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Bartash, Volha

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Towards ethnography of archival silence: Romani memory of Nazi genocide confronts the Soviet records

ABSTRACT

In this article, I reflect on my ethnographic-historical study of the genocide experiences and memories of Roma and the identified gaps between archival and family memory. In order to illustrate these gaps, I draw on my case study of a small community of Roma in Vidzy, Belarus. My field research reveals the interconnectedness of Romani family memory and local memory, as well as the silence of Soviet archival records on the mass killing of a Roma group in a Vidzy forest.

In the second part of the article, I seek an answer to the question “How does archival silence happen?” By following Stoler’s proposition for the ethnography “of” and “in” archives, I try to reconstruct the sociopolitical context of the work of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission, as well as potential tensions between the local population (eyewitnesses) and the Soviet state (representatives of the Commission). For these purposes, I combine an engaged reading of the Commission’s records with my field observations and other scholarly works in the field of Soviet studies.

At a theoretical level, this article seeks to improve our understanding of the archival silence and its potential implications for memory. Additionally, it shows a potential of the ethnographic method in revealing, and even filling, archival silences in the case of ethnic minorities and indigenous populations whose memory narratives have been predominantly oral and who have not yet created their own archives.

Keywords: archival silence, family memory, ethnic minorities, Soviet Extraordinary Commission, ethnography of archives.

Ethnographers writing history

This article offers an engaged reading of the Soviet sources on the Nazi persecution of Roma through an ethnographic lens. It results from my ethnographic-historical study of the experiences and memories of the Nazi genocide of Roma in the Belarusian-Lithuanian border region¹. In what follows, I reflect on my work as an ethnographer in state archives and identify the gaps between the archival evidence and the actual memory of Romani families.

Anthropologists’ work in archives is not entirely new and not confined to the field of Romani studies. Anthropologists of various regional competences have long nurtured an interest in the histories of indigenous populations. Since the pioneering work of Jan Vansina (1985), an increasing number of ethnographers have been

engaged in historical studies of local oral traditions and ancestral genealogies. Besides their historical roots, these studies have demonstrated the variety of ways in which “oral” cultures reproduce their knowledge about the past, including rituals and social practices (see, for instance, COLE 2001).

In this sense, Romani culture is not unique – many populations around the globe have used “orality” as their main means of knowledge transmission. What makes the situation of Roma different is the European context. Roma have been for centuries living in the societies where History is a highly institutionalised practice that is strongly associated with written records. These societies have continuously viewed Roma as their own antipode, judging them for being “illiterate”, “backward”, oriented towards the needs of the present and indiffer-

¹ Started as an independent research, this project later received institutional and financial support from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Jeff and Toby Herr Fellowship 2013/2014), Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (Research Fellowship 2015/2016), Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena (Fellowship 2016), and Swedish Institute (Visby Programme 2016/2017). My work on this article was made possible by my Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship (Horizon 2020), project registration No. 793826. The first draft of this paper was presented at the conference “On Categories and Boundaries: Intersections in the History and Ethnography of Europe’s Sinti and Roma (19th-21st centuries)”, Bolzano, 6-7 June 2017. I am grateful to the participants for their feedback. I also wish to thank Elisabeth Tauber and Paola Trevisan for their thoughtful and helpful comments on the earlier draft of this article and for their patience and encouragement through the preparation.

ent towards their past. In professional and amateur accounts of Romani history, the discourse of “ahistorical” people traces to the early 19th century. For instance, first publications on the history of Roma in the former Belarusian-Lithuanian Commonwealth were likely to speculate about the origins of Roma and their cultural tradition in the most biased ways (see, for instance, DANILOVICH 1824). Those early writings influenced many subsequent texts on Roma in the region and, until recently, uncritically cited as historical sources in scholarly and amateur publications (see, for instance, DEMETER 2000; KALININ 2005; DUCHYC 2003).

In the early Soviet Union, the discourses of backwardness and illiteracy were often used by leading academics to justify state assimilation policies towards nomadic Roma (for more on the early attempts of assimilation, see O’KEEFE 2013). Thus, the high-ranked Soviet academic, Aleksej Barannikov – one of the “fathers” of the so-called *Tsyganovedeniye* (Russian for “Gypsy studies”) – portrayed nomadic Roma as backward and asocial, underlining the need for compulsory sedentarisation and employment (BARANNIKOV 1931: 84).

It seems that the perception of Roma as a «people without history», in Katie Trumpener’s terms (1992), has deeply penetrated historiographical and literary traditions throughout Europe. Ironically, such pre-assumptions have also affected research on the historical topics that explicitly call for the Romani perspective. Firstly, this is the Nazi persecution of Roma in German-occupied Europe and the Soviet Union. As Michael Stewart has rightly noted, «The growing scholarly literature on the nature of the Nazi persecution of the Sinte, Roma, and other Gypsies (BURLEIGH & WIPPERMANN 1991; LEWY 2000; ZIMMERMANN 1996) almost entirely bypasses the relationship of the victims to their own history» (STEWART 2004: 561).

It is likely that the rareness of published testimonies by Romani Holocaust survivors has been often understood as an absence of memory and used as a justification for the one-sided (based on the perpetrator’s documentation) approach to the study of Romani tragedy. Several

quite influential studies of the Holocaust memory have even chosen Roma as an opposite to remembering Jewish communities². In her “Reading the Holocaust” (1998), Inga Clendinnen wrote «In fact they have chosen not to bother with history at all, because to forget, with a kind of defiant insouciance – “their peculiar mixture of fatalism and the spirit, or wit, to seize the day” – is the Gypsy way of enduring» (CLENDINEN 1998: 8).

As Nancy Scheper-Hughes notes in her interview with Harry Kreisler, anthropologists have been always particularly well suited to question common assumptions (SCHEPER-HUGHES 2000). Starting with the articles of Paloma Gay y Blasco (2001) and Michael Stewart (2004), ethnographers have been paying an increasing attention to the practices of remembering and forgetting in different Romani communities. Recent engagement of ethnographers with the methodology of oral history and archival research has allowed the voices of “ordinary” Roma to appear (SIMONIUKSTYTE 2006; TREVISAN 2013; KELSO 2016; BARTASH 2017; VÍKOVÁ 2016). These studies have been generally well received within the broader field of Holocaust studies, which has recently underlined the need for a more inclusive approach in the sense of ethnic and social diversity of Holocaust victims and their experiences. (For a more elaborated discussion on promoting “inclusiveness” in Holocaust studies, see BERGEN 2016.)

Due to their access to family and community networks of Roma, ethnographers have been able to collect first-hand accounts of family losses and survival experiences. However, it would be highly mistakable to see their work as a product of a purely scholarly interest. In a no lesser degree, this is a result of anthropologists’ engagement with the community (see TREVISAN 2013). Visiting archives, as a next research step, is also an obligation to the people who have entrusted us with their family histories. When informants encourage an ethnographer to go to archives, they often have deep-rooted personal and community-based motivations. First, archival research gives hope to those who, after more than 70 years, still have no news about

² Remarkably, such opposition would not work in the Soviet context where Romani and Jewish experiences and memories of the Nazi genocide had many similarities and intersections (see BARTASH forthcoming).

their deported or “disappeared” family members. Second, Roma communities are inclined to see archival search as an effective tool to add “accountability” to their own narratives and, eventually, make the world believe that «what our old people say, is truth». Paola Trevisan, who was one of first to work with family biographies of Italian Sinti and local archives amply notes: «I realized that as long as they remained just Gypsy stories nobody would be interested in finding any archival evidence, as if their voices were of no value in testifying to the persecution they endured» (TREVISAN 2013: 150).

