

Rethinking Roma Holocaust: Victims or/and Victors

The idea for topic of this paper emerged in 2014 in Berlin. Then, the head of a local Roma organization, a Rom from Macedonia, invited us to give a public lecture for his organization. He asked us to speak about the participation of Roma in the anti-fascist movement during World War II, because, as he said “today everybody speaks about Roma Holocaust and Roma are always presented as passive victims and nobody pays attention to their fight against fascism”.

This invitation didn't come as surprise to us, similar voices we had heard many times and in different places from Roma in and from Eastern Europe. In the last few decades are running active processes of rethinking and reediting of the concept of the so-called Roma Holocaust from today point of view, and filling it with new content. New public functions that this concept performs (or should perform) are created and developed. It is not about personal rethinking of the past by the survivors, but about new type of deconstruction of historical memory of the community. This is connected from one side with ‘Europeanisation’ of Roma issue, which leads to aspiration to be in compliance with the so-called “‘European standard’ of the ‘universalization’ of the Holocaust” (Radonić 2015: 65), viewed “as ‘a negative European founding myth’” i.e. “understanding the Post-war Europe as a collective that developed shared structures in order to avoid a recurrence of the catastrophe of the Holocaust” (Radonić 2015: 65; Leggewie and Lang 2011: 15). Some authors speak even about inscribing Roma in the “globalization and Americanization of Holocaust discourse” (van Baar 2010: 118-120). It is connected also with the efforts to break the humiliated silence about Roma sufferings which should provide justice and redress for past violations and protection from future discrimination. The so-called Roma Holocaust receives through Roma activists and scholars also its new Roma name Porrajmos, Baro Porrajmos, Samudaripen, Kali Trash, Pharrajimos, Parunipe, Praxonipe, Berša Bibaxtale, or even Holokosto, Holokausto (Kenrick and Puxon 1972; 1992; Tscherenkov and Laederich 2004: 184; Hancock 2006: 53-57; Kruezi 2017)

From other side the deconstruction of historical memory of the community is connected with processes of development of Roma communities in new, ethno-national paradigm. As shown in studies of different authors (e.g. Mirga and Gheorghe 1997; Kapralski 1997: 269-283; 2012; Lesinska 2005: 161-176; Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826; van Baar 2011: 1-17), the Roma mobilization around Holocaust memory serves number of goals: some are directed towards own community, such as building a common identity, ethnic revival, nation-building process and ethnic

and political mobilization, other aims at - through awareness about Roma Holocaust to sensitize the majority about Roma fate and to fight antiziganism.

What is omitted in some way till now is to pay attention to some consequences that affect (or may affect) negatively the Roma communities themselves and lead to their disunity instead of desired building of common identity. Some of the issues, which we will mention bellow, reflect also negatively on Roma relations with their surrounding population and on the process of their social inclusion although here this is not our main topic. We will present here in very concise form the two main and interrelated circle of these problems.

The first range of problems is connected with discredit of the very topic of Roma Holocaust in the public sphere, among Roma and also among the majority society of which Roma are an integral part. It is already more than two decades since we started observing constantly popping up in public sphere accusations in corruption of various Roma activists associated with different programs for compensation to Roma victims of persecutions during World War II about which we wrote in details in our previous work (Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826). Here we will mention only the most recent examples. Perhaps the most absurd is the case of Bulgaria, where lists of “survivors of prisoners in ghetto” is currently made, in spite of known historical fact, that in Bulgaria there were not created ghettos for Roma during Second World War. Similarly in Romania, a renowned Roma activist is accused in public space of taking cash fee for preparing documents for such compensation for Roma survivors of deportation in Transnistria as survivors of prisoners in ghetto. Compensation applications for about 80,000 Roma are prepared until now, against the backdrop of the number of around 25,000 people all Roma deportees to Transnistria (Achim 1998; Kelso 1999; Radu 2000; Ionescu 2000) and the numbers are steadily increasing. Such accusations (even the unjustified ones) not only discredit and belittle Roma Holocaust in the eyes of their surrounding population, but also lead to internal conflicts within the Roma community, which blames Roma activists in ethno-business (i.e. instead of uniting the community such scandals disunites it).

