needed some form of dialogue to get their story more in line with the knowledge that historical research has established. As the other historians march out, I stay behind with the Roma activists. I felt as if I was the em-

bodiment of Peter Burke's observation about memory work: "neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases we are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned."<sup>11</sup> But I must figure out what makes the activists of historical injustice question the known facts, for that is not a matter of selection. Rather

it seems a socially conditioned flight from reality in which the search for the truth at the present moment has no intrinsic value.

### **The activist syndrome: internal competition gone wild**

The conflict over facts between historians and activists is not something that only concerns Romani history. It is endemic to many situations in which recognizing and rectifying historic injustices is part of a political campaign. Here I deal with the Roma, but the same conflict can be found when dealing with the genocide of Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire.

There are several factors that frame the historians' conflict with Roma nationalists. One is that the Roma are a stateless nation with no central authority. They are a minority spread over a large number of countries and separated by borders, legal structures, dialects and historical experiences.<sup>12</sup> Although since the 1990s the name "Roma" has been the politically correct term, even among the people themselves this name has not found total acceptance and older assumed derogatory names like Gypsies or Tsiganes still survive as self-identifications. Indeed the politically correct term adopted by European institutions itself adds to the confusion by bringing together ethnic Roma from countries with unrelated groups like the Irish Travellers, and the Swiss Yenisch and even Dutch caravan dwellers.<sup>13</sup> For many years, at least since the 1970s, an international unification movement has attempted to find common ground in historical injustices – origins in India, slavery in Romania, poverty everywhere, and in modern times, genocide and the destruction of culture.<sup>14</sup> Thus, dissemination of knowledge about the genocide and commemoration of the victims have become part and parcel of a political movement managed by a self-appointed elite. They emphasize Romani vic-

**“THE EFFORT TO USE THE GENOCIDE AS A UNIFYING ALL-ENCOMPASSING SHARED MEMORY HAS PROVED PROBLEMATIC.”**



PHOTO: ARTUR CONKA, OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION

The firing wall where prisoners were executed. On August 2, 2014, hundreds of Roma people gathered at commemorative events in Crakow and Auschwitz.

timhood in order to gain greater attention for the contemporary situation of Roma.

Lacking a state, the Roma representatives lack the resources that contribute to creating a single historical orthodoxy recognized as legitimate by all. In most countries the Roma have little influence over the schools and textbooks, national museums, TV, radio, and other major media – all of which are essential for creating, disseminating, and repeating any official version of the past. Instead, the creation of a Romani historical narrative depends on the efforts of a range of intellectuals, traditional tribal leaders, and various nationalist associations who compete with each other to create a shared memory. This memory remains unstable as competition leads the narrative in new directions. Right now for example there is much effort placed on discovering the extent of Romani resistance to the Nazis.

Inability to establish a stable and clear identity among the Roma means that nationalists attribute great value to creating shared memory. Questions of identity merge with questions of memory. In the view of Wulf Kansteiner, focusing on identity “highlights the political and psychological use-value of collective memories.”<sup>15</sup> This use value is quite obvious in the Roma nationalist memory work. The genocide of Romani peoples plays a central role in the international Romani movement. In its earliest form, in 1971, what was to become the International Romani Union adopted a national hymn, called “Gelem, Gelem”. One of the stanzas goes: “I once had a large family, but the black legions murdered them all.” The term “black legions” is taken as a reference to German soldiers. When World War II ended, nearly all of the Roma and the related group, the Sinti, in Germany, Austria, what is now the Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia, and Estonia were dead. In Hungary, Romania, Bosnia, France, Belgium, the

Netherlands, and the Soviet Union, some (but not all) of the Roma had been destroyed. Most of the murdered of Roma from Italy, Hungary, and Slovakia were killed after Germany occupied those countries, towards the end of the war. In some of the latter countries only the “nomadic” Roma were affected, and settled Roma were spared. There are no known massacres of Roma in Slovakia, Finland, Italy, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, and Macedonia, although other forms of harassment, foremost hard labor camps, were implemented. There is little doubt that Nazis targeted the Roma and Sinti on racial grounds, and the German parliament has recognized the genocide; in Berlin a monument to Romani victims was inaugurated in 2012. Romani Rose, the leader of the German Sinti group, was instrumental in gaining recognition and financial compensation for the Romani victims from the German state. However, he keeps a somewhat low profile internationally.<sup>16</sup>

