Methodology

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for collecting oral testimonies on the Roma Genocide in Ukraine







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THE ROMA GENOCIDE IN UKRAINE: MEMORY PRACTICES

THE ROMA GENOCIDE DURING WORLD WAR II

The genocide of the Romani people in Europe during World War II is a human tragedy that is getting more and more attention worldwide. In the period between 1933 and 1945, about 500,000 individuals were executed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Based on a long-perpetuated prejudice, Roma and Sinti people in Europe were considered by the Nazis as 'asocials' (outside of 'normal' society) and 'racial inferiors'. These definitions point to the intent for the extermination of Romani people. In international law, intent in mass killings is a key element for considering the crime as genocide (Kotlyarchuk 2022).

The most massive event of extermination happened between July 31 and August 2, 1944, during the liquidation of the Zigeunerlager ("Gypsy camp") at Auschwitz-Birkenau. About 3,000 Roma people were executed in a single act.¹

THE ROMA GENOCIDE IN UKRAINE

According to ongoing historical research, about 20,000 to 72,000 Romani people were killed in the territory of modern Ukraine. Unfortunately, the records of the prosecution of Romani in Ukraine are few due to the long history of silencing these facts by the Soviet government. For decades after the war, the civil victims of the Nazis were portrayed as 'peaceful Soviet citizens.' The ethnicity of those people was intentionally ignored to comply with the overall political narrative of the victory gained by the 'whole Soviet nation.' (Koltyarchuk 2022)

One of the most massive killings in Ukraine has happened in Babyn Yar, a big ravine in the North of Kyiv. In 1941, from 29 to 30 September, the Nazis and collaborators shot about 33,771 Jewish people in the ravine. During the following months, they murdered other groups of people: Red Army soldiers, civilians, and the Romani population. The estimated number of victims in those months is 100,000 individuals.²

COMMEMORATION AND REMEMBRANCE

Unfortunately, the history of Babyn Yar in the Soviet period was neglected for decades. It was only in 2005 that the date—September 29th—was designated as a commemoration day for the Roma victims in Ukraine. In 2012, on August 2, the International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, the first public ceremony was held at Babyn Yar. As for the national Roma genocide memorial, it was established only in 2016 after a long period of work by Romani activists (Kotlyarchuk 2022).

However, the collective memory of this tragedy was kept through generations of Romani people. There are about twenty other Roma genocide memorials today in Ukraine. Around 50,000 Ukrainian Roma today comprise the third and second generations of genocide survivors (Kotlyarchuk 2022).

¹"What Is the Roma Genocide?" Open Society Foundations, accessed October 2, 2024 at https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/ explainers/what-roma-genocide

²Kotljarchuk, Andrej. "Babi Yar and the Nazi Genocide of Roma: Memory narratives and memory practices in Ukraine." Nationalities Papers 50, no. 3 (2022): 450-470.

³ "Roma Genocide", Council of Europe, accessed October 2, 2024 at https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-genocide/ukraine#Recognition

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY AND HOW TO COLLECT ORAL TESTIMONIES OF THE ROMA GENOCIDE SURVIVORS

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO COLLECT ORAL HISTORIES IN ROMA COMMUNITIES?

Due to the long period of official silencing of the Romani people's genocide during WWII in Ukraine, the history of this period is not well documented. Until now, researchers have continued to struggle with identifying names and locations. However, this history is kept within the communities and families of the survivors. Many projects that use the methodology of collecting oral testimonials and memories keep on working with Roma genocide survivors.

In our methodological guideline, we introduce the concept of oral histories and explain how anyone can contribute to collecting the stories of the survivors. We define oral history and why it is important, and then we introduce the interview method of collecting testimonials and memories. We explain how to approach the topic of the Roma genocide, how to work with the community, how to arrange and take interviews, what to keep in mind, and how to use the collected material.