The above described, and many others similar scandals, are going on with parallel efforts for creation of an image of Roma as ‘eternal victims’ in the world history, as a subject of endless persecutions by all of the countries and societies in which they lived and are living now. This image creates problems in many aspects, e.g. it prevents from adequate and accurate perception and assessment of the history and contemporary state of Roma, and is leading to disgrace and belittlement of Roma sufferings. Presentation of chain persecutions leads often to ‘blaming the victims’, to statement like this, which we are hearing repeatedly from some representatives of majorities and even from some Roma: “when all societies in all centuries persecuted them, so maybe it was a reason for that”. In efforts to display Roma as a persecuted people we came across not only

of specific interpretation of history and ‘game with numbers of victims’ about which we wrote earlier (Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826) and which leads to the clashes between historians and Roma activists (Gaunt 2016: 42), but also of some absurd cases of misinterpretation based on misunderstanding of rules of establishing folklore plots. Roma folklore and its transformations are not our topic in this text, we are mentioning this example to point out cases of authors and activists who are not familiar with development of folklore genres and accept such stories uncritically as historical facts and in this way and thus contribute to profanation of history. In the next paragraph we will point to only one most recent of numerous such examples.

Widespread knowledge about tragic fate and suffering of Roma give birth to historical neo-mythology as a specific genre of Roma folklore. One of the favorite plots in this genre in Bulgaria are narratives how Roma have been forced to dig trenches for their own future mass graves (it is needless to explain here that something like this never happened). Recently we come across a reaction to the announcement of publication of a new book about participation of Bulgarian Roma in Bulgarian armed forces in history of the country (Krastev and Ivanova 2016) The publisher’s blurb on the back cover of the book says: “During World War II the Gypsies people in Bulgaria and its newly-annexed territories were neither subject to genocide, nor to any legal or repressive measures. Some of the thousands of mobilized Bulgarian soldiers were Gypsies” (Lincom 2016). In fact, the book explains how under Bulgarian occupation of Macedonia local Roma received Bulgarian citizenship and were mobilized in Bulgarian Army. Immediately after publishing the announcement in an internet group one renowned Roma activist and author of scholar and journalist works repeated the information about digging trenches for mass graves and pointed it as further illustration of Roma suffering: “My ex-father-in-law's father, ..., cleaned shoes for Bulgarian officers in Skopje. One day an officer lost his temper and kicked ... shoe-cleaning box to pieces”. There can hardly be any doubt that such kind of “knowledge” discredits the whole issue and the public impact of it is completely opposite to expectations. To not leave the readers of this text with wrong perception about contemporary Roma folklore we need to say that there is also different type of narratives, also such which glorifies Roma and their importance in fighting fascism, e.g. stories about salvation of the partisan Tito by Roma, etc. But this part of narratives did not enter the contemporary Roma Holocaust discourse.

The second set of issues related to the topic of Roma Holocaust stems from its overall perception by the Roma community itself. Despite the seeming predominance of the “European standard” or “Globalized Holocaust Discourse”, actually the Roma among themselves are not in agreement whether this is the idea which should be their main ideological paradigm for community internal consolidation. On the one pole are international Roma activists, scholars and donors who

advocate and support view that in order to “advocate for change” it “is crucial to take the memory of the Holocaust as a starting point for our advocacy” (Mirga 2017). Similar to other places in the world, the current perspective includes ‘victim centrism’ and “affirmation of particular survivor experiences and the wider goal of reforming the dominant historical narrative of the state through public education” (Niezen 2016) and to create in this way “a unifying, all-encompassing shared memory” (Gaunt 2016: 41) “through publications, media products, exhibitions and conferences dealing with genocide” (Gaunt 2016: 39). “Affirmation of particular survivor experiences” is leading to exclusion of other “particular survivor experiences”. In some cases the exclusion is so illogical, that some wonders whether it is done intentionally or it is simply negligence. Best example for this is approach to the earliest document on the experience of Roma in Nazi occupied parts of Europe. This is an epic poem of famous Polish Roma poetess Bronisława Wajss (Papusza) entitled “Ratfałé jásfá. So pał Saséndyr pšegijám apré Vółyń 43 i 44 beršá” (The bloody tears. What Germans Did to Us in Volhynia in 1943 and 1944), which was published only once, in distant 1956, in Romani with Polish translation (Papusza 1956). It is incomprehensible why this poem, which has similar power as the famous Song of the Murdered Jewish People by Ischak Kacnelson, was not re-printed anymore and not translated in any other language, and thus remains almost unknown.