In a certain sense, the archival work conducted by ethnographers is what Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls «anthropology-with-one’s-feet-on-the-ground, a committed, grounded, even a “barefoot” anthropology» (1995). According to Scheper-Hughes,

[w]e can make ourselves available not just as friends or as “patrons” in the old colonialist sense but as *comrades* (with all the demands and responsibilities that this word implies) to the people who are the subjects of our writings, whose lives and miseries provide us with a livelihood (SCHEPER-HUGHES 1995: 418).

This is very reminiscent of the situation where an ethnographer visits archives and then returns to the community, sharing the fruits of her/his findings and seeking a continuation of the histories identified. In a certain sense, such interaction between a researcher and a community is a form of teamwork whose final goal is to produce a coherent and “reliable” written narrative of suffering and survival. The boundary between “barefoot” anthropology and activism is, however, quite ambiguous³; and such teamwork may be not only rewarding, but also at times, frustrating for both sides. For an ethnographer, the role of mediator and writer, which she/he plays in the community, often entails a number of ethics considerations and internal struggles (see SCHEPER-HUGHES 1995).

The necessity for my research on the genocide experiences and memories of Roma has emerged in the course of my work-on-the-ground in Belarus between 2007 and 2010. Al-

though the initial focus of my fieldwork was different, the memory of Nazi violence and Romani struggle penetrated different levels of community life – from home conversations to social structures (see BARTASH 2017: 7-9). This is how this theme entered my field notes and, consequently, constituted the idea for a historical-ethnographic project.

Reading archival silences

Drawing my encouragement from the community, I went to the local archives intending to find documented proof for the oral histories of first- and second- generation Roma genocide survivors. So far, I have focused my archival efforts on the evidence produced by the Soviet authorities in the immediate post-war period and in the 1960s, namely the records of war crimes trials and the so-called “Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Fascist German Invaders and Their Accomplices” (ChGK) (discussed here)⁴. The Commission was established as early as 1942, long before the liberation of the Soviet territories. The plan was for the ChGK to start its work in a given Soviet region immediately after its liberation (see UMANSKY 2011: 347).

According to German historian Martin Holler, ChGK reports provide most important evidence on the Nazi persecution of Roma in the Soviet Union (HOLLER 2009). Nevertheless, my work with this archival collection was at times unrewarding. Out of about twelve mass killing sites identified by my oral history survey⁵, the ChGK reports provided only a bit of information (from a sentence-long mention to an eyewitness testimony) on approximately a third of them. Moreover, I scarcely found a testimony of a Romani survivor in the papers of the Commission (see *How does archival silence happen?*).

How to explain the (almost complete) absence of Romani voices in the Commission’s documentation? Why were most crimes against Roma left undocumented, despite the awareness of the local population (as shown by my survey-on-the-ground)? And, ultimately, how would one fill the archival gaps with the vic-

³ This is without mentioning those social scientists that helped Romani survivors and their families fill compensation claims, as, for instance, Michelle Kelso, who did just that in Romania (see KELSO 2008).

⁴ The full name of the Commission was “Extraordinary State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the Fascist German Invaders and Their Accomplices, and of the Damage They Caused to Citizens, Collective Farms, Public Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR”. The work of the Commission was organised in accordance with the administrative division of the Soviet Union – rayon, oblast, and republic sections.

I have accessed the records of the Commission at the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk, as well as the oblast (administrative unit) archives. A digital collection of the ChGK records from the State Archive of the Russian Federation, Moscow, was available to me during my research fellowship and a research stay at the USHMM in 2014 and 2016. I have surveyed the materials of war crimes trials at the Lithuanian Special (former KGB) Archives in 2016.

⁵ Besides an oral history survey of the families of Roma, I had conversations with local educators, museum-based historians, and the non-Roma who lived in close proximity to the mass killing sites. Some of those conversations have provided me with important information on the genocide of Roma, as well as on the Soviet memorialisation policies.

tims' voices in an ethical way, without over-produced evidence?

"Traditional" historians often question the reliability of oral histories, pointing out the shortcomings that arise from the very nature of human memory, such as the failure to date events, identify localities, recall personal names, and remember other details. In the case of Roma genocide victims, such a scrutinizing approach would mean a complete lack of accounting for their (oral) memories. South African archivist Verne Harris points out the problem of non-responsiveness in the archives to the marginal or "indigenous" epistemologies (HARRIS 2002: 150). According to Harris, the narratives that do not employ the «powerful Western frame of reference» (HARRIS 2001: 9), such as oral tradition, are ignored and silenced. Canadian archivist Rodney Carter adds: «The speech acts, that is, the documents that are produced, are not recognised as records by the archives» (CARTER 2006: 219).

In this article, I attempt to switch the roles by applying an ethnographic lens to Soviet archival sources. Since the archival turn of 1990s feminist theorists, archival scholars and post-colonial critics have contributed multiple understandings of archives and social relations that organise archival hierarchies and contents⁶. Thus, Ann Laura Stoler, anthropologist of post-colonialism, proposes to view archives as «sites of state ethnography»:

An ethnography "of" and "in" the colonial archives invites more attention to the social relations and material conditions in which archives were produced, to their editing or dissenting voices, to how common sense was crafted, and to which categories were privileged and resilient and which were demoted or ignored (STOLER 2002: 271).

As this article demonstrates, archival silences call for an engaged reading. The Soviet records not only fail to report, downplay, and omit the Nazi crimes against Roma – they reflect the relations of victims, eyewitnesses, and the Soviet state, as well as different local aspects of the political and social reality in which they were

produced (post-war western borderlands of the Soviet Union).

The approaches from feminist and post-colonial studies might be, to a certain degree, helpful in understanding the archival silences on the Romani tragedy during the Second World War. Recent studies on minorities, indigenous populations, and marginalised groups have shown that their histories are extremely difficult to reconstruct based on state archives (see, for instance, CASWELL, PUNZALAN and SANGWAND 2017). Informed by the works of Michel Foucault (1974) and Jacques Derrida (1996), Rodney Carter notes «...the powerful can introduce silences into the archives by denying marginal groups their voice and the opportunity to participate in the archives» (CARTER 2006: 217). As my study shows, the Soviet Extraordinary Commission, too, neither meant to document the Nazi genocide of Roma nor undertook any practical steps towards the inclusion of Romani survivors (many of whom were, at the time, on the move)⁷.

Carter further elaborates on other possible readings of archival silences. He points out that excluded communities may choose to be silent (CARTER 2006: 227). In accordance with recent research in anthropology, their silence has not an exclusively negative connotation. It may be empowering (see, for instance, KOŚCIAŃSKA 2009) or even one of the «arts of resistance», to quote James Scott (1990). In Romani studies, many scholars pay attention to the attitudes that Roma and Sinti have developed in response to oppressive state policies and hostile environments⁸. For instance, ethnographers from the former Soviet Union have described the practice of double-naming, i.e. using one name in identity papers and another in the Roma community (see BESSONOV, DEMETER and KUTENKOV 2000). Throughout their history, Roma have tried to escape personal data collection by, for example, census takers, in order to protect themselves from state pressure (see, for instance, SILVERMAN 1988). In relation to the central theme of this article, I wonder whether Romani survivors in post-war Soviet Union refrained from participation in the ChGK survey for similar reasons.

