

## **A community without history?**

### **A life story approach to Romany memory and ethnicity**

#### Abstract

This paper approaches Romany memory culture through life stories and is based on results and conceptualisations from the study of biographic narratives and life experiences obtained within various ethnic and cultural settings in Latvia. It explores how the experience of living under different political regimes is conveyed in communicative memory through collected life stories of Roma people. Many studies point out the apparent neglect of history in Roma communities. Roma people do not seek to emphasize their distinct identity, and their history is not fixed in stable artefacts such as monuments and national narratives. Analysis of Romany life stories allows to perceive a relationship between the status of a given group in society, gypsies' historical experience and their neglect of the past.

Key words: Latvian Roma; biographic narratives; collective memory; ethnic identity.

## **Introduction**

Throughout the western history “the time of the Gypsies” was an imagination similar to Orientalism, „idealization, objectification; sympathetic picture, denigrating caption; exemplary autonomy, feared alterity: what constitutes the mythology of Gypsy life is the tension between two simultaneous, mutually contradictory yet continually coexisting moments – memory and amnesia” (Trumpener 1992: 857). To dispel mythologies concerning “memory and amnesia” it is best to address individuals and their narratives. If we want to know the unique perspective of an individual, suggests Robert Atkinson, there is no better way to see this than in their voice and their life story (Atkinson 2007:231). This article seeks to establish relationship between historic experience and ethnic commitment of Latvian Roma by listening their memories they have shared in life story interviews.

The history is limited neither to the facts nor to chronicles, and memory may contain traces as well as evasion of matters of the past. Memory studies follow the founding father Maurice Halbwachs' dictum that different groups generate different accounts of the past (Halbwachs 1980). How differently is the past seen from the perspective of the Roma people? In what way do they do remembering and how do they present their biographies? These are among the first questions that come in front exploring the life stories and oral histories of this group, which in many societies is perceived as strangers. Researchers on autobiographic memory have already identified diversities in the remembering, and particularly many distinct characteristics of memory processes among people with different cultural or ethnic background (Ross and Wang 2010). The life story, however, is not as much about autobiographic or episodic memory (how information is preserved in the mind or retrieved and how it relates to cognitive capabilities) as for culture that 'speaks itself through an individual's story' (Riessman 1993:5).

Roma people are rarely placed at the centre of studies in oral history, and their life stories are unknown for wider publics. To present an insight into their life experiences, and, particularly, to contribute for better understanding of the historic experience and the construction of ethnicity within Roma community, in this article, I use the approach and data gathered in the research project of the University of Latvia "Ethnic and Narrative Diversity in the Construction of Life Stories in Latvia" (2013-2016). In this project the Roma communities were in particular focus to bring awareness of their presence among larger ethnic groups residing in Latvia – Latvians and Russians. These three groups have different social, historical and cultural experiences, thereby allowing them to be contrasted and compared.

Biographic accounts in life stories provide an in-depth understanding of the intersections between the personal and the social. The approach to listen people's stories was inspired by writings of Bertaux and Kohli (1984) who suggest: "Because the life story refers implicitly to the totality of a person's experience, because there are many ways to elicit a life story and more than a single way to talk about one's past, life stories (as oral, autobiographical narratives generated through interaction) potentially lend themselves to a multiplicity of uses" (Bertaux and Kohli 1984:217). The life story approach with narrative analysis (Riessman 1993) used in this project allows to analyse personal stories along the historical and cultural backgrounds which play particular role in the construction of stories people keep in mind and elaborate during remembrance. The core questions in the study revealed the relationship between life and its rendition in a narrative, and how it is formed by means of memory, consciousness, language, experience, and influenced by other stories and identities.

For purpose of this article to show the value of life stories in uncovering questions concerning memory and identity I use 40 interviews with Roma people from different parts of Latvia gathered during the project. Life story interviews with Roma people have been carried out between January 2014 and November 2016.

Biographic recollections in the interviews with Roma people reveal their particular way of life, the relation to broader society and their capacities to resist societal power which manifests itself primarily in forms of discrimination or assimilation. Analysis of their narratives unveils how past experiences come in conjunction with identity construction. Thus the life story material documents human experiences in various epochs as well as discover some sociological issues on the formation and expression of ethnic commitments. The understanding of the memory culture, why it is manifested and the way it is maintained, comes hand in hand with issues of identity, because the desire to produce and to protect historic narratives is linked to the need to enhance group self-consciousness and its recognition (Gillis 1994, Megill 1999). Roma people who face constant discrimination do not seek to highlight their particular identity, and their histories do not rest on stable artefacts like monuments and national narratives. Taking it in account, the paper above all raises theoretical questions concerning Romany “temporalities” – peculiarities of collective memory, lack of historic narratives, and their distinctive attitude towards the past. The general intention in this study is to grasp what do Roma biographical narratives reveal - what are the differences or similarities in comparison with other ethnic groups in Latvia? How different is experience of history and self-perception in society? A life story approach rooted in the personal experience narratives makes it possible to have an insight into peculiarities of Romany memories, as well as to pose a question: at what extent do their narratives represent a different memory culture? It is already acknowledged that Gipsies have its own way to manage the past even if their societies lack written records and institutionalized commemoration practices (Gay y Blasco 2001, Stewart 1997). I propose to interpret Romany attitude towards history along with the narratives on ethnicity revealed in interview questions regarding self-reference.