In current approach toward preserving and publicising the fate of Roma during the WWII we came across even more striking cases, such as exhortations not to “focus too much on the exciting and heroic tales of those who resisted” because it gives the idea that ‘people who didn’t resist were simply quiescent ... It doesn’t just take an exceptional person to resist; the conditions have to be there.’” (Romani scholar Ethel Brooks quoted in Nirenberg 2016: loc. 1967) In this approach not only “heroic tales” are excluded from multitude of Roma histories but also study and presenting of Roma who do not fit in the ‘Holocaust Discourse’ is not encouraged. This became may be most visible recently in the case with failed numerous attempts of a young Roma film-maker to raise funds from wealthy donor institutions (which are known as Pro-Roma and even headed by Roma) for co-financing a documentary about the fate of Bulgarian Roma during the WWII, who were not victims of Nazi regime.

On the other pole, on the ground, the role of “eternal victim” (Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826) or “victims in perpetuity” (Rosenhaft 2004: 181) is often perceived by many as a threat for social inclusion in the fabric of their majority societies. May by the first one among Roma activists and visionaries who warns openly about negative effects of the victimization narrative was the late Nicolae Gheorghe. In his last text, kind of political testament, he wrote: “The role of Roma opinion makers is to suggest new approaches, focusing on integration rather than on being victims” (2013: 57). It will not be exaggeration to say, that majority of “ordinary Roma” as well as number of

activists, working within the borders of individual countries in countries of Eastern Europe (or who originated from there) are in agreement with this and definitely prefer another “reading” of their history than as of ‘eternal victims’ and another public image. They do not want Gypsies to be presented only as passive victims of the Nazis, but also as active participants in the anti-fascist resistance (as partisans or soldiers in the armies of the anti-Hitler coalition), in which they take part as members of the societies, in which they live for centuries. Regarded in more general plan, for them the Roma history should not be presented as a history of centuries of persecutions from the surrounding population, but as “normal” history, as every other people have, with its light and dark pages, tops and falls (Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826) Correspondingly the attitude towards Roma should be really equal, as towards all other citizens of the countries in which they live, and not to be subject of constant “care”, which for them is a sign of their own inadequateness, which has to be compensated in various ways. Neglecting of these Roma points of view deprives them from the rights of self-expression. We cannot but agree with Huub van Baar that “inscription in a globalized holocaust discourse results in the loss of specificity of the Roma’s own histories. This not only includes losing sight of the specificity of various Romani groups, but also, ... losing the specificity of the history of the Eastern European Roma in particular” (van Baar 2010: 126)

The reasons for this different interpretations or let say ‘double reading’ of Roma history should be sought not only in the so-called “prescriptive forgetting” (Connerton 2008: 61-62), which is typical for part of historical memory of Roma in general, because “the memory of past misdeeds threatened to sow division in the society” (Connerton 2008: 61), but also in “Forgetting as annulment”, however not because of “surfeit of information” (Connerton 2008: 64-65) but (as we were repeatedly told by our Roma informants all over the Eastern Europe) because of efforts of protect the kids from harms of memory about past sufferings (cf. also Marushiakova and Popov 2006: 805-826). Moreover the explanation can be found also in the history of Roma living in Eastern Europe for centuries and on their current status. Roma exist, sort of saying, at least in two dimensions, they live at least in two coordinate systems, that are mutually not excluding, but rather complementing each other, as a separate ethnic community (or rather communities), and as a society (or in other words – as ethnically separated integral part of the corresponding nation-state) (Marushiakova and Popov 2011: 54). In dependence on which of the two dimensions is the leading one, the corresponding vision of the history and the perspectives of development, including the attitude towards the Roma Holocaust, is formed. In this case a leading position takes a sense of belonging to the nation of which Roma are an integral part (may be unequal, discriminated against, etc., but still integral part). Therefore, they do not want to be separated from it, even in the form of ‘victim’ and prefer to be seen as ‘victors’ who successfully fought in the composition of the

respective nations who defeated Nazi Germany, i.e. fought together with non-Roma and not separately from them.

And this is not without reasons. Roma really have participated in partisan movement in a number of occupied and allied countries (USSR, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Italy, France, etc.), in the regular armies fighting with Germany (mainly in the Soviet Union and towards the end of the war also in Bulgaria and Romania), and in the Slovak national uprising. This is well-known from numerous studies (e.g. Bessonov 2010; Sejdović 2011: 10-11; Genov et al 1968; Krastev and Ivanova 2016; Tesař and Serinek 2016) and even from widely known, loved and influential fiction literature (e.g. Mesechkov 1957; 1965; Moric 1976). These studies and artistic works are only very rarely mentioned in discourse of “Roma Holocaust” and some are not mentioned at all, for example the famous novel by the Soviet writer Anatoly Kalinin “Цыган” (The Gypsy) which had a grand success – was reprinted and supplemented many times (the first edition is from 1960), translated in many languages, adapted numerous times as theatre play and even as opera. There are also four screen adaptations of the novel (first one in 1967, second in 1979, the third one in 1985, the fourth one in 1993/1995), as the second and third screen adaptation are among the most successful and viewed movies in the former USSR. It should be said, that in this novel the both major paradigms in presenting the fate of the Roma during the Second World War are present - as victims (the whole Gypsy camp, including the family of the protagonist, was annihilated by the German army) and as victors (the protagonist is volunteer in the Soviet army and returned to his native place as an officer, a war hero, who won numerous orders and medals). In the present case one cannot speak about artistic fiction for propaganda purposes, because in the Soviet Army during the Second World War actually participated (as duly mobilized and as volunteers too) hundreds of Roma (and not only men but also women), many of whom were awarded military orders and medals. Among them one Rom Timofey Prokofyev is holder of the highest award “Hero of the Soviet Union” (Bessonov 2010).

Roma participated in the fight against fascism not as representatives of own ethnic community, who are resisting against the Roma Holocaust in Nazi Germany (on many places they hardly knew about it) but as an integral part of their respective nations (or their specific socio-political structures), that is why there were no detached Roma partisan or army units; they were part of one whole.

The formation of this type of attitude to Roma Holocaust should not be explained as a direct result of communist propaganda. It is result of the level of social integration achieved not only during the communist period of time but in some regions of Eastern Europe even earlier. It is therefore obvious that today in Roma social consciousness there is much more than elsewhere pronounced the feeling of belonging to the respective nations, and in some cases (as with the attitude

towards the Roma Holocaust) it occupy leading positions. Evidently relevant is also the heritage of the attitude of former communist regimes to the topic of the Holocaust in general and in particular to the Roma Holocaust. It was no denial of Roma suffering during the communist time, as it is claimed sometimes today. More accurate would be to say that it has been left behind in the name of imposing the leading conceptual paradigm of “victor nation, winners over the fascism” [народ, победитель фашизма] and of Roma as part of respective nations, victors over the fascism. We lack the space here to give examples in this regard, but it is enough to look at the widely distributed at that time movies and books which clearly illustrate this approach.

It needs to be said there, that between the two visions of the Roma Holocaust (victims or victors) among the Roma community itself it is no insurmountable border, and in recent years one can find examples of the attempts to combine both visions done by both sides. Thus, already for several years a major priority in activities of the Federal national-cultural autonomy of Gypsies in Russia is not only to honor heroism and memory of Roma who had died as combatants in the Red Army during the WWII and Roma partisans, but also of Roma victims of the Nazi on the occupied territories. Moreover, a few years ago has been received a promise from High Government structures to build a special museum dedicated to the Roma Holocaust in Moscow. It doesn't happen yet, but that does not mean that it will not happen in the near or distant future.

