

The importance of history for the current young generation

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Why history and memory are important for the young generation of Roma?

- Because Roma have been for a long time excluded from history/memory of the European societies and denied their own history/memory. They were stereotypically perceived as 'people without history' who live in an 'eternal present'.
- Two versions of the stereotype:
 - Racist: those defined as race, that is biologically, are located in the order of nature and not of history, thus their life develops according to the natural laws, nor in the way in which history unfolds
 - 'Culturalist': Roma life is just a reproduction of their cultural idiom or essence of their culture, they do not change
- This mnemonic exclusion is a continuation of social exclusion of Roma in the European societies and can be described by various theoretical concepts developed recently, such as 'differential deprivation of history' (Bauman), 'temporal othering' (Fabian), 'obliteration of history through the erasure of interconnections' (Wolf), 'silencing' (Trouillot), 'muted groups' (E&S Ardener)
- Why memory is important: because Roma history must be an important element of Roma life, must be connected to the grassroots' vision of the past, even if in critical fashion

What kind of history Roma need?

- Roma history, not just history of Roma.
- History that presents Roma as important actors of important events, located in the centers of world history: Byzantine Empire, Modernization, Capitalism, Colonialism, Nationalism, Nazism, the Holocaust, Communism, Post-communist transformation.
- History that avoids being “Lachrymose conception of history” (Salo Baron): need to emphasize Roma agency (resistance, Roma movement)
- History that would not be mythology
- History that controls sources and is included in the international intellectual exchange, stays in dialogue with other histories
- History that Roma may commemorate, reclaiming therefore their memories of the past from non-Roma.

July 3, 1943

- The German gendarmes and Polish policemen surrounded the Roma settlement at the outskirts of the village. After having killed few Roma on the spot, the Germans forced local villagers to provide horses and carts in which Roma were transported to the village cemetery. The locals and some of the Polish policemen negotiated with Germans to release Roma married to Poles and their children. Simultaneously, when Germans did not look, a few babies and children were handed to the villagers. The Roma were shot at the cemetery and buried in a mass grave. That day, ninety-three Roma lost their lives.

The survivor, Krystyna Gil, born 5 Nov. 1938



- Krystyna Gil (née Ciuroń) in her First Communion dress, after WWII
- As a four-year old girl, a child of a mixed Polish-Roma couple, she was among few Roma children saved by the villagers from the massacre. Her mother handed her from the cart, in which they were transported, to her Polish grandmother who sheltered her.
- Her mother and siblings were murdered

Szczurowa, May 1965. Krystyna Gil, now twenty-seven, speaks at the unveiling ceremony of the first memorial tablet commemorating the crime



The 1965 commemoration

Text on the memorial stone:

The mass grave of 93 inhabitants of Szczurowa murdered by Hitlerites on July 3rd 1943. Honored be their memory

Roma are not mentioned as 'Roma'

A Roma survivor entangled in the communist ritual of memory with its flags, soldiers, party officials, communist boy scouts

Main actors are non-Roma officials: local and regional communist authorities; erasure of the identity of the victims according to the 1960s Polish version of 'national communism'

1993 New commemoration



New commemoration, 1993

Initiative: Regional Museum in Tarnów and its Curator, Adam Bartosz;
new, post communist local government

Religious aesthetics of commemoration: cross, the role of priests, new
tablet:

3 July 1943 – 10 July 1993/In the 50th anniversary of the murder/of 93
Gypsies-Roma/During the Hitlerite occupation/A prayerful tribute is
paid/By the inhabitants of Szczurowa

Victims generally named as 'Gypsies-Roma'. Roma families visiting the
site privately and as part of commemorative events staged by the
Museum or religious ceremonies.

The newest commemoration: a co-existence of different forms of remembrance



The newest commemoration

- Black slab with the names of the victims, erected in 2014
- Initiative: private, by the former Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany, Dr. Laurids Hölscher and his wife Lee Elisabeth Hölscher-Langner
- The text on the slab:

The grave of Roma murdered by the Hitlerite occupier in Szczurowa, July 3rd, 1943/[names]/na bister [In Romani: don't forget]/Homage to the murdered/German friends of Roma

Private initiative, Germans, only the word „Roma”, individualization of victims (dignity), elements of Romani language, lack of political and religious elements

Szczurowa 2016. Liberating Roma memory from non-Roma control.



Krystyna Gil (at that time 78) speaks to the European Roma youth, participating in the educational program Na Bister (Don't forget).

Krystyna Gil was a president of the Association of Roma Women in Poland and was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. She was a role model and inspiration for many Roma women

Krystyna Gil passed away on April 1, 2021 at the age of 83. Lokhi phuv tenge.

Why is it important to have history and to remember?

- To fight racism, essentialism and stereotypes
- To get agency and control of the memory production (especially the institutions of cultural memory)
- To construct vertical, historical identities: identifications with the past generations: 'We, in the present, make their story our own'
- To unify different Roma groups. Problem: they often have different histories and here is the role of memory: different histories can be replaced by common memory

Varieties of fate of different Roma groups during the Holocaust

- Reich and Protectorate: deportation to death camps
- Soviet Union: Mobile Killing Squads – mass executions
- The Baltics, Western Ukraine, Poland: deportations to camps/local executions
- Slovakia: forced labor, later executions
- Bulgaria: exempted, forced labor
- Yugoslavia: executions in Serbia, Jasenovac camp in Croatia, Muslim Roma exempted (in Bosnia)
- Romania: deportations to Transnistria; hunger, slave labor; but selective treatment: large sectors unaffected
- Hungary: concentration/detention, later deportations to camps and executions
- Western Europe: mostly internment camps (France, Italy), except The Netherlands – almost all Dutch Sinti and Roma deported to Auschwitz and murdered

To remember = to belong

- ‘Remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation. One has to remember in order to belong’ (Jan Assmann 2008, 114)
- This kind of memory is described in different ways in Memory Studies: as postmemory (Hirsch), prosthetic memory (Landsberg), travelling memory (Erll), multidirectional memory (Rothberg), transnational memory (Rigney), invented tradition (Hobsbawm), ‘authentication of the past’ (Smith)
- Sometimes when people say “We remember”, they mean: “We want to belong” – to a group which indeed remembers the past in a certain way and this is its living memory. Because to belong to a group means to share its memories and identity.