

Roma & Sinti Culture as Modern German and Austrian Studies: A Guide for Researchers

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Abstract

The history and culture of Roma and Sinti, especially within Germany, has faced repeated attempts of erasure and suppression. Although the Roma and Sinti form an integral part of German society today and comprise important periods of Germany's long history, this is a culture and history deliberately kept from the public. I began my project investigating the existing literature and canon of historical works on the Roma and Sinti to better understand their origins and culture for myself, but also to see the landscape of the work and better understand the figures behind it. I found overwhelmingly that these works were outdated by today's standards, with little scholarship having emerged in recent decades. This came with a whole host of problems: the labels used to refer to Roma and Sinti, the lack of consent in ethnographic interviews, and large generalizations or assumptions about Roma across Europe.

Secondary Sources

Two books stood out in their ability to highlight the shortcomings of previous scholarship: Isabel Fonseca's anthropological work *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey* and Klaus-Michael Bogdal's historiographic work *Europa Erfindet die Zigeuner: Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung*. Fonseca, an anthropologist, conducted interviews with Roma families with whom she stayed across Central and Eastern Europe throughout the late 1980's and early 1990's. The book often retells of extremely intimate and vulnerable stories that her interview subjects shared. Fonseca also added her own commentary. While this style of writing was engaging and conjured vivid images of Roma life and folklore, it ultimately bridged into a realm of fiction, solidifying preconceived negative stereotypes about the Roma and Sinti into an unforgiving public consciousness. Fonseca's retelling of false stereotypes and mass generalizations about the Roma and Sinti, such as the tendency for women and girls to marry young and thus be kept out of educational institutions, do more harm to their autonomy and existence than help to

educate on their plight. While Fonseca's intentions cannot truly be determined, it is not unlikely that she, like many authors working within this area of study at the time, plays with a personal fascination to achieve literary success at the expense of the Roma. This is a concept Klaus-Michael Bogdal closely investigates in his work. A trained historian, Bogdal explores the idea that Europeans have been fascinated with the Roma and their culture for centuries yet have deliberately taken efforts to ensure their suppression. He retells many important historical moments involving or revolving around the Roma and Sinti, including their banishment from the South Asian subcontinent in the 11th century, their arrival in the European continent between the 14th and 15th centuries, and recountments of their discrimination from these early periods leading into the Second World War.¹

One notable example of early discrimination and stereotyping that Bogdal elaborates on is *Carmen*, the operatic work by George Bizet. Though this departs from the German regional example, it serves a larger point; Europeans have often taken from the marginalized what they deem of cultural value for themselves and discarded the rest. In Spain, this was Flamenco; in other countries, like Germany and Romania, it has been the outsourcing of cheap and undesirable labor, explicit exclusion from educational institutions through geographic isolation, and even antiquated laws that permitted and encouraged the hunting of Roma people. Bogdal responds to previous scholarship, like the work of Fonseca, stating: "Die Ethnographie verfremdet, indem sie vorrangig Kollektive in den Blick nimmt und nicht Individuen. Ihr Interesse gilt dem, was alle Menschen eines Volkes miteinander teilen und ausüben, also jenen Erscheinungen, die über eine lange Dauer bestehen und sich in Ritualen wiederholen."² Bogdal attempts to offer a comprehensive history without doing the Roma and Sinti injustice, and while he rightly establishes a more objective and critical perspective on the Roma and Sinti, his work still lacks an authentic voice and room for autonomy from the Roma themselves.³ This reveals that the state of scholarship on Roma and Sinti in Germany remains largely unexplored, perhaps because the previous scholarship has created a strong narrative that many are uninterested in reinvestigating or critically analyzing. The work of Fonseca is just one of numerous examples in the scholarship about Roma and Sinti, which has solidified their image in the public consciousness as a crime-ridden, uneducated, and impoverished - while also granting a strange fascination for or seduction of the Roma woman. This potent combination has been a cornerstone for the white male-dominated European culture because it both preserves a sacred hierarchy and creates a convenient scapegoat for societal and economic issues that cyclically recur.

Memoirs

This realization led me to investigate new avenues of approach, still searching for this voice but hard-pressed to find it. I learned that emerging from the horrors of the Holocaust were the first memoirs and published writings by Roma. In the past, the Roma identity of authors or artists was deliberately hidden, or non-Roma authors outright stole

¹ Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner*.

² Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner*, 279.

³ Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner*, 478.

their pieces. But then there was Philomena Franz, one of the first German Roma authors and one of the first female Holocaust survivors to be published. Rather than reduce her work through a simple summary, I offer a quote from the beginning pages:

Ich wünsche mir von ganzem Herzen, daß dieses kleine Buch dazu beiträgt, die Wiederholung von Geschehnissen zu verhindern, die man bei uns in Deutschland 'Vergangenheit' nennt. Die Wahrheit ist schmerzlich, aber nur mit ihr können wir unser Glück aufbauen.

Die Liebe ist Vollkommenheit. Sie gibt uns Freude, Sie ist Weisheit und Wahrheit, denn sie kommt von Gottes Güte und Gerechtigkeit, Liebe fördert immer wieder zum Verzeihen heraus. Wenn wir Liebe nicht haben, zerstört die Menschheit sich selbst, sind wir Menschen verloren.⁴

In her retelling of her life story and the traumas she survived, Franz adopts a framework of love and forgiveness towards hatred, something deeply rooted in her upbringing in a multigenerational Roma family. At the time of its discovery during my path of research, this was a revelation. It was the first time I was hearing from a Roma person themselves about their culture and life experiences without worry of its authenticity. I learned a lot from this account. As I read more memoirs and enquired more about survivors like Philomena Franz, I discovered that writing accounts like these took a heavy toll, often leaving their writers in shambles, having to relive their trauma during the writing process while simultaneously having to reckon with ongoing discrimination against Roma and Sinti. While the Holocaust memoirs offer some of the first authentic recountings of Roma and Sinti experience and expression, they are limited in that they only speak to the experiences of the generation of Holocaust survivors, with only anecdotes about the ancestors (whose voices and stories we have little hope of recovering) and the successors of this now dying generation. These memoirs tend to unintentionally center the horrors of genocide and the role of the Nazis and their collaborators.

Memory politics was something that Bogdal also warned about extensively throughout his book because the aftermath of the Holocaust, in many ways, forgot non-Jewish survivors. LGBTQ+ survivors, disabled survivors, and Roma and Sinti survivors have often been relegated as “the others,” and have been treated as such in the immediate aftermath of the liberation. While LGBTQ+ survivors remained imprisoned as other survivors were liberated, disabled individuals did not receive proper and necessary medical care, and Roma and Sinti were not publicly acknowledged in Germany as survivors worthy of reparation until the 1980s, after mass-mobilization efforts. Additionally, Holocaust memoirs have a limited scope; they take on a victim perspective of what has happened to an individual, which, while the acknowledgment is important and necessary, can often be insufficient in the larger goal of gaining autonomy. In the story-telling of Roma experience, I wanted to see what Roma *did*, and this was the push from memoirs into poetry. Poetry revealed itself in this context to be a medium uniquely suited to allowing writers to express themselves without the same limitations that a

⁴ Franz, *Zwischen Liebe und Haß*, 9.

memoir or other mediums might require, additionally expanding the scope of experiences beyond the atrocities of the Holocaust with an emerging image of a rich and colorful history and culture.

So, the question emerged: How can we spotlight the voices and experiences of *second-generation* Roma and Sinti in the German-speaking world? This second generation, as I am using the term, refers to the children of Holocaust survivors. This generation offers a new perspective and addresses the existing gaps in scholarly research, shifting the narrative on Roma and Sinti towards one rooted more closely in authentic experiences and accounts. The road of memoirs led me to a woman named Dotschy Reinhardt – a Sinti woman born in Ravensburg, Germany on November 10th, 1975. She belongs to a long lineage of Sinti musicians, including the famous Django Reinhardt, and was born into a generation removed from World War Two. In her own memoir, *Gypsy: Die Geschichte einer große Sinti Familie*, Reinhardt addresses her experiences living in an intergenerational family, the distinctions of Roma versus Sinti identity, and the role that mediums of poetry and music have played in processing identity struggles and generational trauma. I became increasingly interested in her work as a musician and poet, which she only referenced in her memoir.

Poetry

Reinhardt authored the Foreword to a book entitled *Die Morgendämmerung der Worte: Moderner Poesie-Atlas der Roma und Sinti*, a Poetry Anthology of collected works of Sinti and Roma poets and artists from across the world and translated into German. In the quote below, Reinhardt captures the importance of poetry and anthologies like this one, when she details the ways in which survivors otherwise struggle to express their traumatic experiences in traditional literary formats: “Oft standen die Überlebenden vor dem Problem, dass die extreme Traumatisierung nicht in die Sprache einer lebensgeschichtlichen Erzählung gefasst werden konnte. Die Lyrik, die Musik und die bildende Kunst war für viele Sinti und Roma ein dankbares Medium, mit dem sie ihr unausgesprochenes Leid zu artikulieren und zu vermitteln vermochten.”⁵ In naming the additional trauma that is incurred by recounting generational trauma for the explicit consumption of others, Reinhardt leaves readers with a deeper understanding that only mediums like poetry can offer a safe haven and a way for survivors to articulate their unspoken pain and to share their stories how they choose to and potentially find means of healing. Audre Lorde famously speaks to the value of poetry in her essay “Poetry is Not a Luxury” and writes:

*This is poetry as illumination, for it
is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which
are - until the poem - nameless and formless, about to be
birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience
from which true
poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling
births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.⁶*

⁵ Reinhardt, *Die Morgendämmerung der Worte*, 20.

⁶ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36.

Again, Lorde reiterates the idea that poetry is a necessary medium for those in need of free expression and liberation, where it cannot otherwise be found in their everyday lives. Furthermore, Lorde states:

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.⁷

As a format without binding rules or structure, poetry allows individuals to work through their pain and trauma with a unique opportunity to confront complications with their identity freely. Lorde's personal experiences studying and writing in Germany, coupled with her ability to draw connections back to the generations of trauma survivors in the United States, further demonstrates the irreplaceable role of poetry in academic discourse and especially in the pursuit of under-researched (or poorly researched) topics. She inspired grassroots activism among the Afro-Deutsch community and mentored Black feminists like May Ayim. This movement and Lorde's invaluable contributions to the decolonization of German culture are imperative to this research project and any project that aims to broaden the horizons of German Studies.⁸

Die Morgendämmerung der Worte: Moderner Poesie-Atlas der Roma und Sinti also features one of Dotschy Reinhardt's poems "Chaplins Geheimnis," or Chaplin's Secret. In this poem, she references a letter uncovered by Charlie Chaplin's daughter in which it is revealed by the sender that Chaplin has ethnic ties to the Roma. The anthology features a German translation of Reinhardt's song with the same title, originally written in English:

*Mitunter frage ich mich selbst
warum ich mich verstecke
vor der Wahrheit
meine ethnische Herkunft
leugne und dann höre ich mich
sagen
es ist einfacher für mich so zu verfahren
mein Geheimnis sehr tief in mir zu
verstecken tief in mir
tagtäglich*

*Deine Gedanken sind ohne Vorbehalte,
deine Liebe ist schlicht rein*

⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 37.

⁸ Plaum, "Audre Lorde."

*ich wünschte ich könnte sein
wie du gelobt sind immer
diejenigen
die immer noch glauben
es gäbe Menschenrechte für Alle
du ermutigst mich damit aufzuhören mich weiterhin
zu verstecken weiterhin mein Geheimnis sehr tief in
meinem Innern
zu bewahren
tief in mir
tagtäglich*

*Aber es gibt viel mehr als nur schwarz und
weiß nun sehe ich endlich sie sind nicht im
Recht
und nur kulturelle Vielfalt die Wahrheit
offenbart und Liebe alle Mauern des Hasses
einstürzen lässt ich werde nicht mehr
verleugnen mich, nicht mehr
Und ich werde mein Geheimnis nicht mehr verbergen in mir
niemals mehr
nie mehr, nie⁹*

The “ich” in the poem addresses Chaplin directly, trying to understand why he would spend his life hiding his Roma background. She recognizes her secrecy in his secret, which brings many questions and conflicting emotions to the surface. Charlie Chaplin might have concealed his identity in pursuit of a successful career. The message in four lines are particularly striking:

*du ermutigst mich damit aufzuhören mich weiterhin
zu verstecken weiterhin mein Geheimnis sehr tief in
meinem Innern
zu bewahren¹⁰*

Reinhardt uses the “ich” speaker in the poem to indicate a sense of motivation to embrace one’s ethnic identity as Roma, elicited by the shame that Chaplin held for his own identity. And yet, she acknowledges the complexity of this choice, knowing that an outspoken embracing of a marginalized identity may come at a severe cost, namely to one’s social status. Roma and Sinti history is a cyclical one of people who have been killed for their mere existence, and the trauma and fear to proudly represent that identity is passed down through generations. In a culture that values the wisdom of its elders and respects the knowledge within the family unit, this is a cycle that cannot be broken easily and has only emerged in recent generations, empowered through a rise in social movements to embrace and recognize diverse cultural heritages in Germany. Through the “ich” in the poem, Reinhardt grapples with her own dilemma of this cost, a

⁹ Reinhardt, *Die Morgendämmerung der Worte*, 42

¹⁰ Reinhardt, *Die Morgendämmerung der Worte*, 42.

seemingly common motif among second-generation Roma and Sinti artists and writers. In choosing to stray from Chaplin's path of secrecy and hiding, Reinhardt is also less overtly exemplifying generational differences that perhaps Chaplin, or others from this older generation of Roma, could not choose to be proud and outspoken about their identity, for the fears of discrimination that undoubtedly faced them. We begin to see that agency in the second/younger generation takes shape in the necessity to choose to be outspoken and to be able to choose in the first place. A refusal to compromise between your identity, community, career, and success is the essence of the emerging voice within the second generation, which researchers and advocates must continue to foreground.

This piece also addresses issues that many historians, especially in relation to the Holocaust, are continuing to grapple with: memory politics. The memories of events that have induced extensive trauma in communities have become increasingly politicized because of how those traumas are measured against other communities that suffered under the same powers of oppression. Additionally, the ways in which communities have been treated and been able to recover from these traumas has a significant impact on the way their traumas are remembered across generations. In the case of the Roma and Sinti, memories around the Holocaust and periods of discrimination before that are certainly remembered and still felt deeply in succeeding generations, arguably because they were acknowledged as victims several decades after the end of the Holocaust and continue to face harsh discrimination to this day. Often, Roma and Sinti struggle and treatment is overlooked because it is compared to that of other marginalized groups who were targeted during the Holocaust. As a researcher, I found it important to distinguish these groups, in order to preserve, honor and respect their memories.

Archival Research

During the following summer, a continued effort to find a means of centering Roma voices and experiences took me to Maryland for a visit to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Archives. While access to archives and their material are few and far between, especially within this area of study, it was important for my research to uncover what dimension an archive might add, if any. Searching broadly for terms like "Roma and Sinti" often delivers results in the thousands or more, which require some introspection and refining on behalf of the researcher. Given my background as an undergraduate researcher comfortably housed in the humanities, I was most interested in materials pertaining to the cultural study of Roma and Sinti within the time frame after the Holocaust. Each researcher has a different focus and can use this to guide their selection of materials within the archive. My own project focused on uncovering any original material written by Roma people or similar projects that might reveal the former, eliminating any objects or artifacts that the archive might hold, as they were not explicitly the focus of my project. This narrowed the options significantly and revealed a number of sources with which I could spend my time analyzing and collecting data for my project. The two most significant findings from this visit were the Mary Costanza *Living Witness* Collection, which documented an art exhibition and a scholarly text, *Jewish and Romani*

families in the Holocaust and its Aftermath edited by Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková.

The scholarly volume *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* was fruitful because it provided detail on the transitional phase of post-Holocaust survival and readjustment, which I had not yet considered in my timeline. The book is an anthology comprising chapters by different authors and the three most salient ones were: “The Romani Family before and during the Holocaust: How Much Do We Know? An Ethnographic-Historical Study in the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region” by Volha Bartash, “Return to Normality?: The Struggle of Sinti and Roma Survivors to Rebuild Life in Postwar Germany” by Anja Reuss; and “The Postwar Migration of Romani Families from Slovakia to the Bohemian Lands: A Complex Legacy of War and Genocide in Czechoslovakia” by Helena Sádilkóva. The book adopts a framework of family and critical familial studies, a theme that I found in my own research to be particularly important in conversation about and with Roma and Sinti. Throughout many of the scholarly texts and in works pursued by Roma and Sinti authors or artists, the family unit recurs as an element central to the Roma culture and experience. For example, the idea that knowledge is passed from elder family members down to younger members (a point deemed higher in value than traditional education systems), ostracization from larger society meaning family members were often the only people to be relied on, and the intercultural pressure for women and girls to marry young which has long been a cornerstone of Roma and Sinti culture because it preserves the sacred unit of family and thereby longevity and survival of a culture and its people. Family has often been used throughout works by Roma and Sinti artists or authors to demonstrate continuous survival and perseverance through multi-layered discrimination, a point my own research has tried to expand upon, but truthfully survival is a key element to Roma and Sinti existence across history. While the first and the third chapters of *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and its Aftermath* depart from my own focus, the second chapter, authored by Anja Reuss, hits on the unspoken dialogue between the generations of Philomena Franz and Dotschy Reinhardt respectively. She discusses the politics of Roma and Sinti survivors left to fight the German government for acknowledgment of their persecution during the Holocaust, financial reparations, and recognition as Displaced Persons (DPs). Many of these efforts were ultimately shot down or unequally implemented due to existing prejudice and stereotyping of Roma and Sinti that remained in the aftermath of the Holocaust. She also looks at the minimal scholarship on survivors, often executed by non-Roma authors, and does a similar critical analysis of the victim narrative that strips autonomy over Roma and Sinti cultural expression and experience. In her work, she draws attention to the designation of Sinti and Roma as second-class citizens, quite literally only ever included in the margins of history and politics. She notes how the lack of aid and support for Roma and Sinti survivors in post-war Germany renewed a distrust among Roma and Sinti communities of state authority and only further ostracized them. This isolation led to the reproduction of many social inequalities that Roma and Sinti have faced for centuries and continue to fight for.

The second discovery during my visit to the archive was the work of Mary Costanza, an American artist born in 1927, who, in her late years, decided to pursue a research project with the ultimate goal of curating a museum exhibit on the art of Holocaust survivors. She had a specific interest and focus on art produced within concentration camps, and also worked with a group of 6 artists whose art she worked to recover and make known throughout her project. The USHMM Archive gave me access to her meticulous and extensive notes that aided in her project's research and curation phase, all compiled and donated by her husband. I was particularly interested in her research methods and process—how she discovered these artists, the notes of her interviews with them, and her selection process on who to include or exclude from the final book and exhibit. Ultimately, she chose not to include works from non-Jewish survivors, due to a personal liking and kinship to the Jewish artists she worked with and for the sake of having a more cohesive narrative. While reviewing these materials was informative to my own research process and larger goals for my project, I saw that the curation of materials in archives is largely incomplete. I anticipated the resources and information on non-Jewish Holocaust survivors to be more extensive. I would advise researchers to be weary and critical of the offerings from archival collections and to look more deeply into the digital archive collections.¹¹ My conclusion on this project is that I hope to see a similar one on Roma artists pursued in the future, with the same dedication and commitment to amplifying their art and stories of survival and resilience.¹²

Conclusion

In summary, this resource guide aims to highlight the primary and secondary sources available to researchers and call attention to the work being done to uplift Roma and Sinti voices and enrich the curricula of German Studies. While not exhaustive, this guide uses my own research to aid others pursuing similar projects of an understudied nature to encourage ethical, holistic, and even unexpected pathways of research and discovery. The ambition behind my research was to center the voices of the Roma and Sinti through a compilation of materials and works that successively led me closer to this goal. I hope to have demonstrated throughout the course of this guide how integral Roma and Sinti are to German Studies and the work that still needs to be done to include their experiences and history into the discipline.

Acknowledgements:

¹¹I found the most useful aspect of visiting an archive in person was the access to incredibly knowledgeable and helpful archival librarians. For new researchers and old, these librarians tend to hold years of knowledge and experience working in the specific subject area of the archive. Likely, they will be the people pulling and requesting the materials not housed in the archive itself, which you request prior to your arrival. Additionally, they assist you in digitizing different materials and navigating their digital archive selections.

¹²I was recently informed of a similar project that recently debuted in Austria - centering Roma artist and Holocaust survivor Ceija Stojka. This body of 90 paintings and drawings captures life pre-war, the family unit, and experience within concentration camps and under Nazi rule. This historic exhibition demonstrates concrete movement in a direction where Roma and Sinti people have autonomy in the narratives of their lives and experiences.

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