**THE EFFORT TO USE** the genocide as a unifying, all-encompassing shared memory has proved problematic. The impact of persecution and genocide varied from country to country, ranging from total annihilation to relatively mild labor camps. In several southern Balkan countries with a sizeable Roma population many have no family memories of massacres or genocide, while other families in Germany, Austria, and Poland are deeply traumatized. Making this geographically limited genocide grow into a memory shared by Roma all over the world has taken considerable time and effort. Making the limited genocide grow to be an event with universal meaning has influenced how the narrative is told. The first country-by-country archive-based research came up with an estimate of about 200,000 Romani victims of Nazi persecution during the world war. The scholars involved

**Sufferings can't be compared. They are always tragic.**

admitted that considering the lack of good statistics it was necessary to make uncertain estimates in order to come up with a total figure. The sole exact figure known is that 20,933 Roma were held prisoner in Auschwitz-Birkenau's so-called Zigeunerlager (which existed from March 1943 to August 1944) and that 12,800 died there of whom 4,000 were murdered in gas chambers on the night of August 2. In competition for leadership Roma and pro-Roma activists began to inflate the number of victims, usually arguing that a great number of Roma had been murdered in Eastern European forests without being documented. In 1972, the number of victims was set at 219,700 in a book written by the British pro-Roma activist and linguist Donald Kenrick and the Travelleractivist Grattan Puxon. After that, Kenrick revised the figure to 196,000 deaths because the first number had included some double counting.<sup>17</sup> Since then, the numbers have grown by leaps and bounds with Ian Hancock ending up citing figures beginning at 750,000 and leading up to 1,500,000 murdered Roma.<sup>18</sup> Hancock, probably the foremost high-profile international Romani activist, stated in a US congressional hearing that between 75 and 85 percent of European Roma were "systematically murdered" – these inflated figures were not supported up by any documentation.

When professional historians have tackled the issue of numbers based on archival records, the figures have been much lower – the lowest estimate is 96,000, which still classifies the killings as genocide. Attempts to estimate the size of Europe's Roma population just before World War II began based on available statistics (and including compensation for the well-known under-registration of vulnerable minorities) come up with figures less than one million – for instance the genocide scholar Henry Huttenbach advanced a total figure for Europe of 885,000 Roma in 1939.<sup>19</sup> A different calculation by historians resulted in a total Roma population in Europe in 1939 of 872,300, of whom 213,550 were killed during the world war.<sup>20</sup> In general, historians use the figure of just above 200,000, while most activists have settled on the figure of 500,000. Both figures can be considered symbolic figures. The authors of a recent publication of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance admit that figure of half a million is based "neither on extensive research nor international comparative study".<sup>21</sup>

The widely differing and increasingly unrealistic numbers of victims cause difficulties. They confuse those who want to know about the genocide. It could even be the case that lowering the numbers of victims would be seen as a relief, as that would mean that more Roma survived. However, the logic of the politics of genocide recognition appears to demand ever increasing numbers of martyrs. In a politicized context, a hierarchy of pain and suffering emerges in which a high number of victims is used as a way of drawing attention and sympathy. The inflated figures for Romani victims are often only vague comments that massacres have been discovered which were not known previously or that the number of Roma killed in the forests and not reported must have been at least equal to (if not more than) those whose murders were documented. These are guesses that come out of the competition between Romani nationalists. This legitimacy

is easiest won through emphasizing the degree of victimhood. At the same time, these flights from what can be documented open for genocide denialists to enter a confusing numbersgame (which no one can win), arguing that the volume of victims even exceeds the size of the original population. However, the attacks of the denialists concerning the number of victims, seems to increase the internal prestige of the Romani activists proposing the highest numbers. Also, disputing the lower numbers arrived at by professional historians seems to increase the status and self-confidence of the activists. This is particularly the case with Ian Hancock.<sup>22</sup>

**ROMA NATIONALISTS** do several radical things that turn the factual event of the World War II genocide into a mythical legend. They Europeanize the victimhood so that the perpetrators are not just German Nazis but also equally guilty Romanians, Czechs, Hungarians, and Croats. They inflate the number of victims. In rivalry for attention with other victims, particularly the Jews, they tend to mimic the successes of more well-recognized victims. They demand a place at the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz on January 26; there is insistence on applying not just the word genocide but also Holocaust, they imitate established practices of erecting memorials and plaques at sites of massacre, and so on. All this, I believe, goes back to the stateless condition of the Roma which encourages the emergence of status rivalry for leadership among Romani nationalists.