WHAT IS AN ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is the complex process of recording, preserving, and interpreting the personal experiences and opinions of people who witnessed historical events or periods. It can also take the form of family or community lore–stories told from generation to generation about a particular time.⁴

The historian Donald Ritchie, in Doing Oral History (2003), gives a technical definition: "Oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives. These interviews may be used for research or excerpted in a publication, radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization, or other form of public presentation. Recordings, transcripts, catalogs, photographs, and related documentary materials can also be posted on the Internet." (Ritchie, 2003).⁵

Oral history can be especially useful for working with smaller communities and minority groups whose narratives are not represented in a bigger historical picture. This applies to collecting testimonies of Roma genocide survivors. Moreover, collecting those stories today is urgent because of the interviewees' old age.

HOW DO PEOPLE REMEMBER?

It is crucial to understand how people remember. Memories are usually a mix of events, reflections, and someone's opinions. Oral histories do not particularly operate with 'factual' information. From the interviews, we need to learn what people did, what they think they were doing, and how they interpret that. In collecting oral stories, the interviewer should consider the values and meanings the interviewees attach to the past events. Oral history focuses on how people make sense of their lives, which is also historical evidence ⁶

While collecting memories, it is essential to focus on direct personal experience-eyewitness testimo-

^{4&}quot;What is Oral History?", University of Leicester, accessed October 2, 2024 at https://le.ac.uk/history/outreach/besh/oral-history/what-is

⁵ Ritchie, Donald A. 2003. Doing Oral History : A Practical Guide. 2d ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ "Getting Started", Oral History Society, accessed October 2, 2024 at https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-beginners/

ny–rather than some recollection of opinions and someone else's memories. Interviewees' memories can also be influenced by the media (films, TV) or others' opinions. The interviewer should keep that in mind and see the connection between the individual experience and the overall historical period. The closer you get to the personal experience, the better.

We usually remember:

- Unique, exceptional events rather than repetitive routine
- Events that made a strong emotional impact on us-fear, shock, surprise, pleasure-rather than those that we did not react to at all
- Our feelings, reactions, and emotions rather than details, numbers, and dates
- Key dates and events around those dates (birthdays, dates of someone's passing away, life events, such as weddings, graduations, etc)

Our memories are also triggered by physical objects or sensory reactions (smells, taste, images). That is why interviewers can use photographs, documents, and objects to help the interviewees remember. Visiting some memorable places would also help to collect memories.

THE SPECIFICS OF COLLECTING ORAL HISTORIES IN THE ROMANI COMMUNITIES

During our "Memories for future: recording Roma Genocide survivors' testimonies, we collected eight interviews of Roma genocide survivors. The realization of this project had different specific aspects, and we are sharing some of them.

First of all, it is important to understand that the history of the Roma people in Ukraine is not well described and preserved. We can say that today is the moment when we write this history. Therefore, all information shared during these interactions is valuable and needs to be considered and paid attention to.

Because Roma communities were marginalized for centuries, they are quite closed today, and it is difficult to get access to the interviewees. We recommend reaching out to activist organizations and community leaders to organize this access. This collaboration will help you gain some level of trust if you follow a community member's recommendation.

Once you have access to the interviewee, please be considerate of the community's cultural specifics. You might hear different references to different people, and it would be useful if you learned about those connections in advance or came with the community representative. You might also conduct an interview in the presence of the community or family members. It can be helpful, but bear in mind that more intimate spaces provide deeper connections.

Most survivors recollect their childhood memories or memories of their parents that were transmitted to them. This leads to the fact that their memories are fragmented. In their recollections, usually, there is no actual 'one big story'; there are only two to three stories that are not connected to each other. Those stories are also very intimate, family stories that most probably would not be incorporated into a bigger historical narrative by the interviewees.

The absence of family archives (photographs, documents, jewelry, and other objects) can also be an issue encountered in interviews. The history of flight and survival during famines explains this lack of documented information and makes the collection of oral history even more relevant.