⁶ Drawing their inspiration from the works of social theorists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, scholars started developing a critical approach to archives. Archives are no longer seen as neutral data stores, but as spaces of power (FOUCAULT 1974) and even violence (DERRIDA 1996). Critical archival studies underscore that power, including «the power to exclude» (CARTER 2006), penetrates every level of the archival endeavour – from record creation to the formation of archival institutions (CASWELL, PUNZALAN and SANGWAND 2017).

⁷ Romani histories are currently underrepresented in most state archives of the former Soviet Union, with the exception of state-sponsored Romani activism of the interwar time (see, for instance, MARUSHIAKOVA and POPOV 2017). Another opportunity to read the voices of Roma between the lines is offered by the records that document state oppressive policies towards them, e.g. early attempts of sedentarisation in the Russian Empire.

⁸ It should be noted, however, that the dichotomy "Roma – Gadjó (non-Roma)", which is frequently used in Romani studies, simplifies the whole gamut of interethnic and interpersonal communications in their local variations (see the microethnographic study by Elisabeth Taubert in this Journal).

⁹ In most reports, this is just numbers. For instance, this is how the German Feldgendarmarie reported on the Roma victims killed in Lida in late summer 1941: «About 80 Gypsies, among them also women and children» (the killing was assisted by the Lithuanian Execution unit). USHMM collection, RG-14.101M, B 162, 3.428.

¹⁰ The identification of Roma, and sedentary Roma in particular, required the ability to operate in the local countryside, including having local contacts and knowledge of the situation.

¹¹ Moreover, the Yahad-in Unum project has revealed dozens “professions” in which the locals, including children and teenagers, were forced to assist in the murderers, e.g. digging pits, collecting victims’ belongings, etc. (see DESBOIS 2008).

¹² In my previous publications, I have argued that nomadic Roma were part of the interwar economy and society of the border region, though their interaction with the non-Roma population was of a seasonal nature. In the region under consideration, Roma used to travel from approximately April to October and rent homes from peasants in winter (see BARTASH 2015). Therefore, being nomadic did not mean being fully excluded from the local social life. When it comes to the “names” issue, nomadic Roma were known to the local peasants by their nicknames rather than “official” names.

¹³ Sociologist Jeffrey Olick proposed to distinguish two main types of collective memory: «collected memories», that is «the aggregated individual memories of members of a group» (1998: 338), and collective memory in the sense of «symbols and their systems of relations have a degree of autonomy from the subjective perceptions of individuals» (1998: 341).

Once supplied, the voices of minorities or of the excluded may significantly challenge mainstream narratives (CARTER 2006). Nevertheless, my goal here is neither to produce a comprehensive history of the Nazi genocide by means of merging memories with archives, nor to decide whose story is closer to “historical truth”. Taking the memories and experiences of Roma as a starting point for my analysis, I seek to identify and interpret the silences of Soviet archives.

Romani experiences and memories of the Nazi genocide (a brief outline)

In his article on the genocide of Roma, Stewart analyses several cases from Austrian and German towns where the persecution of Sinti and Roma families was organised on the initiative of the local authorities and police. He comes to the conclusion that «in the broader context of the Nazi social revolution you did not need a central plan and specifically targeted ideological program in order to arrive at the wholesale redefinition of a social problem in racialist terms» (STEWART 2007). Throughout German-occupied Europe, the persecution of Roma happened in a number of local initiatives and regional variations. Nevertheless, the plight of Roma in the occupied Soviet Union was much more dramatic than in many other places. There, the Nazi police did not seek any ideological or legal justification for their actions. Whole families and even communities of Roma (for instance, nomadic groups of up to 100 members) were victimised without ever being accused; and the victims were barely documented (BARTASH 2017). Most German documents on the killings of Roma in Belarusian and Lithuanian towns do not name the victims, confining their identification to the numbers of children, women, and men⁹.

However, the victims did have names; and their personalities were often known to the local police without whose assistance none of those crimes would be possible¹⁰. With the exception of killings that took place in the deep woods, most were witnessed. In the occupied Soviet territories, Nazi police did not undertake any se-

rious measures to prevent the local population from watching the murder of Roma and Jews¹¹.

It could happen, of course, that the eyewitnesses were unable to identify nomadic Roma by their “official” names when the Extraordinary Commission arrived. This, however, does not mean that they did not have contacts before¹². Such a situation was even more unlikely in the case of sedentary and semi-nomadic families. (For more on the difference in the experiences of sedentary and nomadic Roma, see BARTASH forthcoming.) The level of their integration in local communities was usually higher, and they knew their neighbours in a variety of roles before the war – as acquaintances, friends, commercial partners, or rivals; even godparents to their children. A personal involvement of the victims, eyewitnesses, and local perpetrators makes the experiences and memories of victimised families even more painful. The Holocaust scholar Natalja Aleksion calls this phenomenon «intimate violence» (2017).

Those Roma who survived the war and genocide did so by going into hiding and enrolling in Soviet partisan units (BESSONOV 2009). Some people fled from killing sites and even witnessed the murder of their own families. After the war, survivors often returned to the places where their relatives had been killed. Some families later reburied the remains of their loved ones at their local cemeteries. Many did so years and decades later. During their visits to these sites of bitter memory, they talked to the local residents, including eyewitnesses. This is how the family memories of Roma gradually pervaded eyewitness testimonies and collective (or collected)¹³ memories of the local population (see the discussion in Bartash forthcoming). Nevertheless, different families tried to cope with the memories of violence and genocide in different ways. In some families, difficult memories caused long-term inter-generational silences or, like the experiences of sexual violence, circulated within women’s circles.

It seems that the under-representation of Roma genocide on a public level through the Soviet era might have contributed to the preservation of family memories. In the post-war

Soviet Union, those Romani men who had become active in the partisan movement received decoration as Soviet veterans. For all others, the memory of the war was confined to family losses and individual suffering – the Nazi genocide of Roma received neither official recognition nor proper public attention. The official memory politics aimed to glorify heroes of the war. For the non-combatant victims, no ethnic difference was made. Thus, the burial sites of Roma were either marked as the graves of “unidentified non-combatant Soviet citizens” or not marked at all. (For the Soviet politics of commemoration, see KOTLJARCHUK 2014)

¹⁴ USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, Opis 92, Delo 212.

¹⁵ As a result of the Polish-Soviet war (1919-1921) and the Riga peace treaty, the territory populated by ethnic Belarusians was divided between the Second Polish Republic and the newly declared Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

¹⁶ *Starovery* (Russ. Old Believers) are groups of Eastern Orthodox Christians who maintain “old” liturgical and ritual practice of the Russian Orthodox Church that existed before the Church reforms of the 17th century. As they were persecuted by Moscow authorities, the groups of Old Believers fled to neighbouring countries, including the Grand Duchy of Lithuania that included the territories of present-day Belarus and Lithuania.

¹⁷ This statement is based on my study of the reports of the ChGK on the Vidzy rayon. USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, Opis 92, Delo 212.