The paper begins with an introduction of “us and them”, namely, a theoretical and institutional background of the research, and some basic facts about the Romany minority in Latvia is presented. Then I present findings from the fieldwork and look for possibilities to interpret issues of memory and identity that arise when analysing the biographic accounts gathered in the interviews with a number of Roma people. What follows has been divided into several sections accordingly. The first section of the paper introduces the question of memory

and highlights the few studies where specific Romany memory culture is touched. Next section briefly deals with the context of the study – the Roma in Latvia and the need for nuanced approach to the Roma experience of living in Latvia. The Roma minority in Latvia is not large, but in certain areas it is noticeable. Only some studies of Romany history, culture, lifestyle and contact with the surrounding society have been conducted. The third section focuses on the most significant aspects revealed in life story interviews, specifically, how the Roma reflect on their own lives and community and the society in which they live as well as the era they have experienced under different political regimes in Latvia. This experience shapes "social frameworks of memory" (Halbwachs 1980), which then determine evaluation of both the past and the current situation. In the final section I wish to show that interviews with the Roma along the insights into their history and lifestyle also contains references on how they see themselves and feel in society as minorities who "keep themselves distinct while appearing to assimilate" (Silverman 1988:273). It opens a discussion about the issue of how a narrative and the information included therein should be perceived. What aspects of human interaction and culture are revealed by the narrative itself? This particularly concerns the construction of ethnic distinctions, and I show in what ways the notion of ethnicity may appear in life story narratives.

In the concluding part a proposition that Roma's collective memory depends on the specific status of the group and the sense of ethnicity is discussed. That is, I put forward an understanding that the sense of different ethnicity and related feeling on endangerment defines the attitude towards the past and generally to the history.

## **Collective memory and history in Romany culture**

Studies on the "social management" of the past address different theoretical issues regarding collective memory and the production of historical narratives in a given community. Memory issues have been analysed within sociology and cultural anthropology studies not merely as a personal cognitive or emotive process, but seen as a collective social practice by which human groups attempt to deal with the past in the present (Assmann 2008; ErlI 2011; Passerini 2003). It must be emphasised that memory is not something static that people "possess". Instead, memory is constructed according to cultural codes and prevailing discourses (Wertsch 2002), and it is actualised in the form of narrative in specific interactive situations, such as interviews. Concerning biographical interviews where the making of a story out of a life

is taking a place, the individual does a more or less conscious selection of memorised events; s/he puts them into the plot, thus performing “emplotment” (White 1978; Ricoeur 1988) to create sense in the life-course narrative. For respondents (i.e. life story tellers), some things are easier to express and can be expressed more quickly, with plenty of details; for a large part of experiences, however, respondents may lack words. Sometimes recollections are clearer, whereas at other moments they may be blurred. Cultural and political settings have to be considered here (Connerton 1989; Hodgkin et al. 2003; Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Middleton et al. 1990). In examining human memory it is crucial to recognise “the importance of social frameworks and contexts in the process of remembering” (Misztal 2003:1).

In notable studies on social solidarity Maurice Halbwachs introduced the notion of collective memory to designate group-specific views of the past which function to facilitate the integration of that group (Halbwachs 1980). As early as in the 1920’s he wrote about the social frameworks of memory. Memories upon which oral histories are built depend on social frames of remembrance defined by the respective groups (such as families, generations or nations). Halbwachs argued that remembering is shaped by involvement in collective life, that memory survives and recollections are backed up only in the group context. Thus, there must be a collective memory towards which individuals are oriented. Collective memory, although being rather elusive term, can be defined as a representation of the past shared by members of a group, “which is collectively commemorated, that enacts and gives substance to the group’s identity” (Misztal 2003:7).

In order to reduce social exclusion, Roma people are increasingly involved in social and political life, and research is being developed around the world, including the culture of different gypsy communities and the role of collective memory within it. In the case of Romany culture it must be acknowledged that many authors agree on the peculiar character of “memory regime” within Roma communities and even their lack of interest in the past (Fonseca 1996), Alaina Lemon in her book reminds and warns us of popular notion that “Gypsies are usually depicted not only as people ‘without history’ but as indifferent to recollection, living in an ‘eternal present’” (Lemon, 2000:3). Likewise, Gay y Blasco in her article about the Gitanos of Jarana notes that even if the obliteration of the past is detected in Romany culture, it is best understood as a transformation of memory that has constructive social effects rather than as an undesirable form of communal amnesia (Gay y Blasco 2001). And Michael Stewart agree that Roma people manage not to forget crucial aspects of their past, even though they live “without history as we

know it: the more or less formal, discursive or performative reproduction of the past in the present” (Stewart 2004:566).

What Roma people lack, indeed, because of a vague national consciousness and persistently marginal positions within society, is significant “realms of memory” (Nora 1996). This, then, allows Lemon to conclude that the problem is not in neglecting history, but that no infrastructure magnifies Romany memories as broadly collective, as constituting an imagined community (Lemon 2000). This is in the contrast to the situation of ethnic Latvians, who obtained their national sovereignty a century ago. The Latvian nation has its own memorial infrastructure, and it has developed a national historic narrative about oppression and the struggle for independence (Muižnieks 2011, Velmet 2011). It contains, for instance, the destruction of statehood under Soviet occupation, commemorated as the memory of massive deportations, and the narrative of the peaceful “singing” national rebirth which is remembered as the *Baltic Way*, when Latvians joined hands with people of the other two Baltic countries. These national master narratives find their expression in people’s own recollections as “testimonies of lives” (Skultans 1998). It is not what we can encounter in Latvian Roma histories, nevertheless, our interviews show that Romany people have their specific autobiographic reminiscences and thus the possibility for oral history to reconstruct their experience of historic turns.