PREPARATIONS BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Before the interview, an interviewer needs to research the topic. Try to be specific; for example, if you are interviewing people in one particular territory or who you know came from a different place, learn the history and specifics of those places. This research should not be profound and thorough; it should help you understand the context. You can find the example of a preliminary desk research in the additional documents.

As we mentioned above, it is helpful to reach the Roma community. Such facilitated access and a preliminary meeting with the interviewee can help create trust. The best interview projects usually imply several visits to the interlocutors. If there is a chance to return, use it.

It is also recommended that an interview guide be included, which is not the same document as a questionnaire. The interview guide usually categorizes questions into thematic groups. For genocide survivors, the interview guide can consist of general biographical questions with a series of more specific questions on the times of World War II, childhood memories, and family stories. You can find an example of an interview guide in additional documents.

EQUIPMENT

The quality of the recorded material is crucial for the successful preservation of oral histories. Various technological means exist for recording audio and video. If you have a budget to acquire good-quality equipment, that will only help the project. If not, a recording on a smartphone can suffice, too, but don't forget to test everything in advance.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD I ASK?

We recommend talking about the interviewee's biography in general and then focusing on the period of World War II. Family histories and genealogies are rich material for understanding the context of Romani culture, migration, lifestyles, and how political and economic life affected the community. The family's oral history is an integral part of preserving Romani identity and will give many insights to better contextualization.

Start with earlier life: background, family history, grandparents, parents, their lifestyles, family home, relatives on both paternal and maternal sides, siblings, and relationships between them. Talk about the routine, chores, and duties the interlocutors had to carry in their childhood (housework, mealtime, child care), leisure (games, friends, books, celebrations), school, or any other social life. Continue with relationships, early jobs, typical working routines, marriages, divorces, and children.

It is better to start with open questions that require more detailed answers. Use questions to encourage the interlocutor to describe things, contexts, and emotions.

"Can you tell us about your childhood?", "Where were you born?", "How did it feel to live there?", "What kind of house did your parents have?".

The general rule is not to presume the interlocutor's life ("I suppose your childhood was poor and you were struggling?") but to let them describe their lives in their own words.

ETHICS OF THE INTERVIEW

Researchers should pay great attention to ethical questions during their interviews. Because the interviewees are talking about sensitive parts of their lives that have a significant meaning to the community and society, it is important to create a consent form for them. The form must include a description of the project, its aims and purposes, and the potential usage of the information collected through the conversation. In Holocaust survivor interviews, interlocutors must understand that they will talk about traumatic events and that they are emotionally ready for that.

Another specific characteristic of such projects is collecting the names of the survivors, making the story of injustices visible through testimonies. Therefore, the interviewee should clearly understand that their names will be mentioned and consent to that. The interview can only happen if the interlocutor provides informed consent.

The consent form is usually a document explaining the project and its specificities. The interviewee signs this document before the interview. In the case of genocide survivors, who are typically elderly people, this form should be read and explained orally. This can be done before the day of the interview and repeated shortly before the actual interview. You can find an example of the consent form in additional documents.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Interviewing is a specific genre of collecting information based on conversation and personal interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. This implies some levels of trust and openness on both sides. The recording devices (microphone, camera, recorder) and additional equipment can disturb the interlocutor. The interviewees should be informed before the interview so they are prepared.

Body language plays a significant role during the interview. It is important to keep eye contact and engage in active listening. Nodding and posing clarifying questions is a sign of active listening. Most of the time, the interviewer stays silent and listens to the interviewee. It is crucial to refrain from interrupting and let the interlocutor talk through everything they want to discuss, and only after that pose more specific questions. Keep in mind that in genocide survivors' interviews, the people are usually old and tend to talk a lot. Let them do that, but with more specific questions, try to help them focus on your research topic.

In the case of active listening, the interview guide might distract you both. Try to learn it thoroughly before and remember the sequences and questions. You can always come back to it during the interview, but it is more valuable to be engaged in the conversation.