¹⁸ The date of the mass killing is reconstructed according to the age of the survivor, Anna Marcinkewitz, born in 1938, who was five years old at the moment of the tragedy.

¹⁹ In the Soviet period, employment was compulsory for every grownup.

Case study in Vidzy: family memory confronts the archival silence

The more I proceeded with my fieldwork, the more I realised the interconnectedness of Romani family memories and the memory of the local non-Roma population, i.e. potential eyewitnesses. The scenes of Romani suffering, by now largely erased from the local memory narratives, are traceable in Romani family memories (see BARTASH forthcoming). These observations predetermined my expectations for the archival search in former Soviet archives. Since I knew that the Soviet Extraordinary Commission had interviewed thousands of contemporary eyewitnesses, I hoped to find their voices speaking in support of the memories of Roma families.

As it turned out, such a combination was rare to achieve. The Commission’s records either kept silent on killings of Roma or reported them in several sentences, not allowing the eyewitnesses to speak for themselves. It seems that those contemporary voices, on which the ChGK reports drew, were somehow lost in the multi-level data processing for what was to become a Soviet official narrative of the German occupation (see the section *Contextualizing Soviet documentation of the Nazi crimes*). In the course of my research, I rarely encountered a situation where archival evidence would significantly add to a family narrative. Putting it differently, more often I gained either the story told from only one perspective (archival or familial),

or two versions (archival and familial) of one event that hardly spoke one to another.

In order to address the gaps between the Soviet archival evidence and family memory of Roma, I will briefly outline my case study in Vidzy (Pol. Widze), Belarus, conducted in the summer of 2017. Before coming to Vidzy, I had an opportunity to survey the records of the Soviet Extraordinary Commission on the Vidzy rayon (Bel. administration district) compiled in 1945¹⁴. The archival search did not yield any information on the persecution of Roma in the Vidzy rayon. In spite of this, I decided to visit – my Roma contacts (from other places) indicated the town as the right place for my fieldwork.

Today Vidzy is a small post-Soviet town (approximately 1,600 inhabitants) on the border with Lithuania. It has a small Roma community of up to 100 people. In the interwar time, the place was under Polish rule (1921-1939)¹⁵. It was a multi-ethnic town populated by people of Belarusian, Polish, Russian (Old Believers)¹⁶, Tatar and Jewish origins. As an important place for trade and artisanship, the town also attracted the local Roma, who were engaged in horse trade and commerce and kept on the move. Under the German occupational administration, a police unit was based in one of the town’s centrally-located buildings. The local police was known for its cruelty, oppressive policies against the local population, and participation in the Holocaust¹⁷. As revealed by my oral history survey, at least one extended family of local semi-nomadic Roma was murdered by the local police in the forest near Vidzy, presumably in autumn 1943¹⁸.

It is remarkable that the relatives of the victims who had survived the Nazi persecution in the woods returned to Vidzy after the Soviet sedentarisation campaign of the 1950s (see BARTASH 2015). During the Soviet period, they worked for local enterprises and agricultural cooperatives¹⁹. Their memories of the bitter past, including the biographies of lost family members, were transmitted mostly orally within the community. Thus, several generations of the local Roma grew up, aware of the location of the mass grave and their relatives’ fates. Once

marked with a wooden cross, the place did not change much through the Soviet period (besides a natural change in landscape); no “official” memorial was erected.

In the 1990s, one of the community members volunteered to compile a list of the victims in accordance with the memoirs of their relatives. The intention was to submit it along with the application for a memorial plaque²⁰. Unfortunately, the plan to install a plaque has never materialised. For reasons unclear, the community did not receive any official or unofficial answer from the rayon authorities. It is, of course, possible that the papers got lost in the bureaucratic chaos of the 1990s. Another probable interpretation would be, however, that the lists, which relied on community memory (and not on archival records)²¹, were not taken seriously by the recipient, i.e. the local authorities. The lack of archival evidence has already become a serious obstacle for many commemoration initiatives in the post-Soviet countries. It is here that archival silence reveals its dangerous potential to transform into a public act of forgetting – denying the memory of living people a place in the memory of future generations. After first- and second-generation survivors and witnesses are gone and the local landscape transforms unrecognisably, the “oral” memory will not stand the test of time (see CARTER 2006: 217).

In spite of their failed memorialisation project, the Roma community of Vidzy continued to commemorate the victims. In the context of post-Soviet religious revival, their commemoration, too, became more religious in nature. With help and encouragement from the local Catholic priest and parish, Roma families have managed to erect a new wooden cross and organise several religious commemorative ceremonies on the site.

During my stay in Vidzy in summer, 2017, I had a chance to talk to the local Catholics, as well as to other older locals and local history experts. My conversation with Marfa, an elderly Russian woman, led me to the discovery of the story of Anna, whose continuation I later recorded from the Roma families. Anna, a five-year Romani girl, was one of few survivors

of the mass killing in the Vidzy forest. When her family, including parents and siblings, was driven in an armed escort from the local prison to the killing site, the girl somehow mingled with non-Roma children and thus stayed alive. For some time, she went from one home to another, crying and seeking refuge. No one, however, took the risk of taking in a Romani child. After the police spotted the homeless Romani girl, they sent an officer to the forest “to get rid of her”. However, the officer in charge took pity on the child and let her go. Eventually, the girl was found by the wife of an Orthodox priest in her own backyard in Bogino (several kilometers away from Vidzy). The childless couple decided to adopt Anna²². Marfa, the narrator, met the girl during her visits to the priest’s home after the war²³.

It is remarkable that Marfa was not the only local to remember Anna’s story. Different versions of it have been reproduced in Bogino, where Anna found a home²⁴. The “local” versions of Anna’s survival can be also traced in the current memories of Roma families from Vidzy. Nevertheless, their narrative is very different from those of outsiders. Three of Anna’s relatives whom I have interviewed recounted her survival, not as a separate plot, but in the context of family pre-war and wartime history and genealogy²⁵. Only in its “family” version does the story of Anna become meaningful.

My case study in Vidzy well demonstrates the interconnectedness between the Romani family memory and the memory of the local non-Roma population, thus revealing the silence of Soviet archives on the mass killing of Roma in the local forest. The mass grave of Roma genocide victims near Vidzy is, nevertheless, not exceptional. As already mentioned previously, a considerable portion of such sites was left undocumented by the Extraordinary Commission. How was it possible to bypass them in the immediate post-war period, when the information was on the surface and when their very existence at the outskirts of villages and in the local woods testified about the murder that took place there?

²⁰ Interview No. 0007, Oral history collection of the author.

²¹ My survey of the Soviet records on the Vidzy rayon has not elucidated any information on the mass killing.

²² In this article, the story is reconstructed according to the survivor’s relatives (Oral history collection of the author).

²³ Interview No. 0008, Oral history collection of the author.

²⁴ This information was provided by Father Igor, an Orthodox priest from Bogino.

²⁵ Interviews No. 0007, No. 0009 and No. 0010, Oral history collection of the author.

How does archival silence happen?