Even if Romany culture lacks considerable written records and institutionalised commemoration practices to maintain (historic) memory and to develop historic narratives in their communities, the researchers, nevertheless, argue the community has its own different way to deal with “the life of before” (Gay y Blasco 2001; Stewart 1997). Particularly Paloma Gay y Blasco after the fieldwork among *pueblo gitanos* suggests that “understanding the Gitanos’ particular way of dealing with the ‘before’ is thus essential to understanding their particular way of being in the world, including how they locate themselves in time and space and how they face the non-Gypsies, and how they reproduce themselves as a distinct kind of community.” (Gay y Blasco 2001:640). For Halbwachs, collective memory depends on the particular nature of the group and the collective experience that shapes it. Consequently, every group has its own collective memory and it may differ from the collective memory of other groups. Halbwachs, however, wrote about collective memory within the family, religious groups and class, but he did not highlight that those respective collective memories would operate in principally different ways. Drawing upon the above mentioned studies it can be elicited that the memory in Romany communities functions differently from that of the (national) societies in which they live. In this article through life stories and ethnological observations I come to the conclusion that memory

culture, the way memory is handled, in Roma communities is closely tied to the reproduction of ethnic distinction.

## Roma minority in Latvia

Latvian Gypsies (Roma)<sup>1</sup> are one of the oldest ethnic minorities living within the present-day borders of Latvia since the 16th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were approximately 2000 Gypsies living in the provinces of Vidzeme, Courland and Latgale, which were at that time a part of the Russian Tsarist empire. However, this data is problematic and the number of Gypsies was probably much higher because many of them did not confirm the Romany language as their mother tongue. In the Republic of Latvia (after independence in 1918) their numbers increased and almost doubled due to both natural population growth and immigration. In 1925 there were 2780 Gypsies in Latvia, in 1930 there were 3220, and 1935 there were 3840. Half of the Roma population lived in Courland (Bērziņš 2003). The Roma population was not extremely significant in size. As in many countries, they were semi-nomadic. Gypsies in Latvia moved seasonally, owned houses and, all in all, they fit well into the local rural economy. This ensured them relatively good integration into the Latvian-speaking majority peasant society. In many cases, this good connection with the local society saved lives during the Holocaust.

Historians calculate that about half of the pre-war Gypsy population were murdered during the Nazi occupation of Latvia (Bleiere 2008) – 2000 deaths and a few stories of escape. Compared to the other Baltic States, this was a very high number of deaths. About 850 murdered Roma have been documented in Estonia, although this number means that about 95 per cent of that country's Roma perished. Approximately 500 Roma were killed in Lithuania, which is about one third of that country's pre-war Roma population.<sup>2</sup>

Nowadays, the Latvian Roma minority is still relatively small and is concentrated in particular towns, including the capital city, Riga. According to population registry statistics, there are 5594 Roma living in Latvia (at the beginning of 2014), which constitutes 0.28 per cent of the total population (Central Statistical Bureau 2014). This data is, however, partial. In some

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<sup>1</sup> We have asked Roma people in Latvia how they prefer to be referred to, and they have expressed no objections at all to being called *čigāni* (Gypsies).

<sup>2</sup> These numbers are taken from Matthew Kott (2015). He particularly refers to the research of Weiss-Wendt (2003) and Toleikis (2005). See also Garda-Rozenberga and Zellis (2015).

interviews it is mentioned that many people with Romany roots avoid stating in documents their actual ethnicity and choose Latvian or Russian instead. Unofficial data on the Roma population estimated by the Roma representatives themselves is also very uncertain. It was estimated that out of a Latvian population of approximately two million there are around 13,000-15,000 Roma. Today, it must be taken into account that since 2007, when Roma emigration to EU countries intensified, the Roma population in Latvia has decreased by a factor of two or even three.

Latvian Gypsies have good Latvian and Russian language skills, and a large number (98 per cent) of Roma have Latvian citizenship. This is often used as proof of the successful integration of Roma into Latvian society. But many surveys conclude that society still stigmatises Gypsies and has a fear of contact with them.

Several studies have been carried out in Latvia, and some significant and basic data can be obtained. One of the main studies was published by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia (Apine 2007); other publications have been produced by the Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, the Baltic Institute of Social Sciences and others.<sup>3</sup> Among these studies on Latvian Roma only one monograph goes deeper into ethnography, and describes "*real Gypsy music*" by exploring its authenticity and ethnic dimension (Tihovska 2017).

In general, a number of studies about the statistics, demographics, mobility and security of Roma minorities can be quickly found within the international academic research field. These studies can serve as an informative base helping to acknowledge different aspect of Roma presence in a given society. Yet, within this quantity it is hard to find studies oriented towards the experience of this ethnic group from the biographic perspective. Within the life story approach it is argued that to listen narratives of remembrance is a meaningful method because it is closer to people's experience "providing first hand, intimately involved accounts of life" (Plummer 2001:19), and such approach is aimed to minimize typical power relations where a researcher has an expertise and is questioning an object. In traditional studies, there is still little reflection on personal experience, world views and the values of the members of the ethnic group. How do they see themselves within the dominant society? How do they present their lives and make stories out of them? Personal narratives in life story interviews may reveal obscured aspects of people's thoughts and feelings. We are supposing that biographical stories, like folk

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<sup>3</sup>The Situation of Roma in Latvia. Riga: Latvian Centre for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, 2003; Impact of the State Programme "Gypsies (Roma) in Latvia" 2007-2009 on the Gypsy (Roma) Community in Latvia, Riga: Baltic Institute of Social Sciences, 2008; Roma Right to Education: Implementing Situation in Latvia, Riga: Centre for Education Initiatives, 2011.



tales, legends and myths as assumed by anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, can serve a window into patterns of culture showing relations between culture and self (Geertz 1973); it could tell about the formation of their identity, and it is important to see the interaction between the dominant culture and minority's self-consciousness.