Notetaking is also important during the interview. If the interviewee mentions some potentially interesting detail (time, geographical names, names of people), discreetly note it and return to it later.

TALKING ABOUT TRAUMA

In the interviews with Holocaust survivors, traumatic events are one of the main focuses. It might seem difficult to approach it, but the interlocutors give their informed consent before the interview, which means they are ready for this conversation.

Let the interlocutor talk through the traumatic events. The interviewers should show their engagement in the story. If the interviewee starts crying, let them cry and show compassion and empathy. If they ask to stop recording, the researcher should do that immediately. Once the emotional episode is over, you can continue recording after getting permission. Emotions are difficult but reasonable, and the interviewee should see that any emotions are acceptable in your intimate space of remembering.

Sometimes, after the interview, the interlocutors continue talking off the record. This can be very sensitive information for them, so do not insist on recording it.

The general recommendation for talking about trauma or any other sensitive issues with the interlocutor is understanding and compassion. Do not insist on recording if the person does not want to talk about particular things or people or would talk only off the record. Pushing the interviewee can cause you to lose trust.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ABOUT PROSECUTIONS

To understand the violence and trauma, the researcher needs to pay attention to particular details. It is obvious that interlocutors do not want to talk about violence directly. There can be less direct questions about the prosecutions. For example, having familial souvenirs (jewelry, presents, etc.) is important in Romani culture. The absence or loss of those objects can reveal the financial hardships during and after the war.

It is also necessary to clarify some moments in the stories. For example, the interviewees can generally mention that "they came and arrested us," but to better understand the context, the researcher can clarify who 'they' were: the German officers, the police, or the collaborators.

ARCHIVING AND PRESERVATION TOOLS

Once you have recorded your interview, it is recommended that you save it in two different locations: on your computer and in cloud services (the easiest way is to send an email to yourself with the attached audio record of the interview or use any type of cloud storage you prefer, for example, Google Drive).

You can transcribe the interview. If you have several interviews, after reading the transcriptions in more detail, you can see the pattern in the interlocutors' stories. This information can help identify trends and reconstruct the contexts.

The best way to preserve this information is to share the interview with Roma history preservation organizations and/or museum archives. We enlisted some of them at the end of this document. Please remember to mention the interview date, time, and place, as well as the interviewer's and interviewee's names, in your recording file. You can find the example of the transcription of one of the interviews in additional documents.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Recorded audio and video interviews and their transcripts can be used differently to benefit communities and science. For example, the audio and video files can be used in documentaries, podcasts, and educational and informational materials. The stories collected can be reworked as literary novels, comic books, and visual art projects. Academics and historians can use this information in their professional publications, lectures, and courses. Museums and archives also look for contributors and later use these materials in their projects. All this cultural work helps prevent stereotypical discriminatory perceptions of Roma identity and culture and facilitates a better understanding of its rich history.

READINGS AND ONLINE RESOURCES

ARTICLES AND BOOKS

Kotljarchuk Andrej. "Babi Yar and the Nazi Genocide of Roma: Memory narratives and memory practices in Ukraine." Nationalities Papers 50, no. 3 (2022): 450-470.

Kotljarchuk Andrej. Нацистский геноцид цыган на территории оккупированной Украины: роль советского прошлого в современной политике памяти = The Nazi genocide of Roma on the territory of occupied Ukraine: the role of Soviet path dependency in contemporary politics of memory. Holokost i Suchasnist'. Studii v Ukraini ta v Sviti, 12: 24-50 https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/ diva2:749130/FULLTEXTO3

Ritchie, Donald A. Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide. 2d ed. Oxford University Press, 2003.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Council of Europe. "Roma Genocide. Ukraine." Accessed September 3, 2024 https://www.coe.int/en/ web/roma-genocide/ukraine#Recognition

Open Society Foundation. "What Is the Roma Genocide?." Accessed September 3, 2024. https://www. opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/what-roma-genocide