In my search for the answer to the question, «How does archival silence happen?» I follow Stoler's proposition for the ethnography "of" and "in" the archives that «invites more attention to the social relations and material conditions in which archives were produced» (see *Reading archival silences*). Scholarly discussion of the Extraordinary Commission's work has so far concentrated on its ideological purposes and highest organisational level (see, for instance, SOROKINA 2009). Thus, not much is known about the work of local ChGK sections and the interaction of eyewitnesses and data collectors in the process of knowledge production. As suggested by my field research, this interaction might play a crucial role in the (non-)documentation of the Roma victims. Although a full reconstruction of each given case would be difficult, a close reading of the ChGK reports and situating them in the local historical and socio-political context (post-war Western borderlands of the Soviet Union) may be useful for the interpretation of archival silences.

Soviet ideology. As pointed out by Andrej Kotljarchuk, Soviet ideology played an important role in the (non-)documentation of the Roma genocide (KOTLJARCHUK 2014). Historian Karel Berkhoff, who has analysed the Holocaust in Soviet wartime media, explains silencing of the genocide of Roma by the fact that, in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, Roma did not have any political weight (BERKHOFF 2010: 116). To a certain degree, such an approach also helps interpret silences and gaps in the reports of the Extraordinary Commission. The documentation of the Nazi crimes against Roma was, apparently, not among the priorities of the Commission's work. Officially, the Extraordinary Commission was tasked with a «full documentation of the villainous crimes of the Nazi and the damage they caused to the Soviet citizens and the socialist state»²⁶.

As the research on the ChGK activities shows, there were also "hidden" political purposes. The materials produced were eventually presented by the Soviets as evidence against

Nazi Germany at the Nurnberg trial. They were also used in the Soviet trials (of different levels) against the Nazi and their accomplices (UMAN-SKY 2016). Political context of the Commission's work led to the misrepresentation of some collected data and to several, known so far, cases of data fabrication²⁷. Other misuses included, for instance, manipulation of the number of victims, silencing the Soviet partisan terror against the local population, and anti-Soviet activities in western regions of the country (see SOROKINA 2009).

Nevertheless, the documents collected by the local sections of the Extraordinary Commission included a lot of raw materials that relatively closely reflected the wartime situation in many localities of the German-occupied Soviet Union²⁸. Presumably, this is the main reason why the ChGK collection was inaccessible to most researchers until the fall of the Soviet Union²⁹. A broader public discussion of themes such as the local collaboration in the Holocaust (as well as in the genocide of Roma), or the scale of anti-Soviet Resistance, would be potentially threatening to the very project of the post-war Soviet Union that was presented as a common home for the nations who «equally suffered» from the German occupation and «equally contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany» (see, for instance, KOTLJARCHUK 2014). Likewise, the Extraordinary Commission meant to elucidate the damage from the German occupation made to an average "non-combatant Soviet citizen", without any specific ethnic belonging or cultural peculiarities. Thus, the genocide of Roma was a rather marginal matter to the Soviet politics of war crimes documentation. Putting it differently, it was ignored rather than silenced on purpose³⁰. In most cases, the question about Roma victims was not even part of the interrogation routine.

Local data processing practices. Most identified killings of Roma lacked any in-depth investigation in the form of eyewitness testimonies, pictures, or forensic examination. An absolute majority of reports describes the crimes against Roma in most general terms, and do not name

²⁶ The official purposes of the Commission were described in the Decree of the Soviet Government from 2 November 1942 that established the Extraordinary Commission.

²⁷ Besides the infamous Katyn massacre, there were several other (known) cases when the ChGK had its part in covering up the NKVD crimes. (For a more detailed discussion, see SOROKINA 2009.)

²⁸ Depending on the local situation, the ChGK produced its statements based on eyewitness testimonies and sometimes forensic expertise. The reports also included pictures, maps, lists of victims, perpetrators (including local collaborators), and forced labor deportees. Some of the files sent to Moscow contained the so-called German "trophy documents" – personal documents, propaganda materials, letters, German postcards, photographs, and other captured evidence.

²⁹ The main corpus of the ChGK materials was held by the Central Party Archive in Moscow and the archives of Soviet republics. Marked as "under secret", those files remained inaccessible to most researchers and the broader public for decades (SOROKINA 2009).

³⁰ The same could be said about the Soviet politics of memory, as demonstrated by Kotljarchuk (2014).

the victims. For instance, the Drujsk rural district (*selsoviet*) reported to the ChGK of Braslaw rayon: «13 Tsyganie were killed in the village of Smulki. Their names are unknown»³¹. Although the information was obviously obtained from eyewitnesses, the ChGK files from the Braslaw rayon do not include any supporting documentation.

In April 1945, the Commission of the Ashmi-any rayon reported on the mass killing of Roma near Navasiady:

In November 1942 Germans had been doing raids and caught 42 Tsyganie and one Jew in the place of Navasiady. They had been shot at the forest edge and buried there. The grave has been fenced in; and the wooden cross (constructed of two boards) has been established. The grave is located 150 meters away from the cemetery of Navasiady³².

Needless to say, such an account provides no idea of who the victims and perpetrators were, or what the circumstances of the massacre were. Moreover, it remains unclear on whose testimonies the statement relies. We only know the names of authorities' representatives and the NKVD officer who compiled and signed the document³³.

Did the eyewitness testimonies on the Navasiady killings of Roma ever exist? In his analysis of the ChGK documentation practices in Crimea, Kiril Feferman pays attention to the fact that part of the collected data was «lost» on its way to Moscow (FEFERMAN 2003: 592-595). A multi-level processing of data at different levels of the Commission's hierarchy was also discussed by archival scholars (SOROKINA 2009). When the local Commissions compiled reports on the results of their work and supported those reports with selected documentation, they already had made a decision about whose voices would remain in the Soviet history³⁴.

At last, certain regions of the Soviet Union were affected by the German occupation to the degree that it was not physically possible for the local Commissions to embrace the scale of Nazi violence against the local population in a limited time slot. In the course of merging the facts from the local memorial books³⁵ with the ChGK records, I have come to the conclusion that the Commission was indeed far from recording every episode of the Nazi criminal policies.

Exclusion of Romani survivors. Nevertheless, the main reason why the genocide of Roma was only partly documented by the Extraordinary Commission is that the Roma survivors and their family members were seldom given a voice (unlike, for instance, the families of party activists whose stories were clearly prioritised over all other victims groups, for political reasons)³⁶. An absolute majority of eyewitnesses who testified on the crimes against Roma did not know the victims in person and therefore was unable to identify them by name. It seems that most ChGK sections hardly tried to reach to relatives or, at least, local acquaintances of the Roma victims. The same was, nevertheless, true

³¹ USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, Opis 92, Delo 209.

³² USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, Opis 89, Delo 9, p. 12.

³³ From such a report, one would be likely to assume that the victims were nomadic Roma whom the village dwellers did not know in person. My field findings confront this presumption. In summer 2015, I visited the burial place of Roma in Navasiady, conversed with the local dwellers, and interviewed one of the survivors (who currently lives in another town of Belarus). Just like in the case of Vidzy (discussed above), my field trip to Navasiady revealed the interconnectedness of Romani and non-Romani memory, pointing out the awareness of the local population and the availability of eyewitnesses at the time when the Extraordinary Commission worked on the site. According to the survivor, the local residents knew her family in person since they had been staying in Navasiady for some time.

³⁴ Soon after each local section of the Commission had accomplished their work they published a summarizing report on the Nazi crimes in their localities in the local press. In post-war time, extracts from those reports were included in student handbooks and document editions aimed to illustrate the Nazi horrors.

³⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union, BELTA, a Belarusian national news agency, started an ambitious project of the documentation of local histories. By the early 2000s, the project resulted in the so-called "Books of Memory" series that provided micro-historical information on most rayons of Belarus. In spite of some traces of the Soviet official narratives, these books include plenty of "raw" information that was collected from historical eyewitnesses, as well from the local archives. Among other topics, these materials shed light on the Holocaust and anti-Soviet Resistance.

³⁶ The same, however, can be said about the Jewish survivors. According to Feferman, the city Commission of Yevpatoria failed to identify most Jewish, Roma and Krymchak victims of the Nazi persecution. They pointed to the fact that those communities were destroyed and no relatives or acquaintances remained to provide essential information on the victims (FEFERMAN 2003: 594). Further, Feferman argues that the communication among regional ChGK sections was inefficient. Thus, the Yevpatoria Commission did not make an attempt to reach out to the relatives of the victims who were not locally present (e.g. those who were evacuated). Such practices of dealing with insufficient or fragmentary evidence could have occurred in other parts of the Soviet Union, too.

for the Jewish victims whose relatives were displaced by the war and its aftermath.

In this regard, Kiril Feferman points out the inefficiency of the communication among regional ChGK sections and failure to exchange data (FEFERMAN 2003: 594). In other words, the methodology of data collection used by the Commission was inadequate to cover the communities heavily affected by disintegration and displacement.

The Romani community of the border region was also affected by deportations and displacements. As a result, many families found themselves separated. Concentration camp survivors returned to their home locations and did not find their families. The war and genocide made family survival a complicated task. In their survival attempts, Roma changed their dislocation, went in woody localities, and sought partisan units that would accept them. My oral history survey shows that such trajectories could cover hundreds of kilometers. Even those who succeeded in surviving seldom returned to their pre-war localities in the immediate postwar period. Moreover, a considerable part of Roma in the region in question was traveling and trading horses, thus trying to survive the post-war hardship (BARTASH 2015). Such a mobile community was easy for a bureaucratic practice to ignore. In this regard, my question is whether the people without permanent residences and identity papers would be considered as “proper” witnesses at all.

So far, I have come across only a few voices of Roma or their non-Roma family members in my archival search; all of them of sedentary background. One of the voices is the application for reburial permission filed on behalf of Konstantin Marcinkevich. In his letter, Konstantin asks the local NKVD officer for permission to rebury the remains of his daughter’s family (the daughter, her husband, and their five children) who were killed in August 1943 in the Syvanciāny rayon (present-day Švenčionys, Lithuania)³⁷.

Another example is an eyewitness testimony of Kristina Shpakovskaya from Lubcharayon who lost her Romani husband and two children in the genocide. As appears from her testimony,

their family lived sedentary, as did other Roma in their rayon:

In autumn 1941, Germans ordered all Tsyganje residents of the Lubcha rayon to arrive to the German commendatur in Lubcha and bring their horses along. About twenty-five women and men (all together) came. Their horses with harness were taken away from them. Out of those twenty-five, two were arrested; the rest were freed [...]

In spring 1942, a mass arrest of Tsyganje began. My husband was also arrested. He was arrested by the policeman Kunicki Ivan Pavlovich, 30 years old. There were more than 50 Tsyganje together with children. Fourteen other people who were suspected in having connections with partisans were detained. I went to the interpreter, Bazhko, and started praying him to free my children from jail. He told me to come later. Then two Germans came, laid me on the bench and beat me up with gummy whips. After that, I was let go.

Since they did not let my children go, I asked them to take me (in jail – V.B.) too. The day after, the police (names each policeman – V.B.) beat up all the detained men and placed them in a truck together with both children (of Shpakovskaya – V.B.). They took them to the cemetery near Lubcha and shot them all. Then the truck returned, picked the women with children and brought them to the same place [...]

After they had killed my husband, the police with Kunicki came to my home, harassed, abused, and raped me³⁸.

Being an official interrogation record, the testimony of Shpakovskaya is very different from those of the outsiders – it shows the Nazi persecution of sedentary Roma from within. Her emotional and rather personal narrative provides a vivid contrast to the reserved language of non-Roma eyewitnesses. The way this mourning mother and widow speaks about the persecution endured by her family from the local police, and her own experience of sexual violence, makes it an exceptional piece in the records of the Commission³⁹.

Since the interviewing of victims’ family members was not a standard practice, the rep-

³⁷ USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, Opis 94, Delo 435.

³⁸ Here quoted from BESSONOV 2010: 28.

³⁹ Moreover, Shpakovskaya provides an important historical evidence on the Nazi persecution of sedentary Roma that started with police registration and property confiscation and turned into a well-planned action. The very fact that Shpakovskaya, a Slavic woman, was separated from her Romani husband and children testifies against the recurring attempts to diminish the racial motive of the Roma genocide (see discussion in HOLLER 2009).

resentation of Romani tragedy in the ChGK collection is rather partial and one-sided. This is not just a question of victims' biographical data, but of the degree to which bystanders' testimonies could mirror the experiences and emotion of the victims.

Personal factor. At the same time, it would be a mistake to confine the analysis of the Commission's practices and records to generalisations. Even though certain approaches or flaws can be traced throughout the ChGK collection, a personal factor played a crucial role in the documentation of each particular case. Otherwise, it would be difficult to answer the questions: Why did some local sections provide more detailed reports than others, and include more supporting documents? Why did some officers choose to raise questions that were not banal? Why did some eyewitnesses testify in a more open and informative way than others?

Just as an example, the ChGK of the Hly-

bokaje rayon interrogated the eyewitness Alexander Smolski on the crimes that took place in Hlybokaje. The reason was probably the fact that Smolski lived close to the buildings of the local police and gendarmerie and, therefore, was able to observe their activities right from the windows of his home⁴⁰. In response to routine questions, Smolski chose to testify on the systematic killings of nomadic Roma in fall 1941. He described what he watched from his home – how the local police and gendarmerie brought nomadic groups from the surrounding areas and drove them in the direction of the Barok forest for shooting. His testimony about Roma is one of the most detailed in the whole ChGK archives⁴¹.

It seems that there was a myriad of ways in which individuals and their interactions could influence knowledge production. The staff of the rural ChGK section did not necessarily have adequate training, the means or the tools for completing their important task. Moreover, not all of them had a profound knowledge of the local situation⁴². In the cities, they invited some recognised and highly motivated educators, writers, academics, medical doctors, and priests to become ChGK experts (SOROKINA 2009). However, rural sections did not always have the same competence and commitment as did the city ones. It often happened that representatives of rural authorities, local party activists, and NKBD (secret police) officers collected evidence in the countryside where most killings of Roma had taken place.

Local sociopolitical context. Lastly, it is important to realise the sociopolitical circumstances of the Commission's work. Holocaust scholars who employed a micro-historical perspective on the matter and combined several kinds of evidence (e.g. oral histories and archival sources), emphasised the uniqueness of the wartime situation in different regions and localities of the Soviet Union⁴³. Until the middle of the 1950s, western parts of the Soviet Union were agonised by the confrontation between the state, which tried to re-establish its power structures, and the armed groups of the anti-Soviet Resistance⁴⁴. In

⁴⁰ The Commission often interrogated the people who lived close to such sites and to the sites of mass killings.