To look deeper and catch silenced voices in different communities, oral history researchers from University of Latvia started to shape a new study, and in 2013 the aspirations materialized in the project about ethnic and narrative diversity in the construction of life stories. The analysis has been presented in the book "To Belong and to Differ: Roma, Russian and Latvian life stories in Latvia" (in Latvian, Skultāne 2017). In the following sections I share some results from that study and focus on Roma life stories and oral history, particularly, their historical memory of both Nazi and Soviet rule, and how they position themselves and construct identity in the life story interview.

## **Memories about living under changed regimes**

One of the themes in the interviews that attracts attention is the persecution of Roma during the Second World War. And it is also relevant for studies in ethnicity as it serves to consider the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion since "persecution, whether experienced or learnt as part of group history, helps to establish Gypsy ethnicity by consolidating a sense of group identity (...), persecution heightens the sense of difference, strengthens in-group feeling and creates an 'us and them' mentality" (Mayall 2004:265). Even though the task of life story research, as opposed to oral history, is not to gather evidence or testimonies about specific historical episodes, in Roma memories it is impossible to avoid the topic of cruelty and discrimination experienced by a Roma narrator or his/her relatives. The fate of the Roma in the Baltic States during the Nazi occupation is an aspect of the past which these countries have chosen to forget. Latvian researcher Vieda Skultāns writes, "shame and indignity undoubtedly play a part here, but the powerlessness of this group and the lack of a spokesperson are equally important" (Skultāns 2014:41).

Considering the size of most Roma families and the large number of Roma killed in Latvia, it can be assumed that practically every Roma alive today has a relative who perished

during the Holocaust, or *Porrajmos*.<sup>4</sup> Up until now there have been no studies of whether and how memories about wartime experiences are passed down through intergenerational communication. Even among Latvians the themes of deportation and Soviet-sponsored terror were long silenced, but this can be explained by the threats and sanctions carried out regarding the dissemination of secret and “ideologically harmful” information. Nowadays, the uncovering of crimes committed in the name of Communism and the honouring of victims are among the main elements in “memory sites” and the nation's historical narrative. The Roma in Latvia, however, has neither publicly institutionalised commemorative rituals nor even a place in the history books. Therefore, despite the life story approach avoids to impose one's own understanding of history upon another's story about himself/herself, yet it is valuable to emphasize and to document the tragic Roma experience from witnesses who are still alive today. Our archive contains stories from the older generation, who witnessed the war themselves, as well as separate references to family members who suffered due to the Nazi racial policy.

One of the most painful stories is that of Valija, who was born in 1936. She recounts about her family fleeing from Kuldīga, where many Roma were being shot. But they were later captured, the parents were separated from the children, and the children were cruelly tormented:

*That's the way it was with me, they didn't shoot me, but they took me, tied me to a tree and then hit me with something like clubs. I couldn't stand it, I fell down, I fainted. They take water and pour it over me. They draw cold water from a well and pour it on – to revive me. And so on, until they stop. But I remained alive. (NMV-1662)<sup>5</sup>*

Similarly to some other interviewed Roma, Valija remembers stories and describes the graves Roma were forced to dig for themselves as well as her testimony that there were even cases of *children caught by the leg and set against the pines; and then they didn't have to waste bullets*. Thanks to the intervention of local inhabitants, some of the Roma escaped and sought refuge in the forest, where other Roma from surrounding towns were also hiding.

Husband and wife Artūrs (born in 1926) and Olga (born in 1928) tell about how they fled; they supplement each other's narrative as they talk about the police coming and there being shooting all around. They also let know their language being prohibited, and *if it was after ten o'clock at night, you couldn't go outside, because then you'd be put in jail*.

- Did you also have to flee during the war?

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<sup>4</sup>The term *Porrajmos* refers to the Romany efforts to establish an official memory of their genocide in Nazi-occupied countries. In some dialects of the Romany language it literally means "devouring" or "destruction". The term, however, is unknown to most Roma and is used mostly by activists to draw a parallel between Nazi policy toward the extermination of the Jews and the destruction of the Roma.

<sup>5</sup> Here and henceforth, the code assigned to every interview in the oral history collection of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology.

- *That was the German period. Roma were not allowed to live in the city at all. We then did agricultural work.*<sup>6</sup>

- A person simply came up to you and said that you had to leave?

- *Not a person, but with the police. They gave us a date by which we had to be gone from the city, and that's all.*

- And if you didn't leave?

- *If you didn't leave, you know what would happen – boom and you're done. Gypsies were shot during the German times. In Saldus district, a portion of them were shot there.*

- Do you know anybody who was shot?