Oral History Society. "Getting Started." Accessed September 3, 2024 https://www.ohs.org.uk/for-be-ginners/

University of Leicester. "What is oral history?" Accessed September 3, 2023 https://le.ac.uk/history/ outreach/besh/oral-history/what-is

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:

EXAMPLE OF THE CONSENT FORM

Молодіжній агенції з адвокації ромської культури «АРКА»

(прізвище, ім'я, по батькові особи') який/-а прож.:

ЗАЯВА

Я,

□ будучи зображений/-а особисто

□ будучи особою, уповноваженою на охорону і надання згоди на використання особистих паперів, фонограм чи зображення фізичної особи згідно з ч 4 ст. 303, ч. 1 ст. 308 Цивільного кодексу України¹

цією заявою, надаю згоду Громадській організації «Після тиші» на використання особистих паперів, фонограми та/або зображення, зафіксованих на будь-який записуючий пристрій (фото-, кіно-, теле- чи відеоплівку тощо) на фотографіях, звукозаписах, відеограмах та інших в інших художніх творах

(прізвище, ім'я, по батькові особи, яка зображена) шляхом публічного показу, відтворення, розповсюдження, а також іншими не забороненими законом способами, якщо таке випливає зі здійснення статутної діяльності Молодіжної агенції з адвокації ромської культури «АРКА».

Підписанням цієї заяви відповідно до Закону України «Про захист персональних даних» від 01.06.2010 р. також надаю згоду Молодіжній агенції з адвокації ромської культури «АРКА» на обробку моїх персональних даних в межах використання дозволу, що випливає з охорони особистих немайнових прав.

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¹ Особа, життя якої стосуються особисті папери, зображена на фотографіях чи інших художніх творах, а в разі її смерті - її діти, вдова (вдівець), а якщо їх немає, - батьки, брати та сестри.

EXAMPLE OF THE TRANSCRIPTION

V - Ms. Vira, I - interviewer(s), voiceover - probably Ms. Vira's daughter

I: Let's start recording.

I: Okay, I'm going to say two words first, and then I'm going to ask you questions, and you're going to answer me.

00:10 B: Okay.

I: First, I will say that the interview is being recorded within the project of the youth agency for advocacy of Roma culture "Arka", the recording is carried out in the city of Lviv, the day and time of the recording: March 25, 2023, interviewers: Andrii Usach, Anna Yatsenko, informant: Biryuchenko Vira Volodymyrivna, born in 1933. We are going to record, do you give us permission to do so-that we are recording you now?

I: Do you authorize us to record you?

00:37 B: Yes, I have permission to be recorded, but let them write!

I: Okay. Then I'd like you to tell me your full name, first name and patronymic.

00:47 B: Okay, I'll write down the documents.

I: No, say it, just say it! Tell me your full name.

00:53 B: My name is Vera. Vera Vladimirovna.

I: And your surname?

00:57 B: Biryuchenko. Biryuchenko Vera Vladimirovna. Thirty-three years old.

I: And what was the date?

01:05 B: Uh... On March fourteenth. I was ninety years old, on March fourteenth, and there, as I said, there are documents.

I: Tell me, where were you born?

01:14 B: In Kharkiv. I was born in Kharkiv, baptized in Kharkiv, all my life in Kharkiv.

I: And you lived all your life in this city, until you moved here?

01:27 B: Where, I never went anywhere. That was it, I was running away, in a red robe, running away, because they were flying overhead.

I: And tell us a little bit about your parents, what was your father's name?

01:42 B: Vladimir.

I: And his surname?

01:45 B: Uh... Well, this one, Zlotanova, I am, I am a Zlotanova girl. I'm already on... on my master's side, and my di... my maiden... maiden name is Zlotanova Vera N... Vlodymyrivna.

I: And do you know what your father's patronymic was?

02:02 B: Markidan.



KYIV — 2024