⁴¹ USHMM collection, RG-22.002 M, Fond 7021, opis 92, delo 212, p. 32.

⁴² For instance, most NKVD officers were sent from Russia. This is also the reason why Russian was the main language of interrogation. The original language of eyewitnesses (e.g. Belarusian) was loosely translated to Russian and sometimes replaced with Soviet ideological cliché in which ordinary people did not talk (e.g. German-Fascist invaders, Fascist butchers, etc.).

⁴³ For instance, in her research on the Soviet trials in Moldova, Diana Dumitru cautions against stretching the local situation from one Moldovan town to another (DUMITRU 2009).

⁴⁴ The roots of different anti-Soviet and pro-nationalist movements could be traced back to the pre-war events, namely the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland (1939) and the Baltic States (1940). Those events were followed by a rapid political transformation that went hand in hand with repression and deportation of thousands of

people of different ethnic background from the newly gained territories. Although the state did not succeed in the socioeconomic transformation of the region in 1939-1941, it spread the seeds of fear and hatred throughout. During wartime, pro-nationalist partisans (e.g. the so-called "Forest brothers" in Lithuania), as well as other armed groups of a more vague political orientation, operated in the local woods. After the war, the anti-Soviet groups replenished their ranks. While some newcomers were motivated fighters, many were led to the woods by the fear of personal repercussions that would follow with the return of the Soviet order (e.g. those who served in the Nazi police, deserted from the Red Army, or escaped the first post-war draft).

So far, there has been no elaborated scholarly discussion of the anti-Soviet Resistance in Belarus (for political reasons). By contrast, this topic has become a cornerstone of the politics of memory and research agenda of state-sponsored institutions in Lithuania. Nevertheless, the scholarly works that apply a critical approach to the Resistance movements are rather rare (for more on this, see DAVOLIŪTĖ 2017).

popular language, that long-lasting confrontation received the name “the war after the war”⁴⁵. This literally means that many of the local population perceived the events as a continuation of the Second World War.

It was especially true for the countryside inhabitants who found themselves “between the two fires”. Although the Resistance fighters greatly relied on the local networks (many were locals themselves) and enjoyed a certain degree of support from the countryside population; they also threatened their physical safety and demanded regular food supplies⁴⁶. The Soviets, on their side, tried to restore their power structures and engage the local peasants, who were exhausted by the war and occupation, in the collectivisation project. The latter was meant to mobilise the sources from the countryside for industrial development. The Resistance groups, on their side, undertook all possible means to fight the Soviet order, for instance, by killing Bolshevik activists and the peasants who (in) voluntarily collaborated with them. In order to confront the so-called “banditism” and re-establish the state, Moscow sent experienced NKVD officers to the Belarusian and Lithuanian countryside. They were well trained and ideologically instructed not only to suppress the Resistance but to liquidate their “social base” among local peasants (see, for instance, PASHKOU 2002).

How could all of the above affect the documentation of war crimes by the ChGK, and the crimes against Roma in particular⁴⁷? The impact could be direct and indirect. First, “the war after the war”, in a certain sense, moved the documentation of Nazi crimes to second-hand matters in the affected areas. Second, the tensions that existed between the rural population (potential eyewitnesses) and the Soviet state (ChGK experts) could have prevented many potential eyewitnesses from giving their testimonies. Ironically, the same NKVD officers who were involved in the Soviet repressive politics in the countryside often conducted interrogations for the Commission.

Therefore, the question is, How likely would the people be to disclose their local secrets to the state representatives? In the region under

consideration, many families had members who worked for Germans in some capacity, or were connected to the anti-Soviet Resistance in some way. The process of giving a testimony was indeed far from a free conversation. It was a formal interrogation that included questions about the background of an eyewitness and her/his activities under occupation. For instance, the eyewitnesses were asked whether they took part in any anti-Soviet organisations and uprisings. As noticed by Feferman, «Failure to produce a satisfactory response could easily lead to the witness’s transformation into the defendant» (FEFERMAN 2003: 591).

Main conclusions: Archival silence and actual memory of people

In this article, I have reflected on my ethnographic-historical study on the genocide experiences and memories of Roma. As demonstrated by my case study in Vidzy, an ethnographic method has the potential to recognise, read, and even fill archival silences. Therefore, it has a particular value in the case of ethnic minorities and indigenous populations whose memory narratives have been predominantly oral and who have not yet created their own archives.

Remarkably, it is the link between the memory of the Romani community of Vidzy and the memory of local inhabitants of other ethnic backgrounds that points out the omissions in the Soviet archival records (see *Case study in Vidzy*). As such, it brings the local context of the Commission’s work into focus: How could archival silence occur if the local population was aware of the murder of local Roma⁴⁸? These field observations led me to the question of the interaction between the Commission members and the local eyewitnesses and, in a broader sense, the locals and the Soviet state. By following Stoler’s proposition for the ethnography “of” and “in” archives, I have sought to reconstruct the sociopolitical context of the Commission’s work in the western borderlands of post-war Soviet Union, such as the Anti-Soviet Resistance and state repressive policies against peasants. Combined with my field observations and other scholarly

⁴⁵ Such an expression is used throughout the *Knigi Pamjati* (Books of memory) Series mentioned above (see, for instance, PASHKOU 2002).

⁴⁶ In 2015 I conducted a small-scale oral history survey on the post-war countryside in Central Belarus (Maladzechna region). Here, I draw on its outcome.

⁴⁷ It is worth mentioning here that the plight of Roma in the immediate post-war period was even more dramatic than that of the peasantry. Oral testimonies, family memories, and post-memories show that the Roma who had survived the Nazi persecution continued traveling and facing danger on the roads of the Soviet West until the 1950s. For instance, a caravan of my informant was attacked by unknown shooters on their way from one village to another. As a result of the shooting, most people died. Interview 0012, Oral history collection of the author.

⁴⁸ Also important, my field study in Vidzy suggests rethinking the dichotomy “Roma - non-Roma”, often used as an interpretative model in the studies of Romani culture. The interconnectedness of the narratives of local history in Vidzy shows that the history and memory of Roma community is embedded in the micro-history of the region and its cultural landscapes and, therefore, cannot be studied as a phenomena on its own.

works in the field of Soviet studies, an engaged reading of the ChGK records unveils potential tensions in the “eyewitnesses-State” relations.

The above approach allows looking beyond the Soviet ideology that, obviously, contextualised the work of the local ChGK sections, too. The documentation of Nazi crimes against Roma (if any) happened as part of the documentation of the damage from the German occupation to the Soviet people in general. Nevertheless, it seems that the lack of political and social weight of Roma, as well as their mobile lifestyle at the time, prevented Romani survivors from participation in the Soviet survey. The local Commissions, apparently, undertook little effort to document the crimes against Roma and almost entirely bypassed the relatives of the victims. Although some ChGK files contain information on Roma, including eyewitness accounts⁴⁹, the genocide of Roma as a phenomenon hardly rises from the Commission’s records. In most reports, Romani victims are unnamed and represented as groups of men, women, and children of unclear origins. Such a picture contradicts my field research, which shows that most victims had traveled in the areas where they were killed, before the war.