- *Who remembers them any more? We know lots of them, but we don't remember any more. My aunt was shot near Kuldīga. They came and they gathered them up. They were just like Jews. (NMV-1661)*

Kārlis Rudevičs (born in 1939), who is among the few more widely known representatives of the Roma community and culture in Latvia, recount how his family fled to Riga to escape possible destruction. There they hid under a different surname and posed as Latvians, and money was earned by the so-called “white Gypsies”: *We, black ones, of course, were not shown to anybody. [We] were around 17-18 years old. My brother was white with blue eyes. He worked as a driver in Riga. Yes, father had horses and he drove. And so, the family awaited the Germans' retreat in some cellar, and Rudevičs had to hide behind the lighter-coloured members of his family until the very end. Rudevičs remembers:*

*Yes, I remember: when the Russians were coming in and we were hiding there in the cellar. Someone had betrayed us, said that there were Roma living there, and they sent those Schutzmen onto us. But in that commotion, when the Russians were upon us, they would have dispatched with us, too. They entered the cellar with their automatic weapons there: “Zigeunisch?” And Mother was white with blue eyes, all of the black ones were hidden: “Alles Lettisch! Alles Lettisch!” And then they left. My sister, younger than me, she was completely blond, with big eyes – she was placed in front – and Mother was white, too. Well, and so....*

[Interviewer: And on paper you counted as Latvians?]. *Yes, yes. They didn't even ask for our papers. After all, they were fleeing [retreating], and it could be that they shot you on their way out. Well, and then I remember how the “katyushas” [Red Army mobile artillery]...I saw them.... All of Old Riga was already burning. (NMV-2108)*

Most of the interviews contain memories about the Holocaust, but it is also the case that this theme is more often encountered among researchers and activists rather than “on the lips of the Roma in the lands occupied by the Germans during the Second World War. Daily life was lived with barely an acknowledgement of those events” (Stewart, 2004:564). The life story in itself does not provide an answer to how important historical memory is among the Roma; for that, one would need to spend longer periods of time among the members of the community in order to determine how correct Stewart is when, studying the characteristics of memory culture among Hungarian Roma, he says that, “these are certainly memories, but they do not seem to me

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<sup>6</sup> Due to the fact that husband and wife talk simultaneously, Artūrs' utterances are transcribed in italics.

to be part of a process of remembering which involves the possession and sharing of a narrative history” (ibid.).

Personal stories and memories about persecution and genocide fit with the general narratives of violence and prejudice against Gypsies, and all in all the coming of the Red Army and the establishment of the Soviet regime brought some positive changes, as is told in almost every interview with Roma people. It has already been studied that during the Communist era, in spite of continuing discrimination, Gypsies were able to benefit from regular wages to improve their social situation (new houses and sending their children to school). It was a time that can be characterised as a period of increasing “proletarianisation” of the Roma population. According to Will Guy, this was the first time in history when a large number of Roma in Eastern Europe had the opportunity to achieve some sort of limited integration into the broader society (Guy 2001). This also resonates in our interviews. Roma people remember the Soviet period as a time of stability and “ease” in ensuring at least a convenient standard of living both by working on collective farms (kolkhozes) and benefiting from the Socialistic “deficit economy” to trade goods (unofficially, of course).

When asked about the Soviet years – also referred to as the “Russian times” – Lūcija (born in 1925) does not hide her attitude regarding the changed situation:

*The Russian times were good, too. People went to work and everybody made a living, everyone had their own job. It was good, it wasn't bad at all. No problem. And you could earn a living; even if it was a small salary, but...you could survive. My daughter went to work. She worked then...and even with that little something, you could buy everything and survive. But now...everything is so terribly expensive and you can't afford to buy anything. And how much, then, is our pension?! (NMV-1660)*

In another interview, the interviewer asks Olga (born in 1928) “when did you feel happiest?” She responds straightforwardly: *In the Soviet Union, that was a good time. There were jobs, the Gypsies were not segregated. You could go to school, you could do all sorts of things, there was no difference/discrimination. (NMV-1661)*

In her response, Olga associates the Soviet era with a decrease in segregation. She also challenges two stereotypes at once: the notion of the significance of education and the belief that Roma avoid working. In other interviews, too, it can be observed how often the interviewees emphasise diligence and a hard-working nature when describing their families. This can therefore be interpreted as a definite desire to contradict the prevailing stereotype about Gypsies being lazy. In this sense, Brigita's (born in 1947) narrative is interesting in how, among other things, her memory merges her parents' wartime experience with her own experiences at the beginning of the Soviet era, which she simultaneously compares with the current times:

*Well, and then Mother told about the prisoners/captives being taken there to the forest. That they were give two hours' time in the summer to eat berries. They went with guns, she said. Then, the people threw out on that road whatever they could. You weren't allowed to give them anything, of course, otherwise you'd be punished yourself. Well, and that's how she met my father and lived. In the Russian times, I remember, it was still the Soviet times, we were children, we went to school. Well, they were hard times, but not harder than nowadays. At least there was work! It was the kolkhoz times. We worked on the kolkhoz, we were little kids. We went around to the farmers, at first we weeded the beets. Then we went to the kolkhoz and harvested potatoes and picked berries. Father worked in the forest. My sisters began working as shepherds at the age six. (NMV-3857)*

In the next fragment, Fredis (born in 1957), who in his interview speaks ironically about the system of obligatory employment under socialism, describes the sources of income during those times, which correspond more to common opinions about the nature of Gypsy employment:

*In Soviet times... – now it's called business, but back then we were considered speculators. You find stuff somewhere, you fill some deficit. I was in Jūrmala; there were several opportunities to work with illegal business there. Of course, we didn't do any big, criminal things – we just managed to obtain deficit products for a lower price. In those days the [Communist] party men had their own stores, so [we got] this and that from those stores. Like that. We tried to divide the products up fairly, so it wasn't just the party guys living a good life. And so, a part of the good filtered down to us, too. (NMV-4069)*

Fredis admits that, as the Soviet system collapsed, he had to reorient himself and find new opportunities; now, he's quite satisfied and runs his own private farm. On the whole, however, most of the interviewed Roma feel that their status in society has sharply declined since Latvia regained its independence. The Roma are loyal to the Latvian state, but, like Ausma (born in 1958), they feel politically excluded and are not satisfied due to the fact that the availability of jobs dictates everything:

*When the Latvian era began? You know, I must say that I wasn't all too happy. We weren't too happy when the Latvian era began. Because, of course, no one asked us what we wanted. Also, when the elections happen and all, we don't care about any of it. We need to adapt. We live in Latvia.. (..) I cannot lie and say I've had very bad times. Life's harder for me now! But back then, in the Russian times, life wasn't hard for us. You understand, we had jobs! (NMV-4070)*

The availability of work is constantly stressed, not only because work is a means of survival; it also symbolically decreases the gap between the Roma minority and their lifestyle and the rest of society. Another Brigita (born in 1959) reflects on this aspect in an original way. As if observing from afar, she refers to the Roma in the third person and comments on how they've changed. The interviewer asks Brigita whether the Soviet times were calmer:

*Yes, yes. Back then, you know, they [Gypsies] had a sort of “наоборот” [turn-around] – it was a pretty good time, a time when they began to become people. When they were put to work, in short, trained to live in one place. Before then, the Gypsies moved around. From village to village, from town to town. I guess the Russian times taught us that we,*

*too, are capable of living like everyone else. In Latvia they don't move around anymore, but see, there are still countries where they've still got those Gypsy camps, where they still move around in horse-drawn wagons. (NMV-4073)*

This fragment expresses the divided Roma identity that was brought about by the policy of social integration through inclusion in employment. This relates to what Guy (2001) wrote about a similar legacy of the past among the Central European nations, namely, that Communist governance had the effect of strengthening the social identity of the Roma through their further integration into the overall work force. However, major policy approaches applied to the Roma were contradictory and ultimately doomed to failure. They simultaneously attempted to destroy Romany ethnic identity, denying its existence, and hoped that it would somehow dissolve amidst the dominant groups (Guy 2001). In the Roma life stories we can feel both a desire to belong to Latvian society, which is discussed in the next section, as well as the need to preserve their own identity and avoid marginalisation, which in their memories was less of an issue during socialism.

The life stories demonstrate a collective memory of life under the Nazi and Soviet regimes – a terrible experience of genocide followed by relative security and comfort within a socialist economic system. It constitutes a “framework of social memory” that determines the assessment of both the past and the present situation. The poor condition of Gypsies today makes very explicit the sympathy towards the “Soviet times” expressed in their biographic narratives. In this sense, these recollections may be set in contrast to the “official” institutionalised Latvian national historic narrative, which contains distinctly negative representations about the past under Soviet occupation (see Saeima of the Republic of Latvia 2005, Nollendorfs 2002). The public memory in Latvia after regaining independence in 1991 became a space of political struggle. It represents the efforts of ethnic Latvians who suffered under Communist rule to make their version for the basis of national identity. So, on the national level there is little room for recollections of the Socialism era that do not fit in the current discourse on how to treat Socialism. Thus, Roma collective memory is in potential conflict with the Latvian mnemonic praxis that has a tendency to downgrade everything connected to the socialist system and to the Soviet Union especially.

This “clash of memories” may deserve more attention in further sociological studies, but collected life stories turn attention to another important aspect of interviews, which may be considered as an interaction between strangers of different cultural backgrounds. Instead of taking stories as “windows” that may assist to perceive the reality about which they speak, in life story studies we try to approach stories as part of an ongoing dialogue in which the narrator

engages with her or his audience. Language actively constructs the self, and the talk becomes a 'site' of self and identity work (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Stories can both represent events and perform one's selfhood, in such a way constructing "narrative identities".

## **Constructing ethnicity in biographic accounts**

*I don't really have anything to tell you. All along we've lived just as fully; I think you live just like we do. (...) We're all working people, we've all gone to school just like the Latvians. (Ausma, NMV-4070)*

From the perspective of contemporary theory, ethnicity, race and nation no longer represent objects of the exterior world; instead, they represent the ways in which that world is imagined, interpreted and represented (Berbrier 2008; Brubaker 2009; Csepeľi and Simon 2004; Hall 1989; Wodak etc. 1999). In offering a concept of "ethnicity without groups" Rogers Brubaker concludes that ethnicity should not be considered in categories of groups that have definite characteristics in common; instead, ethnicity should be seen as a form of social relationships (Brubaker 2004). Ethnicity is the social organisation of cultural differences. People certainly perceive and recognize objective cultural differences that exist between themselves, but it may play minor role in their interactions. In his study of ideologies, Siniša Malešević emphasises that precisely because perceived differences in culture are so real and obvious, they so easily give in to nationalism and ethnicisation. He therefore proposes the idea that ethnicity is "a politicised social action, a process whereby elements of real, actual, lived cultural differences are politicised in the context of intensive group interaction" (Malešević 2006:27).

One of the pretexts for discrimination against (and even persecution of) Roma is the widely accepted stereotype that Roma try to avoid working. Knowing this, the interviews stress the diligent, hard-working Roma character when describing biographical facts. Thus, less is said about cultural characteristics, but more is said about the social differences that divide one group from another in society's opinions.

