

**RE-THINKING ROMA RESISTANCE  
THROUGHOUT HISTORY:  
RECOUNTING STORIES  
OF STRENGTH AND BRAVERY**



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**ERIAC, 2020**

## Chapter 5

# Roma Resistance in occupied Poland

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### Introduction

From the 1980s, the Roma and Sinti<sup>1</sup> Genocide<sup>2</sup> has been increasingly recognised and commemorated in international Roma circles and has become a topic of public and scientific debate. The growing presence of Roma and Sinti discourse is the result of efforts of Roma activists and scholars to increase awareness of their struggles and experience of genocide during the Nazi period. Unfortunately, it still remains on the margins of the dominant Holocaust narrative, commonly unacknowledged by the broader public, and widely ignored in the education system. Research into the persecution and genocide of Roma and Sinti is challenging because it concerns stories of people and families which remained unmentioned until long after the war, even within the communities themselves. Therefore, the extermination of Roma and Sinti is called “The Forgotten Genocide”.

Compared to other European countries, the Polish case of Roma resistance has a unique character. There is relatively high public awareness of Roma resistance during the Second World War in Poland on account of the phenomenon of Romani women saving Jewish and Roma children, and the crucial Roma uprising in the Zigeunerlager in Auschwitz-Birkenau camp resistance

1 In this paper, I use terms Roma and Sinti referring to the community being the topic of my research. The pejorative terms Gypsy and Gypsies are used in the text only in quotes of the historical documents and statements.

2 In this paper in referring to the Roma and Sinti experience during Second World War I use the terms Genocide, persecution, and extermination.

event on May 16, 1944.

This paper summarises and discusses the key findings of my research on Roma resistance in occupied Poland conducted between February and June 2020. The main goal of the study is to present the activities and stories of Roma resistance, which took place in occupied Poland during the Second World War. This study aims to provide a regional perspective on Roma heroism and to contextualise the historical research of Roma and Sinti Genocide. The research is particularly important because of its intent to raise awareness of Roma resistance, as well as promote a deeper understanding of the Roma and Sinti Genocide during the Second World War and associated discourse.

The first part of this paper discusses the historical context of Roma in Poland and their experiences under occupation. The next section describes Roma resistance events such as the individual escape attempts from ghettos and camps, Roma and Sinti uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as uprisings in the Warsaw ghetto, and the Roma revolt in Karczew. The following part presents outstanding stories of Roma heroes in the Polish Armed Forces and in the Polish resistance movement. The last part of this paper shows a notable case of Romani women's participation in the resistance.

## **State of research**

The existing Polish literature on the topic of the Roma and Sinti fate during the Second World War primarily focus on general issues of the genocide. The valuable and important monographs published in Poland are *Voices of Memory* vol 7. *Sinti and Roma in KL Auschwitz*, published in 2011 in Oświęcim by the International Centre for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust, *Naród z popiołów. Pamięć zagłady a tożsamość Romów* (A nation of ashes. Memory of extermination and the identity of the Roma) by Sławomir Kapral-ski (Warsaw 2012), and *Prześladowania i masowa Zagłada Romów podczas II wojny światowej w świetle relacji i wspomnień* (Persecution and mass extermination of the Roma during World War II in the accounts and memories), edited by Jerzy Dębski, and Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (Warsaw 2007). Another important publication is *Beyond the Roma Holocaust. From Resistance to Mobilisation* (Cracow 2017) under the editorship of Thomas. M. Buchsbaum and Sławomir Kapral-ski.

The Roma and Sinti Genocide is a topic of many publications written by the

expert, Adam Bartosz: *Małopolski Szlak Martyrologii Romów*, (Malopolska trail of the Roma Martyrology; Tarnów 2015), *Tabor Pamięci Romów* (Roma caravan's memorial; Tarnów 2003), and chapter in *Nie bój się Cygana. Na dara Romestar*, (Do not be afraid of Roma; Sejny 2004). The Roma and Sinti persecution in Auschwitz-Birkenau is discussed in the valuable monograph *Cyganie na polskich drogach*, (The Gypsies on Polish roads) written by Jerzy Ficowski (Warsaw 2013). Ficowski also collected local histories about Nazi executions of Roma and Sinti families, resistance stories, and Auschwitz songs. Besides monographs, so far, several authors published chapters and articles about the Roma and Sinti Genocide. However, none of them bridged the gap in research on Roma resistance in occupied Poland. That is the reason why this study is scientifically important.