My case study in Vidzy not only uncovers an archival practice of the past, but also its impact on the future, namely implications of archival silences, in Carter’s terms (CARTER 2006). In my case study, the Roma community of Vidzy tries to confront the archival silence with their actual memory; but their memorialisation project is rejected due to a lack of archival evidence. After almost thirty years of Belarusian independence, Soviet legacy continues playing a crucial role in the local politics of memory. The burial sites that were left undocumented by the Extraordinary Commission were not marked in the Soviet period, and are not currently included in the catalogues of war mass graves; which means that they are not protected by the state. For small rural communities of Roma, whose resources and accesses are very limited, is not always possible to confront an established bureaucratic practice. Once placed at the margins of the Soviet memory narratives of the Second World War, the

memory of Roma continues to face discrimination; which is, to a great degree, the result of the archival silence of the Soviet period.

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⁴⁹ A part of the information, such as eyewitness testimonies, was, presumably, lost in the multi-level processing on their way to Moscow.

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SOMMARIO

Per un'etnografia del silenzio negli archivi: la memoria romani del genocidio nazista sfida la documentazione sovietica, di Volha Bartash

In questo articolo rifletto sulla ricerca storico-etnografica da me condotta sulle memorie e sulle esperienze dei Roma vittime del genocidio nella regione di confine tra la Bielorussia e la Lituania.

La prima parte dell'articolo tratta del ruolo degli etnografi nella scrittura della Storia e, in particolare, della storia dei Roma. Partendo dagli articoli di Palma Gay y Blasco (2001) e di Michael Stewart (2004), gli etnografi hanno prestato un'attenzione crescente alle pratiche del ricordare e del dimenticare in diverse comunità Romani, confrontandosi così sul discorso circa la loro "arretratezza" e il loro essere "astorici".

Il destino dei Roma europei durante la Seconda guerra mondiale è un argomento che richiede esplicitamente l'assunzione della prospettiva della vittima e questo implica un profondo coinvolgimento etnografico. Recentemente gli etnografi hanno combinato la metodologia della storia orale con la ricerca d'archivio, facendo così emergere le voci stesse dei Roma (TREVISAN 2013; KELSO 2016; VIKOVÁ 2016; BARTASH 2017). Grazie all'accesso alle reti familiari e alle comunità, questi etnografi sono stati in grado di raccogliere testimonianze di prima mano sulla dolorosa sorte

delle famiglie e sulle esperienze di sopravvivenza dei Roma durante l'occupazione tedesca.

Nella seconda parte dell'articolo, cerco di rispondere alla domanda «Come prende forma il silenzio degli archivi?» Innanzitutto introduco i concetti di silenzio archivistico e di etnografia «dell'archivio» e «nell'archivio» (STOLER 2002), evidenziando i risultati teorici degli studiosi che si occupano di archivio e degli antropologi post-coloniali. Di seguito prendo in considerazione il potenziale insito nello stesso metodo etnografico, che è in grado di rivelare e persino di riempire il silenzio degli archivi nel caso di minoranze etniche e popolazioni indigene, le cui memorie sono prevalentemente orali e che non hanno ancora creato propri archivi.

Al fine di illustrare il tema del silenzio degli archivi e di affrontare il problema delle lacune tra memorie d'archivio e memorie familiari e della comunità, attingo alla ricerca da me condotta a Vidzy, dove vive una piccola comunità di Roma. Secondo la memoria locale, durante l'occupazione tedesca venne perpetrata l'uccisione di massa di un gruppo Roma proprio nel bosco attiguo al villaggio; tuttavia, nel 1945, il caso non venne documentato dalla Commissione Straordinaria di Stato per l'Indagine sui Crimini commessi dai Tedeschi nei Territori dell'USSR (ChGK). La mia ricerca sul campo rivela l'interconnessione tra la memoria delle famiglie Roma e la memoria della popolazione locale non-Roma, evidenziando le omissioni nei documenti d'archivio sovietici. In questo modo viene messo a fuoco il contesto locale in cui si è svolto il lavoro della Commissione a partire dalla domanda su come si sia prodotto il silenzio degli archivi se, anche la popolazione del luogo, era a conoscenza dell'omicidio dei Roma locali.

Queste osservazioni sul campo mi hanno condotto alla questione dell'interazione tra i membri della Commissione e i testimoni oculari locali e, in un senso più ampio, tra la gente del posto e lo stato sovietico. Seguendo la proposta di Stoler per un'etnografia «dell'archivio» e «nell'archivio», ho cercato di ricostruire il contesto socio-politico in cui si è svolto il lavoro della Commissione nelle zone del confine occidentale dell'Unione Sovietica nel dopoguerra, come anche la resistenza antisovietica e le politiche repressive dello Stato contro i contadini. Partendo dalle mie osservazioni sul campo, unite ad altre ricerche storiche in ambito sovietico, è stata possibile una lettura critica e partecipata dei documenti del ChGK, che ha rivelato le potenziali tensioni nei rapporti tra testimoni oculari e Stato sovietico.

A livello teorico, questo articolo cerca di approfondire cosa sia e come si produca il silenzio degli ar-

chivi, e le sue potenziali implicazioni. Nello specifico, la comunità Roma di Vidzy cerca di affrontare il silenzio degli archivi tramite la propria memoria; tuttavia il progetto di recupero di questo luogo della memoria è stato rifiutato a causa della mancanza di riscontri archivistici. Dopo quasi trent'anni dall'indipendenza della Bielorussia, l'eredità sovietica continua a giocare un ruolo cruciale nella locale politica della memoria. I luoghi di sepoltura non documentati dalla Commissione Straordinaria non furono contrassegnati in epoca sovietica e, ancor oggi, non

sono inclusi negli elenchi delle fosse comuni del periodo bellico, il che significa che tali luoghi non sono protetti dallo Stato.

Per le piccole comunità rurali di Roma, le cui risorse e possibilità di manovra sono molto limitate, non è sempre facile contrapporsi a questa prassi burocratica consolidata. Una volta posta ai margini della memoria ufficiale sovietica sulla Seconda guerra mondiale, la memoria dei Roma continua a subire pratiche discriminatorie. E questo è, in gran parte, il risultato del silenzio degli archivi del periodo sovietico.

VOLHA BARTASH <volha.bartash@gmail.com> is historian and anthropologist whose work focuses on the history and ethnography of Roma and other ethnic groups in Eastern Europe. Since 2008 Volha has been engaged in a number of national research projects on the culture of ethnic minorities in Belarus. In her doctoral dissertation (2011, National Academy of Sciences of Belarus) she analysed the effects of the transition to sedentary lifestyle on Roma communities in Belarus. The study was based on nine ethnographic case studies in Roma communities. For the paper based on the outcome of her thesis, Volha received the Marian Madison Gypsy Lore Society Young Scholar's Prize in Romani Studies (2013). Since 2013 Volha has started to work on the oral history project on the Roma' experiences of the Nazi genocide in the Belarusian-Lithuanian border region. Her research received support from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, KONE foundation and the Swedish Institute. From 2013 to 2017 she held several international fellowships at the institutes for advanced studies including Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies and Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena. In 2016-2017 she conducted research and taught at the Uppsala University. As of July 2018 Volha is working as a researcher at the IOS Regensburg. Her current research project is titled ROMPAST. Two Paths of a Shared Past: Memory and Representation of the Nazi Genocide of Roma in Belarus and Lithuania. It is supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship).