

**European Academic Network on Romani Studies:**  
**Bridging the Gap between Academic and Policy Makers**

**History, Archives and Communities: Critical Interfaces in Romani Studies**

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**FINAL REPORT**

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Workshop Aims and Rationale

This workshop aimed to bring together scholars and practitioners who engage with the field of Romani Studies through their work as archivists, historians, or educators. How might practitioners in these three distinct but interlinked spheres cooperate effectively and what can they learn from one another? Participants were invited to deliver position papers based on their own experiences as the basis for an informal discussion.

The workshop had three main aims.

First, to ask how historians and policy-makers might cooperate to ensure that the research infrastructure that historians working in Romani Studies need to do their work – in particular, archives – is in place, well maintained and accessible. How might community or personal archives be maintained, and what are the ethics of archiving and preserving records in relation to the communities involved?

Second, to discuss how historians and policymakers might cooperate for the benefit of community relations. How might history and historical knowledge be used to combat racism and xenophobia in local, national or international settings? What is the role of institutions such as museums in disseminating this knowledge? And how should academic historians work more effectively with cultural policymakers and local activists in this respect?

Third, to assess the scope for further cooperation and joint projects.

Session One: Archives

The first panel presented the views of professional archivists and curators. Participants were asked to reflect on the practice of collecting, maintaining, and making visible archival materials that relate to Roma and Sinti. What, for example, are the particular challenges posed by historians or the wider public?

The speakers in this panel provided an insight into four different types of archive. The first were the state archives of Sachsen-Anhalt at Magdeburg, which house one of the largest surviving collections of police files on Gypsies in the Third Reich, and thus represent a

crucial resource for professional historians as well as for legal claims by individuals seeking compensation for persecution. The second were the city archives of Dessau-Rosslau. The third were the archival collections of the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno, Czech Republic, which was initially created as a non-governmental association before gaining recognition by the Czech Ministry of Culture. The last example was the Gypsy Lore Society Collections housed by the Special Collections of the University of Liverpool Library.

Lutz Mieke, head of the Department for Data Protection, Reparations and Archives at the Interior Ministry of Sachsen-Anhalt, spoke in a personal capacity about the challenges of using official archives to reconstruct histories of Roma and Sinti that look beyond the perspective of state repression and discrimination. Drawing on his knowledge of the wide variety of records held by state or local administrations, Mieke suggested sources that would help to reconstruct 'ordinary' histories of Roma and Sinti. Frank Kreissler, archivist at the Stadtarchiv Dessau-Rosslau, also focused on how archivists facilitate the interface between historical research and educational work with local communities. As an example, he discussed Eve Rosenhaft's research into the story of Erna Lauenburger, a young Sinti woman known as Unku, whose life-story was fictionalised in the classic German children's novel *Ede und Unku*, which became part of the school curriculum in the German Democratic Republic.

The Museum of Roma Culture in Brno was established as a civic association in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the socialist regime in Czechoslovakia, but the idea for such an institution was initially conceived during the Prague Spring by activists in the short-lived Association of Gypsies-Roma (1969-1973). In late 2000 the museum moved to its current premises in a Roma district of Brno, and in 2005 became a state-funded institution. Speaking on behalf of Michal Schuster, the curator of archival collections at the Museum, Milada Zavodská explained that the museum functions as a cultural centre for local communities as well as a repository for historical artefacts. Providing a space for performances or social events, the museum communicates the results of its research projects to participants, witnesses, and a broader public. This reflection on the museum's role in the community gave an insight into how practitioners think about the complex relationship between Roma identity-building and the preservation of archives or the production of historical narratives.

In the final presentation, Katy Hooper discussed the challenges of reorganising the eclectic collections of the Gypsy Lore Society for the benefit of contemporary researchers. Once catalogued according to categories replete with 'gypsyologist' stereotypes about Gypsies and Roma, the archive has now been reorganised to reflect the logic of the original collections. This enables contemporary researchers to approach the records of the Gypsy Lore Society critically, in their historical context. This presentation exemplified the way in which changing attitudes towards academic knowledge about Roma shape the preservation of records relating to their history.

## Session Two: Historians and History

This session asked historians to reflect on their experiences with using official archives to study the history of Roma and Sinti. What particular challenges arise, for example, concerning access, interpretation, or responsibility toward the ‘subjects’ of research? What problems emerge vis-à-vis archivists and the wider public? Rather than presenting research papers, speakers were asked to draw on case studies from their research to make their points.

In the first paper, Miika Tervonen reflected on the ethical, political and practical aspects of collaborative research into the history of Roma, with a focus on Scandinavia. Tervonen suggested that historians should work in partnership with Roma associations or representatives already in the very first stages of planning a research project. This presentation raised an argument that would become a common theme of the discussion: Roma communities may often not wish to support research into the history of institutionalised discrimination for fear of compromising their privacy or personal family histories.

The next presentation was given by Ilse About, a specialist on the history of policing and identification practices in western Europe since the late nineteenth century. About’s research into state control of mobility across borders has led him to focus on ‘Gypsies’ as a case-study for understanding the roots of the European system of migration control. In his talk, About stressed the need to study this history not only from the perspective of international and national bureaucracy, police, or legislation, but also the family histories of individuals caught up in these processes of identification and regulation.