Roma and Sinti resistance is part of the permanent exhibition in Block 13 of Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, which opened on August 2, 2001. The project was undertaken and conducted by the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg in cooperation with the Auschwitz Memorial, the Association of Roma in Poland, the Cultural Association of Austrian Roma, the Museum for Roma Culture in Brno, and organisations from the Netherlands, Hungary, Serbia, and Ukraine. The exhibition plays a significant role in sharing the Roma and Sinti experience in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp and genocide during the Second World War.

## Research Methodology and Sources

Roma resistance in occupied Poland has been described in some sources<sup>3</sup>, but – as mentioned above – it is limited mostly to the subject of Roma Upris-

3 See Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska. 2018. "Research report. Resistance and Survival of the Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz-Birkenau" In. *Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath*. Collection of Working Papers, edited by Evelin Verhás, Managing Editor Angéla Kóczé and Anna Lujza Szász. Budapest: Tom Lantos Institute; Ficowski, Jerzy. 2013. *Cyganie na polskich drogach* [The Gypsies on Polish roads]. Warszawa: Nisza Press; Helena Kubica, Piotr Setkiewicz. 2018. "The last stage of the functioning of the Zigeunerlager in the Birkenau camp (May-August 1944)". *Memoria*. No. 10 (July) 2018: 6-15; Jerzy Dębski. 2001. "Ucieczki Romów z KL Auschwitz" [Roma Escape from Auschwitz]. *Dialog-Pheniben*. No 1: 4-20.

ing in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the story of Alfreda Noncia Markowska<sup>4</sup>. To uncover more stories and dig deeper into existing materials, my research was based on the data-collection method. The study mainly consists of archival materials, documents, and journalistic articles. The research was also based on seeking new knowledge and evidence through new archival and testimonial evidence and oral histories. As a part of the research, I conducted interviews with Roma survivors and their family members, including Monika Sternal, Helena Siwak, Jan Chojnacki, and Roman Chojnacki. My research also included testimonies of Roma collected by Romani Historical Institute in Oświęcim. I used qualitative methods to analyse the findings.

The collected data consist of testimonies of Roma heroes, archival statements, military service books and documents of the Romani Historical Institute in Oświęcim and the Institute of Romani Heritage, Memory and Holocaust's Victims based in Szczecinek. My research also included Roma resistance stories collected and quoted by Jerzy Ficowski in the monography *Cyganie na polskich drogach* (The Gypsies on Polish roads) and the report on the Romani resistance event written by Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoner – Tadeusz Joachimowski, quoted in *The National Socialist Genocide of the Sinti and Roma*. Catalogue of the permanent exhibition in the State Museum of Auschwitz, edited by Romani Rose.

The collected data reveals new knowledge: new archival and testimonial evidence of Roma resistance in occupied Poland. On the one hand, valuable testimonies and military documents confirm outstanding Roma resistance heroism. On the other hand, analysed materials represent a novel, deeper perspective of the Roma fate during the Second World War.

## Definition of resistance

Firstly, it is essential to clarify the definition of resistance I adopt for this research. Resistance studies are an emerging and developing field of social science within which “exists a plurality of concepts and definitions of actions

4 See Gierliński, Karol Parno. 2006. “Piękne życie Alfredy Markowskiej” [Beautiful life of Alfreda Markowska], *Romano Atmo*, No. 5: 10-11; Jakimik, Elżbieta Alina, and Gierliński, Karol Parno. 2009. *Kobieta w środowisku romskim* [Woman in Romani community]. Szczecinek: Polish Roma Union Press.

that are seemingly equal or related in one way or another to resistance” (Baaz, Lilja, Schulz Vinthagen, 2016, 137). Resistance can be defined in various ways, depending on different contexts, relations, and targets. I based my analysis on Bob Moore’s definition, which describes resistance as “any activity designed to thwart German plans or perceived by the occupiers as working against their interests” (Moore 2000, 2).