### Competition between victim groups

In the four decades up to 1980, only about seventy articles or books had been published on the massmurder of Roma and Sinti. Very little of this was based on research and even the amount of autobiographic material was small.<sup>23</sup> With all probability the American Television miniseries "Holocaust", broadcast throughout the world in 1978, had a great impact, particularly in Germany, increasing consciousness of the Holocaust. And this also became an impetus for learning about the Nazi treatment of the Romani. General awareness of the historical importance of the Holocaust, the brutality of decolonization and the breakthrough of human rights issues coalesced and reinforced one another in the 1970s. In the context of the Roma this new situation meant that they could propose that what had happened to them in World War II was a genocide and even a part of what had been increasingly termed the Holocaust. The term Holocaust existed and was used in popular media. But its meaning was confined to the extermination of Europe's Jewish population. The Romani claim to be an equally victimized group and part of the Holocaust was met head-on with opposition.<sup>24</sup>

The debate about the wider applicability of the term Holocaust grew out of the planning committee discussions leading up to the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington. That museum opened in 1993 after preparations dating back to 1978. Conflict arose over whether the institution would focus solely on the Jewish Holocaust or whether other genocides could be included, such as those committed against the Armenians and the Roma.

These genocides and some others came to be known as the “other Holocaust”. On the one side were those who argued the “uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust” and maintained that its integrity would be impaired by being placed beside other genocides. Some believed that comparing a whole series of genocides would reveal racial and ethnic annihilation to be something more or less normal throughout history. One extreme researcher went so far as to accuse all who wrote about the other genocides as having a hidden agenda of reducing German feelings of responsibility for the Jewish Holocaust.<sup>25</sup> On the other side, those who pushed for inclusion of the Romani genocide argued that the Holocaust was one and the same historic phenomenon and encompassed the eradication of many groups whom the Nazi leaders considered unfit to live, among them the Gypsies.<sup>26</sup>

Michael Rothberg describes the struggles between the various victim groups over genocide recognition as a product of zero-sum reasoning, battles with only total winners or losers. The Jewish activists, who already dominated the narrative of the Holocaust, acted as if they believed that if other genocides were acknowledged, then their own trauma would automatically get less attention. It was as if knowledge of genocide was a matter of great scarcity and could not encompass other cases. For the other victim groups, with their purported “forgotten” or “hidden” genocides this meant that they needed to fight bitterly for any attention what so ever. The debates between victim groups concerned the injustice of not having each group's own narrative of victimhood recognized. In this competition the reading of research had low priority, and was deemed unimportant and uninteresting, and the political campaign for genocide recognition became ever more polemical and distanced itself from the pursuit of historical accuracy.<sup>27</sup>

Although the “other” Holocaust debates were very frustrating and bitter conflicts, they did have the positive effect of increasing the general and scholarly awareness of the other genocides. And it became widely accepted by the early 1990s that the Roma had been the victims of genocide during World War II. Placing the Roma in a long history of persecution gave the impression that Roma identity had been formed by continuous victimhood and racial hatred.<sup>28</sup>

### **Mimicry of established narratives**

Foremost among the earliest descriptions of the Romani genocide is *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* written by two pro-Roma authors: Grattan Puxon, a British Traveller-Gypsy activist, and Donald Kenrick, a prominent linguist. Both were part of the Romani political movement in Britain and later the international unification movement.<sup>29</sup> Their work was part of the on-going Romani campaign aimed at proving genocide in order to get compensation for the victims from the West German government.

Jewish victims had for a long time received compensation, but at that time Roma met with many legal-semantic hurdles. Puxon was the secretary of the First Roma International Conference. Kenrick was a British expert on the Romani language. The book came about as part of a research project studying nationalism and racism at the University of Sussex. The project's aim was to “investigate how persecutions and exterminations come about; how the impulse to persecute or exterminate is generated, how it spreads, and under what conditions it is likely to express itself in action.”<sup>30</sup> There were other non-Roma roots to this research since source material had been donated by the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute. The institute had found this evidence when interviewing eyewitnesses to the massmurder of Jews.