In similar way, over the past few years along honoring memory of the victims of Roma Holocaust in many European countries was introduced Roma Resistance Day on May 16, which was declared a ‘Day of Roma uprising in Auschwitz’. The placement of the Auschwitz uprising in the Romani national mega-narrative is a legitimate one, but it is not an issue here to discuss the significance and role of national mega-narratives in general and in Roma case in particular. Resistance narrative can be powerful tool for uniting diverse and dispersed communities, however the numerous Roma resistance celebrations and actions sponsored recently by donors and conducted by Roma NGO's all-over the Europe in form of street performances, flash-mobs, etc. are something else. They are not only often misunderstood by ordinary Roma, but are made again in discourse of Roma Holocaust; even honoring the Roma resistance against fascism is presented in a way that detach it from its wider social dimensions. Extending the concept of Roma resistance to other spheres of Roma life and culture (e.g. concept of contemporary Roma Art as an act of Roma resistance) again and again put Roma in position of “eternal victim” which endlessly tries to resist against past and current wrongdoings.

And finally, let us get back again to the main issue of our text – which is (or should be) the perception and presentation of Roma – as victor and/or victims in contemporary Post-Holocaust

situation. It is clear that this issue cannot be formulated through the “or”, and it is needed always to consider both visions about the place of Roma in the context of World War II. The best illustration of the two sides of this relationship, that are not opposing but complementing each other, we have witnessed at the Exhibition “Gypsy Tragedy”, opened in Moscow in 2015. These are Posters of renowned artist and researcher Nikolai Bessonov representing both visions side by side, and the signs over the two parts respectively are “Gypsies Victims of the Genocide” and “Gypsies in the Battle for the Motherland” (see picture 1 and picture 2).

On this backdrop the main issue acquires new dimensions – about the balance between the presentation of the two main visions of the Roma Holocaust, which of them should be the leading one, around which will be built Roma unity and which will be the best base for development of the Roma community in the future. The question can be formulated like this – is it really a needed to have one leading side, or both sides of this seeming opposition must exist in a harmonious unity. For us it is palpable that the answer is expected to come from the Roma elite if it really intends to accomplish its role. In the terms of the famous scheme of Miroslav Hroch (2009) phases which national movements follow when they are constructed, nowadays we can say that Roma elites and their supporters succeeded to reach the first and second (A and B) phase of nation building and in development of Roma national ideas. The third phase (C) during which a mass movement is formed, however, is still in blurb horizon. How successful will be this phase depends on many factors, one of which (and not in last degree of importance) is what vision will present the Roma elite to their community about the fate of the Roma during World War II, and especially how this vision will respond to imaginations and expectations of the community.

P.S.

Soon after finalizing writing this article appeared further evidence of ambiguous interpretation of the fate of the Roma during the Second World War. It is in the Call of application for research fellows in the project *Roma and Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath* (TLI 2017). The purposes of the project are ambitiously presented as follows: “this project gives space to a new perspective enabling a shift from the image of the victim lacking agency to an active actor that shapes history” (The Roma 2017). Reading further however we see formulation of the five research topics eligible to receive funding: 1. Resistance and Survival of the Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz-Birkenau; 2. Einsatzgruppen actions in Eastern Europe or deportation in Transnistria; 3. Resistance and Survival of the Roma and Sinti in Internment Camps (France, Germany, Italy); 4. Resistance and Survival of the Roma in Concentration Camps; 5. Testimonies of Resistance in Romani Cultural Memory; 6. Roma Resistance against Forgetting and Indifference: Practices and Strategies of

Collective Memory (Ibid.). As it is palpable that the listed research topics largely nullify the original intentions. Exclusion from the funding priorities such forms of resistance of Roma as their participation in partisan movement in a number of occupied and allied countries (USSR, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Italy, France, etc.), in the regular armies fighting with Germany (mainly in the Soviet Union and towards the end of the war also in Bulgaria and Romania), and in the Slovak national uprising, in fact leave the project in a familiar discourse of victimization and stigmatization of Roma and reconfirms their exclusion from general social context in the fight against Nazism. And as seen from historical and contemporary experiences, such an approach of Roma stigmatization in the last end is a serious obstacle to their social integration and inclusion (Marushiakova and Popov 2015: 19-31). Thereby the fundamental task facing today's Roma elite acquires new dimensions that depend on the elite's ability to find the necessary strength to escape from the discourses imposed by donors and to introduce their own Roma vision how should be presented the fate of the Roma during the Second World War.

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