*We worked from a young age, too. From childhood! I worked at the kolkhoz right here in Saldus district. Mother milked cows, I herded 60 cows. I was young, 14 years old. Sometimes I was tired and just wanted to sleep; I fell asleep in the morning, sitting out in the field, and the cows were gone.. But I worked, tears and all! And I helped Mother milk the cows, too. We've worked our entire lives! [We] worked on a kolkhoz farm in Zemīte, too – my whole family! The district even honoured me as the best cattle-farm worker. But now? Children cannot find work. (NMV-3857)*

In his work with the issue of identity, Richard Jenkins (2008) has proposed to “rethink ethnicity” (cf. Jenkins' book *Rethinking Ethnicity*) and formulated a socio-anthropological model with which to study ethnicity. His main conclusions are that ethnicity is linked to cultural differentiation, and he stresses that identification always includes dialectical relationships between similarity and difference. Ethnic identity is not something that belongs to people or something to which they belong; instead, it is “complex repertoires which people experience, use, learn and ‘do’ in their daily lives, within which they construct an ongoing sense of themselves and an understanding of their fellows” (ibid:15). Regarding the Latvian interviewees, ethnic characteristics in many of the Roma story repertoires are intensely hushed up. Only when encouraged by examples from other people's lives does Ausma, for example, agree that there are certain traditions that, in her opinion, might differ from Latvian life:

Interviewer: *Don't the Roma have some other ways of preparation....*

Ausma: *I don't think so, that's all been talked about. There's nothing different! Absolutely nothing different.*

Interviewer: *One of my colleagues worked with Roma people in Slovakia. And there they were very strict about cleanliness, about not being allowed to use one pot – one pot was for milk products, and the other was for meat.*

Ausma: *No, we don't have that in our family. But what we do have in our family that you don't have – I know that as a 100% fact – where, if you wash something, then it's separate. That's already a matter of habit for us. For example, you wash clothes, it doesn't matter, you wash out the kettle and use it to prepare food. We don't do that. We have one set of pots/containers for cooking and another set for washing. Well, that's one thing. That's maybe.. because I know a lot of Latvian families, which I have observed a bit, that they do that [wash everything in one container]. (NMV-4070)*

In trying to avoid stressing their differences in relation to Latvians, however, the stories nevertheless contain differences among the Roma themselves. Collective identity for the Roma as an ethnic group cannot develop by discursively dividing between “us and other Roma”. This can be found, for example, in Brigita's story in which she distances herself from Roma in other countries and their lifestyle and language. Nor is she thrilled about the local Roma, commenting that “their clothes give them away”:

Brigita: *My daughters tell me that the Gypsies over in Ireland are rich. They have houses, but anyway they still – not with horses – but they [have] some sort of cars. Like the Germans who drive around with cars like that [with trailers/campers], their whole house with them. (..) And they, for example, my daughters, they don't even understand the Gypsies there. Not a single word. You see, there's more of the Irish and English language there, and they don't look like our Gypsies, either. We're all black [dark], but there they're all like you. You see them on the street and you think – well, you'd never guess that's a Gypsy. But, you see, all of the red-haired ones – they're all Gypsies. Red-haired and white [light-skinned]. In other words, well, we don't have any like that over here.*

Interviewer: *I've heard there are “white Gypsies” in Latvia, too.*



Brigita: *It's been heard before, but where did those white ones come from? That is, see, they're from some neighbour (laughs). I mean, honestly, no? You don't think so? I know, for example, about myself. That was in Jūrmala, where those relatives of mine live, my mother's sister. Some of them were – a real Latvian girl. If she cleaned herself up nicely and dressed decently, you'd never tell she's a Gypsy girl. But, see, her clothing gave her away. Those long skirts and the carelessness, the untidiness.*

Interviewer: *I think Gypsy women always pay a lot of attention to their appearance.*

Brigita: *That's nowadays. But earlier? They used to be much more careless. Earlier, well, they were pretty but kind of untidy. You know, what you saw was what you got. It's not like that anymore. Now they make an effort. (NMV-4073)*

This distinct stratification mentioned in other interviews is what prevents the Roma minority from seeing itself as one community. Similarities and differences are played out contextually. It turns out that the concepts of “barons” and “Gypsy camps” are just folklorised clichés. *Of course, there's a baron in Riga, says Veronika (born in 1959). There is none here. What are we here? We're all kind of uncultured.* Veronika continues:

Interviewer: *What does the word “tabors” (Gypsy camp) mean to you? We see them in films, and it's beautiful – Gypsies in their camp.*

Veronika: *It's interesting, of course. It's interesting that the rich dance like that and go around covered in gold. Not everyone's equal, of course. And I like that they dance. They're earning their livings.*

Interviewer: *That's an art others cannot do.*

Veronika: *Yes, others like it. That's how they stand out. They've got a sort of different personality, different. But us, we're more in the Latvian style. We're used to it here in Latvia and we live modestly: we work and somehow earn our bread. You know how it is, what it's like in this day and age (thoughtful). Yes, but they've somehow got that richness, pride.*

Interviewer: *They've got that pride that you can see.*

Veronika: *Who are we, the Gypsies of Latvia? Hardly any of us are rich, so to say. Here we're just...we don't even know how to do like them; we're different.*

Interviewer: *You're more similar...*

Veronika: *...to the people of Latvia. Like, for example, us in Kuldīga. Riga is Riga – different people stand out there. And we're kind of low, after all. They're kind of high up, orderly and neat. And we don't know how to do anything, either, just work and earn our bread. But they're different. (NMV-4072)*

This interview fragment shows both an inclination to identify with Latvians and a reference to other Roma as “they”, especially wealthier Roma and those living in the capital city, Riga. But it's not as if the interviewed Roma lacked self-confidence as a minority that cannot afford to lose its identity. In the interview as a social interaction, the answers that touch upon cultural characteristics are like an interplay between the group's own self-image and what society's ideas about the group might be. At the same time, it's a game of adapting and avoiding the categorisation forced upon them by others in order to not limit the discursive space for “self-generated identities”, as mentioned by Jenkins in his concept of ethnicity:

“Categorising ‘them’ is part of defining ‘us’ (...). In terms of collectivities, a group is internally defined and a category externally defined. In their everyday social interaction people systematically classify themselves and others. They distinguish, in doing so, between identities that are self-generated and those that are other-imposed.” (Jenkins, 2008:83)

Considering what social classification and identity marginalisation of people can sometimes lead to, a minority like the Roma needs to be careful of overly separating themselves from the surrounding society. But Fredis does not worry about that in his interview, saying that the Roma have never hidden themselves away: *If a Gypsy came towards, you could tell a kilometre away. Now we Gypsies [recognise] each other more by “feel”. As usual nowadays, the Gypsy doesn't advertise his Gypsy-ness. Now we've become like the Jews – the Jews were partially ostracised, and the Gypsies were like that. The Gypsies never renounced their ethnicity – they display that they're Gypsies* (NMV-4069). Fredis feels the similarity of his ethnicity's condition with that of other minorities in Latvia, but he expresses it in the past tense, echoing what others have said, namely, that much has changed nowadays. *The Gypsies were once united*, says Ziedonis of his ethnic group's history (NMV-4071); *they lived together, they moved around together, they went into the forests together – now everyone's off on his own*. His wife agrees: *There aren't any more real Gypsies, the kind there used to be*. Ziedonis adds that *Gypsies need to keep up with the times*, even though he and other Roma are becoming more and more similar to Latvians. But his wife, Austra, interjects that *a Gypsy remains a Gypsy, a Latvian remains a Latvian*. She does agree, however, that cultural differences are being levelled out and, mentioning her niece, she describes the process thus: *She's educated, of course. She's graduated from important schools and is continuing her studies. She's more like a Latvian, not a Gypsy. That's why I say, she talks like a Gypsy, but there's nothing else left of the Gypsy [in her]*. Ziedonis and Brigita, in a different interview, explain that Roma assimilation and the disintegration of their community is due to the fact that they're all on their own now, a trait they have adopted from the Latvians. But they have nevertheless retained a memory and a certain nostalgia for their authentic lifestyle:

*I still got in on the Gypsy life. My father had a little white mare. We drove in a long line of Gypsies. We met others, everyone was around campfires in the evenings, the men in their groups and the women in their groups. It was very beautiful.* (Zelma, born in 1956, NMV-4078)

## Conclusions

The life story approach which rests on narrative analysis of personal experience stories provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of memory and identity construction, and it answers in what ways memory culture in Roma communities may differ from dominant “national memory”.

Regarding the content of memories, Roma seldom speak about their childhoods, which in Latvians' memory stories are the happiest time to remember – a time associated with developing one's world view, obtaining an education and participating in relationships. Unlike most Latvians, in their biographies the Roma view the Communist-imposed order and how it was manifested in daily life in a positive light; the theme of political repressions by Soviet authorities does not have a prominent role in their experience. This is a feeling that has been influenced by two “social frameworks of memory”. On the one hand, the positive attitude is framed by the contrast with experiences during the German occupation or the traumatic experience of the *Porrajmos* accumulated through “communicative memory”. On the other hand, the Soviet era is more favourably described in comparison to the poverty and feelings of marginalisation presently experienced by the Roma due to the socio-economic situation in Latvia today.

An important component in conversations with Roma people is the latent comprehension by both parties that actually two cultures are meeting. Therefore, besides memory narratives, I found it useful to utilise life stories in order to focus on the construction of identity. During the analysis of interviews, it amazed me that in many narratives the Roma quite often refer to themselves as being “the same as you Latvians”. This denial of distinct identity calls for special attention and interpretation. Is it an attempt to guess our stereotypes and prejudices and to respond to them in advance? The Roma already know from those living around them that they are ascribed wandering and avoidance of work. Therefore, in their stories they stress that they've had to work hard and a lot. But the general hiding of their identity is associated with a much deeper social insecurity and feeling of discrimination. This “silencing” of cultural differences is evidence of anxiety stored in social memory, the anxiety that persecution could eventually return. The interviewees' ambivalent attitude towards Roma-ness that we encountered in the materials we have collected turns our attention to “ethnicity markers” (or, rather, the lack thereof), which points to the Roma's feelings of living as a minority within a specific nation and therein their attitude towards the past linked to persistent identity.

As an ethnic minority that cannot even be called a diaspora, because it has no localised homeland with which to link its national identity, the Roma have not developed their own history discourse, nor has it become a relevant issue for them. As Stewart (2004) suggests, it is we – the “*gaje*”, i.e. non-Gypsies – who remind them of who they were in the past and are today. It is our mutual interactions in daily life that serve as memory promoters in the Roma community. When people want to strengthen the status of their group, they update history and search there for both inspiration and “origin myths” on which to base their collective identity. Are the Latvian Roma striving for this? And why would they need to? Pierre Nora's conclusion sounds like a warning: “We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” (Nora, 1989:7). He says that “realms of memory” are necessary in order to promote and support memory, because the possibility of forgetting evidently exists. The Roma have practically no “*lieux de mémoire*” – no places where commemoration ceremonies are publicly performed – nor is the Roma flag, nor other symbols are used on a daily basis. The embeddedness of a memory in material or symbolic artefacts is required as long as we worry that time is playing against us. My conclusion after listening to Roma memory narratives and discourses on ethnicity is that the apparent neglect of history on the one hand and the ambivalent while persistent and certain ethnic identification on the other hand indicates a strength of collective memory. It is strong enough that there is no need for special external symbolisation to maintain valued commitments and to prevent the flow of significant events into nothingness.

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