The research project was headed by Norman Cohn, at that time a well-known historian of the persecution of Jews. Originally, Kenrick and Puxon intended only to describe the era of Nazi persecution, but they soon realized that this could not be understood without a long background chapter on harassment and persecution based upon prejudices deeply rooted in European society. This pioneer work created a narrative that for a long time dominated the story of the Romani genocide. Tracing the background of the Nazi genocide far into the

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Middle Ages, this interpretation insists that the World War II repression was novel only in the details. There was no qualitative difference introduced by the Nazis. One can liken this narrative to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century sorrowful version of the history of the Jews in Europe as a long series of persecutions and massacres.<sup>31</sup> At that time the notions of genocide and Holocaust had not yet become widely known, so Kenrick and Puxon did not use those terms in the book.<sup>32</sup>

The permanent persecution narrative was influenced by project leader Cohn's view of the long history of anti-Semitic persecution, also dating back to the Middle Ages.<sup>33</sup> He traces the roots of modern totalitarian terror and genocide far back to medieval utopians with millenarian dreams. Many of these radical groups killed their opponents. Cohn maintained that in times of rapid social change, older xenophobic ideas like anti-Semitism (and in parallel anti-Gypsyism) resurfaced after lying dormant. Cohn's view was imprinted onto Kenrick's and Puxon's macro-narrative. Their story, like Cohn's, starts with the Middle Ages and concentrates on the activities of the police and of racially oriented academics in the centuries leading up to the genocide.

Up to this point we have dealt with representations of genocide that have been made by individuals who, even when academics, are not professional historians. As Rothberg indicates, the politics of genocide recognition overshadows an interest in uncovering historical truth. From here focus will shift to what professional historians have done with the Roma genocide. Frank Ankersmit postulates that historians have a special feel-

**Victimhood is not a characteristic. But it might bring survivors together.**



PHOTO: PHIREN AMENCA

Phiren Amenca supported local commemorations that took place August 2, 2014, in Bányterenyé and Bicsérd in Hungary.

ing that there is a truth in history that can be attained through the dispassionate study of documents through the time-proven methodology of source criticism. From the point of view of the historian, this search for truth (always complicated) is potentially counterproductive for a culture, such as that of the Roma that reinforces traumatic loss through the commemoration of genocide and its link to present-day anti-Gypsyism. It can even undermine the narrative of reliving the trauma by questioning the very innocence of the victims, the perfidy of the perpetrators, and the moral faults of the bystanders. He also states that traumatic experience is simply too terrible to be “admitted to consciousness” because it exceeds our (I suppose he means the historian’s) capacity to make sense of that sort of experience.<sup>34</sup> Something similar has been said by a professor of drama, Robert Skloot, who accuses historians of being biased in their reliance on archives and documents because “it restricts a fuller understanding of the events and conditions being researched and it excludes other ways of knowing and understanding human experience.”<sup>35</sup> Yet another position on the relationship between the historian and the “community of memory” is taken by Giorgios Antoniou. He sees the potential of a role for the historian as a “mediator between the past and current society.” Traditionally, historians in their mediating role transform the “facts” although they have no “lived experiences of the event”. Antoniou postulates there is a “grey zone between historiography and public/collective memory.”<sup>36</sup>

There are thus at least three diverse ways of looking at the position of historians in relation to memory. Expressed by Ankersmit, historians place themselves at a distance from memory

and actively challenge memory, thus demythologizing it. He sees this as a strength of historical practice. A second stance, taken by Skloot, holds that historians must transcend their dependence on written documentation in order to give a description of lived experience. He sees this as weakness of historians and social scientists compared to aesthetic representations. Antoniou takes the middle stance that there can be – in certain contexts – some mediation between professional history and collective memory work.

It took many years before academic discussions and research on the Roma genocide started in the 1980s. A breakthrough came simultaneously with political decisions, namely the acts of recognition in 1982 by the West German chancellors Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl to apologize to the Roma for their wartime suffering. The German parliament held hearings with survivors. Ultimately in 1989 the lower house of the parliament acknowledged that the murder of Roma was motivated on racial grounds – thus placing the relatives of these victims on the same legal level for compensation as the Jewish victims.