Researching Roma resistance against Nazism and Fascism in occupied Poland is challenging because of its many facets. Polish Roma not only survived persecution but actively participated in the Polish Resistance Movement, as well as the Polish Armed Forces<sup>5</sup>. While Polish resistance was defined as a response to occupiers, the goal of Roma resistance was not only to resist anti-Roma persecution, but to survive.

## Historical Context

Before the Second World War, approximately fifty thousand Roma lived in Poland. An estimated thirty-five thousand of them were murdered during the Second World War (Bartosz 2004, 65). The Second World War began on September 1, 1939, with the Nazi German invasion of Poland. Soon after that, on September 17, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the East. The Polish Army was defeated after a month but never officially capitulated. Government-in-exile, the military and intelligence services were organised abroad.

Soon after the outbreak of the war, the Nazis started deporting thousands of Polish Roma and German Sinti to the “General Government”<sup>6</sup> established in the territory of occupied Poland. They were taken to and murdered in the ghettos of Warsaw, Łódź, Siedlce, Lublin, Kraków, Tarnów, Lwów and to the Nazi extermination camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Chełmno and Nerem, Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec.

Roma were also murdered in pogroms and executed – often together with Jews – by SS, police, Gestapo, gendarmerie, and Ukrainian fascists (in Nazi

5 Polish Armed Forces in Exile also known as Polish Exile Army (pol. Polskie Siły Zbrojne) - organised by the Polish government in-exile in September 1939, after the occupation of Poland to fight against Nazi Germany and its alliance during WWII.

6 The General Government (Ger. Generalgouvernement, Pol. Generalne Gubernatorstwo) – German zone established in the territory of occupied Poland.

service or Ukrainian Insurgent Army bands). Significant numbers of Roma who lived in occupied Poland were executed en masse (Ficowski 2013, 150). Especially harsh was the fate of Roma on Eastern Borderlands, as local police often helped German Nazis in committing vicious and horrendous crimes against Roma (Bartosz 2015, 7).

## **Roma resistance in occupied Poland**

The Roma resistance in occupied Poland assumed a variety of forms and types. The following sections will discuss the notable resistance efforts of Roma and Sinti in occupied Poland such as escape attempts from the ghettos and camps, Roma and Sinti uprising on May 16, 1944, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Roma revolt in Karczew and the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. It should be emphasised that even though some of these resistance acts had a violent character, this analysis focuses only on Roma intentions and objectives of resistance.

### **Escape attempts from camps and ghettos**

In discussing the topic of Roma resistance, one cannot ignore individual acts of resistance. Escape attempts of Roma and Sinti prisoners from camps and ghettos during the war can be defined as a particularly unusual revolt reaction against Nazi persecution. Undoubtedly, escape attempts were motivated by extremely hard living conditions inside the ghettos and camps. Prisoners made risky decisions to escape spaces of oppression to survive. In this paper, I mention only several cases of Roma who successfully escaped from the camps, ghettos, pogroms, massacres or transports to places of extermination.

The information about Roma - who escaped from the ghettos, camps and mass execution places - appears in archival documents and testimonies. The section about the escape attempts is also part of the Roma and Sinti exhibition in Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum mentioned previously. The exhibition also includes information about Polish Roma, Aleksy Kozłowski, who escaped from the concentration camp in Lublin, and Mieczysław Pawłowski, who escaped from the slave labour in Germany to England.

In the archives of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, there is evidence of 38 Roma and Sinti who managed to escape; 31 of them did not survive: 30 were re-cap-

tured and put in the “bunker” in Block No. 11 in the main camp and then executed at the “death wall”; one man was shot during an attempted escape. There is no information about the other seven. However, it should be emphasised that most of the attempts to escape ended tragically: “Captured prisoners were often executed at the Death Wall, and their bodies, ridden with bullet wounds and dog bites, were paraded through the camp in order to deter other prisoners” (Talewicz-Kwiatkowska 2018, 115).

### **Roma and Sinti Uprising on May 16, 1944, in Auschwitz-Birkenau**

Undeniably, one of the most critical Romani resistance events from the period during the Second World War is the Roma Uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp. On May 16, 1944, the SS wanted to start the liquidation of the “Gypsy Camp”, sending the Sinti and Roma still living there to be murdered in the gas chambers. The political prisoner, Tadeusz Joachimowski warned the prisoners about the planned action. Roma and Sinti prepared to fight by arming themselves with stones and tools. They barricaded themselves in the barracks and were ready to ward off the threat of extermination (Rose 2003, 287). The report on the Romani resistance action, written by KL Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoner Tadeusz Joachimowski states:

The last camp leader (Lagerführer) and also Rapportführer of the gypsy camp was Bonigut. [...] On May 15th, 1944, he came up to me and said it looked bad for the gypsy camp. There was an order out for the destruction of the gypsy camp. He had received a corresponding order from the political section by Dr. Mengele. The gypsy camp should be liquidated by gassing all the Gypsies remaining in the camp. There were about 6,500 Gypsies in the camp at that time. Bonigut instructed me to tell those Gypsies, in whom I had full confidence, about this [...] The next day at about 7:00 p.m., I heard a gong, which indicated the onset of the camp curfew. Vehicles drove up in front of the gypsy camp, and an escort of around 50 to 60 SS-men equipped with machine guns got out. The SS men surrounded the barracks inhabited by the gypsies. A few SS-men went into the housing barracks and shouted: “let’s go, let’s go.” There was complete silence in the barracks. The gypsies gathered there were armed with knives, spades, crowbars, and stones and were awaiting further events. They didn’t leave the barracks. The SS men didn’t know what to do [...] After a while, I heard a whistle. The SS men who had been surrounding the barracks climbed up onto their vehicles again and drove off. The camp was no longer sealed off.” (Rose 2003, 288-289)

During the spring and summer of 1944, the Nazis deported an estimated 3,000 Roma and Sinti to other Third Reich concentration camps. The approx-

imately 3,000 Roma left in KL Auschwitz-Birkenau – mainly children and older adults – were murdered in the gas chambers on the night of August 2-3, 1944 (Rose 2003, 290). In remembrance of the victims of Roma and Sinti persecution and genocide, the European Parliament in 2015 declared August 2 Roma Genocide Remembrance Day (to be commemorated annually). Besides August 2, May 16 has become a significant date in the commemoration of Roma and Sinti Genocide.

In addition to Joachimowski's testimony, there are three testimonies and statements of German Sinti survivors - Walter Winter, Otto Rosenberg and Hermann "Mano" Höllenreiner – who described the revolt in Zigeunerlager. Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska states that despite the controversy of the Roma resistance event and lack of official documents and testimonies confirming the uprising at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, three new pieces of evidence "might provide partial support for the information included in his [Joachimowski] testimony" (Talewicz-Kwiatkowska 2018, 123). Despite this, the event of May 16, 1944, is increasingly promoted and commemorated by Roma and Sinti communities, activists, scholars, and governmental and non-governmental organisations.

### **Roma revolt in Karczew**

In addition to the Auschwitz-Birkenau uprising, another significant revolt took place in Karczew, where Roma fought against the gendarmerie. Jerzy Ficowski, in the monograph *Cyganie na polskich drogach* (The Gypsies on Polish roads), cited two interesting testimonies about the battle in Karczew. The first came from a Roma man (unknown name) who survived the event. His family was subsequently caught by the Nazis in Miłosna and taken to the ghetto in Jadowo. From there, they managed to escape and hid in Karczew. The Roma man was quoted with the following words:

But there [in Karczew], there was no peace either. Soon after, the Germans began murdering the Gypsies. There were two houses of Gypsies. They are already killing Gypsies in one house and another. They throw small children onto the pavement from high windows, full of blood. I jumped out of the window, and when I fell, I shattered my knee. I hobbled to a restaurant where two brothers were drinking vodka, and they did not know anything about what Germans were doing with our Gypsies. I told them, and we ran away. One brother had a revolver, and when the Gestapo started chasing us, he killed two. (Ficowski 2013, 154)

The second testimony about Roma resistance in Karczew quoted by Ficowski<sup>7</sup> says:

“An armed robbery took place in the town of Karczew. German investigators, based on testimonies of witnesses, stated that the Gypsies carried out the robbery; it was also quoted that the traces in the snow lead to the Jewish camp. Gendarmerie arrived to murder the Gypsies. Between the Gendarmerie and the Gypsies ensued a fight. Fifty Karczew Gypsies noticed the gendarmes and, knowing the situation, opened the fire. As it turned out, the Gypsies were equipped with handguns and fought to the last bullet. However, the colony did not survive.” (quoted in Ficowski 2013, 154-155)

The quoted testimonies were the only ones found in research that mention the resistance of Karczew Roma. There are no other statements which could provide more information about this event. The two statements present different perspectives on the Roma revolt in Karczew. The first is the perspective of a Roma man and witness, who, together with his family was a target of oppression, who found himself in the middle of the combat. The second is the perspective of a non-Roma witness.

Although historians are careful in reconstructing past events, it should be noted these two testimonies provide evidence of Roma participation in the combat against the oppressor. Despite discrepancies, both narratives seem to describe the same Roma revolt. According to both accounts, resistance was the reaction to the attack on Roma. Resistance in Karczew shows the Roma's attitude against the Nazis. Roma did not choose nonviolent and passive resistance. They fought to survive.

### **Roma Revolts in the Warsaw Ghetto**

The Warsaw Ghetto (also known as Warschauer Ghetto, and getto warszawskie), established in October 1940 and demolished in the aftermath of the revolt, was the largest Nazi ghetto during the Second World War (an estimated 450,000 Jews were imprisoned inside<sup>8</sup>). The Warsaw Ghetto Up-

7 Jerzy Ficowski quoted the story from the historical monograph in Yiddish language published in Germany (B. Arensztajn, Zagłada Otwocka, Falenicy i Karczewa, Bamberg). Ficowski was a translator of Russian, Romani, Hungarian and Yiddish languages.

8 See August Grabski “Warsaw Ghetto 1940-1943”, Warsaw Ghetto Museum official website, accessed October 3, 2020, <https://1943.pl/historiagw>.

rising began on April 19, 1943 as the prisoners organised an armed revolt to prevent deportation to the camps. By May 16, 1943, the Nazis had crushed the uprising, and sent the remaining ghetto residents to the extermination camps in Treblinka and Majdanek. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest Jewish revolt during the Second World War history.

Besides the Roma revolt in Karczew, Ficowski cited another Roma resistance story from the Warsaw Ghetto Diary of Adam Czerniakow. Roma prisoners from Warsaw ghetto were transported to Treblinka camp and murdered in the gas chambers (often together with Jews). Ficowski is quoting a fragment from a manuscript about Roma in Warsaw ghetto written by doctor Edward Reichter:

I stayed in the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw from its establishment until January 25th, 1943. At the end of 1941 or early 1942, the Germans placed a large group of Gypsies in the Jewish prison on Gęsia Street. These Gypsies were under the supervision of the Jewish correctional officer consisting of officers of the Jewish service (Jüdischer Ordnungsdienst). One day, the Gypsies revolted, overpowered the prison service, and got free. (Ficowski 2013, 165)

He goes on:

In early October 1942, the Germans began to bring Roma from the Aryan side. In November 1942, the Gypsies in several dozen tied a keyman, ripped out the keys, and got out of prison, trying to get to the Aryan side. The Germans noticed them near the walls and started shooting, killing many of them. The rest were sent back to prison and sent to Treblinka in January 1943. (Ficowski 2013, 166).

The above-mentioned stories about the revolt in Warsaw Ghetto shed new light on Roma resistance. Despite the lack of official documents confirming these events, and issues related to the scarcity of sources, these two outstanding cases of resistance allow us to gain some understanding of Roma attitudes and reactions to Nazi persecution. According to doctor Reichter's writings, Roma took extraordinary attempts to escape from the Warsaw ghetto. Both fragments of Warsaw Ghetto Diary seem to describe a well-planned and organised resistance action by Roma.

## **Roma in the Polish Armed Forces (Polskie Siły Zbrojne)**

The Polish Armed Forces in exile (pol. Polskie Siły Zbrojne) was created to fight against Nazi-Germany and its allies during the Second World War. The Polish Armed Forces created in the West fought alongside the Western Allies. The Polish Armed Forces in the East (called Polish Army in the USSR), created in 1941 as the consequence of Polish-Soviet Sikorski-Mayski agreement fought against the Nazi Germany alongside the Soviet Union. Both were loyal to Polish Government-in-exile.

Following the war, the goal of the Polish government was to dismantle anti-communist and political structures of the Polish Underground State with its organisations. As a result, former underground soldiers and partisans were persecuted for their participation in the war by the officers of the Department of Security *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa (UB)* (1945-1954) and later the Security Service (SB) *Służba bezpieczeństwa* (1956-1990). Between 1945 and 1990, officers of UB and SB arrested, tortured, and murdered many former soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces.

Vast Polish literature devoted to the Second World War ignored the participation of Roma soldiers and partisans in military service in occupied Poland. In fact, they took up arms and participated in battles, often shed blood, and lost their lives. Roma and Sinti were in active military service during the outbreak of the Second World War and on the entry of German troops into Poland in September 1939. Roma in the army were integrated with Polish society. They were treated as ordinary recruits in the army, so in the military records, they are not listed as members of the Roma minority.

Roma soldiers who survived the Second World War hid their wartime experiences from family members due to war trauma and fear of repressions from the communist government. Survivors often did not want to share their stories for fear of their own safety due to the post-war persecution of former Polish soldiers and partisans, who suffered mass arrests, torture and deportation to Soviet labour camps at the hands of Communists. Even after 1989, following the end of the communist era in Poland and the return of democracy, former Roma soldiers and partisans were still afraid to discuss their past. Furthermore, at the time, many Roma survivors were already dead, old, sick, or still distrustful of the government. A whole generation of Roma who fought against the Nazis in the Polish resistance movement have passed away, forgot-

ten. However, there are testimonies and pieces of evidence of Roma participation in combats during the Second World War.

The Roma soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces during the Second World War displayed both heroism and Polish patriotism. One among them was Stanisław Nazarewicz (September 3, 1916, Potelicz, Poland – unknown) who, at the outbreak of war found himself in Lviv (Polish Lwów, present-day Ukraine). Serving in the Fortieth Children of Lviv Infantry Regiment, he participated in the defence of the “Warsaw-West” section and then the protection of the bridges on the Wisła river during the invasion of Poland until the fall of Warsaw.

Afterwards, captured by Germans, Nazarewicz became a prisoner of war. Eventually released, he returned to Lviv, where he became a subject of the mass arrests carried out by the Soviets and was deported to the Krasnojarski region. There he struggled to survive, facing extreme conditions including frost, hunger and malnutrition, diseases (on account of poor hygiene), and gruelling work. However, he managed to survive these extremely harsh conditions, and eventually returned to his homeland.

Thereafter, Nazarewicz joined the Polish Armed Forces under the command of General Władysław Anders, serving first in Turkmenistan near Samarkand, and then in Iran. Later, Nazarewicz took part in the famous Battle of Monte Cassino, where he was injured. He fought in the ranks of the Fourth Carpathian Rifle Battalion, part of the Second Carpathian Rifle Brigade. During the Italian Campaign, he also took part in the Battle of Ancona, and participated in the offensive to break the fortifications of the Goth Line at Cattolica. During the three-day battle, Nazarewicz was wounded once again. After the war, in 1947, he finally returned to Poland.