Paola Trevisan discussed related questions arising from her research on the history of Sinti families in Italy under Fascist rule. As a scholar who works at the intersection of ethnography and history, Trevisan highlighted the challenges of an approach that combines oral history with archival research. Knowledge of family and individual histories – which can often only be obtained through interviews and ethnographic research – is crucial, especially since archival catalogues rarely categorize Sinti or Roma as a group. Trial records, for example, can only be searched by name. However, Trevisan strongly emphasized the ethical obligation of researchers to protect sensitive personal data and to respect the confidence and trust of their interlocutors.

In the final presentation in this session, Petre Matei provided an excellent example of the crucial interface between historical research, archival practice, and community relations. Matei is a historian who has created a project to assist Roma survivors of deportations to Transnistria to claim the compensation – including monthly pension and medical care – to which they are entitled under Romanian law (Law 189/2000 establishing rights for victims of oppressive regimes in Romania from 6 September 1940 to 6 March 1945 on ethnic grounds) and the Ghettoentengesetz of by the Federal Republic of Germany. Since the law privileges documentary proof over verbal testimony, Matei assisted survivors to locate documents testifying to their deportation in local archives across Romania. In his talk, Matei explained the challenges this raised (changing orthography of names / places; unreliable memories of survivors; in some cases, resistance from archivists). The project will also create an audio-

visual archive of interviews with survivors that can be used for educational purposes, to raise awareness of the deportations and promote tolerance in contemporary society.

### Session Three: Community Relations

This session asked participants to reflect on the use of historical knowledge and historical sources – including visual sources or oral testimonies – in community engagement or educational projects, as well as academic research.

Milada Zavodská and Helena Sadílková presented the case of *My Friend Fabián*, a film made in socialist Czechoslovakia during the early 1950s that dramatised the story of a Roma man and his son in Ostrava in the aftermath of the Second World War. Including Roma actors who were themselves survivors of persecution, the film can be read on multiple levels as a site of memory regarding persecution, internment, and mass violence during the war and Occupation.

The theme of memory and commemoration was pursued in the presentation of Jana Müller, a founding member of the Alternatives Jugendzentrum (AJZ) in Dessau-Roßlau, which runs projects to ‘make local history visible’ with a focus on commemorating the Holocaust and combating racism in contemporary society. Youth groups researched the life history of Erna Lauenburger, the Sinteza fictionalised as Unku in the novel by Grete Weiskopf (alias Alex Wedding), which became part of the GDR school curriculum. Using documents from the city archives, as well as interviews, the group produced a 35-minute film, ‘Was mit Unku geschah’.

The next two presentations tackled the problem of categorisation and labelling. Jan Selling, University of Uppsala, presented on the history of Roma in Sweden, and in the course of his paper warned against the use of the term ‘Gypsy’. This provoked a direct response from Lilyana Kovacheva (Centre for Educational Integration of Children, Ministry of Education, Bulgaria) in the context of a presentation based on her ethnographic research amongst Roma communities in Bulgaria. Two linked ideas emerged forcefully from her presentation and in the subsequent discussion. One was the way in which ethnographic classifications and taxonomies within communities identified as ‘Roma’ are created and maintained through social practice and the production of knowledge. The second was the political meaning ascribed to these ethnographic categories and the power relations at play when they are used as a means of identification.

The final presentation was given by John Cole, from the Ethnic Minority and Traveller Achievement Service at Liverpool City Council. This talk highlighted the gap that often exists between academic research – for example by historians in universities – and local government or communities. Closing this gap, through better communication or joint projects, is crucial for overcoming discrimination and prejudice against minority communities. In the case of Roma communities from East Central Europe, a more joined-up approach was crucial for challenging the stereotypes that frequently shape their interactions with local societies and government agencies.

#### Session Four: Using History to Combat Racism and Discrimination

In the final session a group of secondary school students from the Enterprise South Liverpool Academy (ESLA) presented a project that used the story of Ede and Unku to raise awareness of racism in contemporary society. ESLA staff and pupils had previously been involved in an extra-curricular initiative on Tackling Racism and Promoting Diversity to respond to conflicts within the student body. Growing out of this, a group of students are using a reading of the novel *Ede and Unku* as the basis for a photo-montage project that reflects on the consequences of racism and discrimination.

#### Concluding Discussion

The concluding discussion focused on two main topics. The first was the possibility of creating a website or database of archives across Europe as a resource for research into the history of Roma. The second concerned avenues for further research projects on a European scale.

In conclusion, the workshop demonstrated that historical research is crucial for understanding the roots of past and present discrimination against Roma (for example, in policing, child welfare, sterilisation) and thus has a vitally important role to play in policy-making and education. Human rights claims often require individuals to provide narrative accounts of their past experiences, supported by documentary evidence, and policy-makers should be alive to the complexity of this process. History is also of great importance for tackling racism and discrimination through educational and community projects. The commemoration of traumatic events is valuable and important but is not sufficient for understanding the complex histories of Roma, Sinti or Gypsies across Europe, which cannot be reduced to a simple story of victimisation or marginalisation.