**TWO APPROACHES DOMINATE** research about the fate of the Roma peoples during World War II. One is a strong undercurrent of seeking new documentation and exploring new territories in the hope of corroborating what is known only through witness testimony. This is in keeping with Ankersmit’s reasoning. The other approach is just as strong and creates considerable surface waves. This concerns the intellectual puzzlement of striving to find some sort of meaning in the annihilation of the Roma and Sinti. A struggle formed over how to actually apply the terms



“genocide” and “Holocaust”. “Genocide” at least has a legal definition through the United Nations Convention of 1948. “Holocaust”, however, can probably never be defined and is open for interpretation. This ambivalence resulted in high-pitched debates about the boundary between Holocaust and non-Holocaust, between genocide and non-genocide. Much of this 1980s and 1990s debate appears in hindsight as hair-splitting and an intellectual dead end in which the discussants slipped in and out of their professional roles.

Established Holocaust scholars initially responded negatively to Romani claims that the genocide was comparable with any other, and that the treatment of Roma lay closest to that of the Jews. The philosopher Emil Fackenheim, of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, argued that the Jewish Holocaust was beyond being called genocide and completely unique. He set up a number of criteria by which the Jewish Holocaust differed from all other mass-murder. He reasons as follows: the Holocaust was not a war and the victims were powerless non-combatants; the Holocaust could not be seen as a war crime since it served no military purpose and it actually hindered the German war effort; the Holocaust was not a case of racism, but rather longstanding anti-Semitism that was grafted onto Nazi concepts of race. Fackenheim also claimed that the Holocaust was not even genocide, as the Jews were murdered because the Nazis considered them inhuman vermin who should not be allowed to exist. Also according to him, the Holocaust is not just part of German history, but of all European anti-semitism. The Jews were no mere scapegoats in the Holocaust. Finally, the Holocaust survived the German defeat, and Jews continue to live in grave peril.<sup>37</sup> Confronting Fackenheim’s criteria of uniqueness became an agenda for Romani activists who demanded recognition of their genocide as one part of a larger Holocaust. Another Romani counter-argument was that anti-Semitism had a parallel in anti-Gypsyism. Thus much effort was put into describing how German anti-Gypsy discourse and praxis, despite de-Nazification, continued unabated in post-war Germany.<sup>38</sup>

Yehuda Bauer, the major Israeli Holocaust scholar, rejected the claim that what had happened to the Roma could be termed Holocaust. He did allow that it might be considered genocide, in his view a less total form of massmurder. He added that he believed that the Roma were targeted not because they were considered an alien “race”, but because they were considered “antisocial”. They were not a threat to the Nazis, merely an “irritant”. Thus the actions against the Roma were not systematic, as the implementation contained many exceptions.<sup>39</sup> In confrontation with Bauer’s position, the Roma were thus forced to prove that their group had been murdered because the Nazis considered them a “race” to be exterminated. His main opponent in this particular debate was Sybil Milton, a consultant with the USHMM, who countered that the Holocaust was hugely complex and involved the extermination

of not just the Jews but also the mentally handicapped, homosexuals, Soviet prisoners of war, and especially the Roma. She argued that the killing of these other groups was part and parcel of actions motivated by the Nazi desire to keep the German “race” pure of “alien” or “defective” blood.<sup>40</sup>

By the mid-1990s, two camps developed ways of perceiving the Jewish Holocaust. One side was adamant that it was unique and could not be compared with any other historical genocide. The other side argued against the concept of uniqueness and maintained that it was indeed comparable and was just the most extreme form of a more general historical phenomenon. At the same time, strong trends in identity politics tried to latch onto the Holocaust concept for partisan political reasons. Most of these campaigns did serve indirectly to reduce the Holocaust’s Jewish character, and this in turn incited Jewish activists to an even greater extent to emphasize its uniqueness.<sup>41</sup>

## The Roma discover history

The gap between historians and activists is much larger than I thought. The Roma are far from attaining a collective memory based on remembrance and commemoration of genocide. Indeed, they are still in a phase of struggling to establish a shared memory. Developing a historical narrative based on documents rather than legend and sagas is a European phenomenon that starts in Renaissance Italy and was improved on in nineteenth century Germany and France. The sourcebased historical-critical methodology had its professional breakthrough in the twentieth century although in many places it has not yet arrived. In the universal and evolutionary vision of J. G. A. Pocock there are several stages that peoples need to go through before they replace a narrative based solely on memory with one based on what he calls objective history.<sup>42</sup> The Roma are still struggling to unify their diverse narratives and traditions: they have not yet

felt the impulse to begin to replace these traditions and memories with “objective” history.

Until recently it was possible for observers to make a credible point out of what they saw as a lack of interest for history among Roma. A few even be considered this lack of interest an advantage that had helped them survive. The literary critic Katie Trumpener perceives them as a “people without history” and the writer Isabel Fonseca

praises a Gypsy “art of forgetting” that she considers to be the outcome of a unique mixture of fatalism with the spirit of seizing the day.<sup>43</sup> The Polish Roma social scientist Andrzej Mirga, at the OSCE Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, recalls that in his childhood the “memory of the war was virtually nonexistent”. Only his mother would occasionally tell stories of the roundups of Roma to be sent to Auschwitz. Such family recollections and the school history lessons, in his opinion, never “lead to an understanding of what Nazism and the war were for the Roma, and why the Roma were murdered and persecuted.” The individual

**“SHARED MEMORY IS NOT PROFESSIONAL HISTORY. SHARED MEMORY SERVES AS A BACKDROP FOR CONTEMPORARY INTERESTS.”**

memory was “not generalized in the form of reflection on the fate of the Roma.”<sup>44</sup> But even a cursory glance at Roma socioeconomic conditions and listening to their plaintive songs and poems, shows that the happy-go-lucky portrait is far from the truth, or only part of it. Since the late 1980s several Romani witnesses have published their stories.<sup>45</sup>

**THE SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGIST** Alaina Lemon believes that the apparent lack of historical consciousness among Roma stems from not having access to media. Roma are seldom able to broadcast their version and they lack voices in the educational systems that reproduce such memories. The communist-ruled states of Eastern Europe, which contained many Romani survivors, forbade memorials that singled out any particular ethnic group as victims (including the Jews). “The problem then is not that Roma deny history, but that no infrastructure magnifies their memories as broadly collective” in the sense of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “Imagined community.”<sup>46</sup>

In general, the collective remembrance of any historical trauma is aimed at making a contemporary political impact. Often the goal is to remind the world of a group’s past and present vulnerability. Bulgarian historian and philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, identifies this use as being “an instrument that informs our capacity to analyze the present.”<sup>47</sup> In the case of the Roma, the goal is to improve living conditions through mobilization around social work, education reform, or the removal of discriminatory laws and practices. The Polish sociologist Sławomir Kapralski has proposed that another reason for Romani organizations to emphasize the genocide is that the shared memory of it (however slight in some countries) has the potential to unite the diverse peoples they aspire to represent. It becomes a chronotope of Roma identification, and commemoration tends towards “ritualized practice” aimed at making genocide an identity-building factor.<sup>48</sup>

The campaign to create a shared memory of genocide is part of the Roma unification movement. Commemoration did not seriously begin until after new, strident ethno-political organizations emerged in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Particularly important were developments in Germany, where Romani Rose led large public demonstrations at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp memorial in 1979 and followed this with a hunger strike at Dachau in 1980.<sup>49</sup> The background was Roma frustration over rejected claims for compensation for persecution perpetrated by the Nazi regime. German courts ruled that Roma were not entitled to compensation because the arrests were for “asociality” and “criminality” under vagrancy laws enacted by the Weimar Republic, and not on racial grounds. Applications of Romani survivors had been dismissed throughout the postwar period. But the new Romani leaders, as a rule better educated than the survivors, insisted that there was continuity in their social and cultural discrimination from the Nazi era to the Federal Republic of Germany. They portrayed the lack of compensation as the tip of an iceberg of contemporary anti-Gypsy discrimination. The demand was for recognition of the Roma as a minority group deserving civil rights, and as a victim group deserving financial compensation.<sup>50</sup>

A negative aspect of the use of the history of the Romani genocide is that the evidence brought forward focused almost exclusively on Nazi policy, ideology, and actions in order to show Nazi guilt. Thus the activist narrative selected a very specific part of Romani history, namely forms of legal persecution and discrimination. As Eve Rosenhaft points out, these narratives become “in fact histories of anti-Gypsyism” and, however unintentionally, tend to deny the Roma any subjectivity and importance as agents. The Roma are thus stamped by their own leaders as “victims in perpetuity.”<sup>51</sup> This may be a consequence of the children of survivors reacting with political activism and ethnic pride against the background of what they perceive as the passivity and lack of ethnic pride among the survivor generation, as expressed in unwillingness to speak about their wartime experiences. Only recently have some Roma activists begun to question the negative effects of the victimization narrative.<sup>52</sup>

### Lost on the way to a shared memory?

Roma leaders are consciously disseminating the memory of persecution and massacres during World War II. The goal has been to create feelings of community through shared memory. The Roma have valorized massmurder into the most extreme crime against human rights, namely genocide. Furthermore, they insist on its introduction into the unique framework of the Holocaust. Because of the complex nature of the Nazi genocide, for many Roma there is no continuous memory; for some, not even a weak memory. As already mentioned, many countries with a large Roma population like Slovakia, Bulgaria and Greece had no experience of genocide and some others like Hungary and Romania were only partially affected. Thus the effort to make a shared collective memory begins with a memory, preserved only by certain groups of Roma, that must be consciously revived or restored or redistributed to other Roma who lack family memory of the events.

Shared memory is not professional history. Shared memory serves as a backdrop for contemporary interests. As Trouillot says, “the past does not exist independently of the present.” Most professional historians would refute this statement. The past does exist without the present, but the phenomenon of the “past” is connected with the phenomenon of the “present”. For activists working in a political framework, the past is subordinated to the needs of the present. Or, to turn Trouillot’s phrase upside down: the past is dependent on the present. There are memory makers, who manipulate and mediate representations of the past, and memory consumers, who can either receive, ignore, or transform these manifestations.<sup>53</sup> The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs invented the term “collective memory” nearly one hundred years ago.<sup>54</sup> He considered this special sort of memory to be the product of state agencies who design to bind people through shared interpretations of the past that are broadcast through the resources of the nation.

Jan Assmann, a German theoretician of collective memory, has a concept of “cultural memory” that is perhaps useful in some contexts. A cultural memory is made up of that “body of re-usable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in

each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.”<sup>55</sup> Such a memory is connected with a centralized state which transmits texts, rites, images, buildings, monuments, and so on that remind citizens of the historical events of the collective. The state sees to it that representations of the past are stored in archives and libraries.

Halbwach’s and Assmann’s notions have little bearing on the activities of representatives of stateless nationalities. A state can control and stabilize its remembrance narrative; in a stateless community like the Roma, no central authority is in control and the narrative becomes always work-in-progress. The Roma lack the cultural resources that transcend generations. This forces Roma leaders to concentrate on contemporary issues. It is logical to put the trauma of what has happened within the range of memory of some of the families of those now living – both of the makers of memory and the consumers of memory. Thus the general history of the Roma activists usually limits itself to Hitler’s regime. Emphasis is on a few selected representations and episodes. Many of the consumers of this narrative have no personal link to the retold events.<sup>56</sup>

Returning to my idea of creating a dialogue between professional historians and Roma representatives, I realize that the ambition was misplaced. The conflict was not one over denial of genocide. Both the historians and the activists were agreed that a genocide had taken place, but they argued over the extent of the genocide, the degree to which it could be made pan-European, the degree to which it could be compared with the Jewish Holocaust, and other big issues.

It is possible that the historians and the activists were using different conceptions of time. For the historian, each epoch in the past has unique characteristics. These slices of time are not a priori linked to the present, at least not without critical investigation. An important trait is to avoid anachronistic interpretations that is applying concepts that were not typical of the epoch concerned. For the activists – and here Roma leaders are not alone – time is not cut up into clearly distinct slices. Instead, the past is useful as a way to discuss present conditions. Thus past and present merge. Commemorations of the genocide make the past “relived” and integrate past and present. The potential dialogue was ill-conceived because the two sides had opposed concepts of time. ❌

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