Nzarewicz received many decorations for his bravery and heroism including the Monte Cassino Commemorative Cross, Cross of Valor for acts of bravery during the Second World War, commemorative badge of the Second Polish Corps of the Polish Armed Forces, and the medal For participating in the 1939 Defensive War - a tribute to persons who actively took part in the war in September 1939 against the Nazis. Nazarewicz also received the Africa Star (British Commonwealth award for participation in hostilities in North Africa) and Italian Star (British military award established by King George VI for participants of the hostilities in Italy between June 11, 1943, and May 8, 1945). (Kwiatkowski 2018, 60-62)

Nzarewicz’s story is particularly important because it represents the phe-

nomena of a decorated soldier who is simultaneously a Polish and Roma war hero, as well as Roma resistance hero. His testimony, military book service and received distinguished service medals and decorations present strong evidence of his active participation in battles, and extraordinary bravery in defending his motherland. Nazarewicz is an outstanding example of Roma heroism, who was awarded for his military service.

The Romani Historical Institute in Oświęcim (Poland) has archived documents pertaining to other Roma who served in the Polish Armed Forces, such as Navi Karol Iglencic<sup>9</sup>, as well as Wawrzyniec Racki and a man named Hyło, who fought in the Battle of Monte Cassino and was seriously injured. The Auschwitz exhibition also presents instances of Roma military personnel such as Mieczysław Paczkowski – a Roma taken to a German forced labour camp, who escaped to England where he joined the Polish Armed Forces. Altogether, the findings strongly suggest that Roma exhibited Polish patriotism and a willingness to fight and to prove themselves as courageous and brave soldiers. Roma demonstrated devotion and a sense of attachment to their Polish homeland. They became symbols of Polish and Roma pride.

## **Roma in the Polish Resistance Movement**

The Polish Resistance Movement was part of the Polish Underground State. Polish resistance covered German and Soviet zones of occupation. The dominant partisan organisation in occupied Poland was Armia Krajowa<sup>10</sup> (Home Army), loyal to the Polish government-in-exile (estimated 400,000 members). There were also other large partisan organisations, such as Armia

9 See the statement of Władysława Jaglencic, Karol Iglencic's daughter: <http://www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net/Wladyslawa-Jaglencic-184.html>

10 Armia Krajowa (The Home Army) – the dominant Polish resistance movement in occupied Poland during Second World War formed in February 1942. The organisation was loyal to the Polish government in exile in London.

Ludowa<sup>11</sup>, Bataliony Chłopskie<sup>12</sup>, Narodowe Siły Zbrojne<sup>13</sup>, Obóz Polski

Walczącej<sup>14</sup>, Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa<sup>15</sup>, Gwardia Ludowa WRN<sup>16</sup>, Konfederacja Narodu,<sup>17</sup> etc. The Polish resistance movement in the Second World War period was the largest underground resistance in all of Nazi-occupied Europe, and one of the largest in the world. Post-war communist government in Poland declared the anti-Nazi resistance movement as “illegal”. Between 1945 and 1990, thousands of members of the Polish resistance movement were persecuted, prisoned in the Gulag, and murdered by UB and SB officers of the Polish communist government.

The research on Roma participation in the Polish resistance movement<sup>18</sup> is highly problematic. Members of resistance movement groups used nicknames instead of real names, making it challenging to identify Roma partisans among the fighters. Another issue is that the graves of soldiers and partisans – including Roma – are located in mass or individual graves, most often with the inscriptions “NN”, meaning unknown. The records and documents of the members of military and partisans’ units were classified. Currently, unclassified Polish resistance movement’s documents are archived in the Institute of

11 Armia Ludowa (People’s Army) – communist partisan force set up on January 1, 1944 by the Communist Workers Party by order of the Polish State National Council. They supported the Soviet Army and fought against Nazi German forces.

12 Bataliony Chłopskie (Polish Farmers’ Battalions) – Polish resistance movement, guerrilla and partisan organisation created in 1940s by the agrarian political People’s Party. In 1944 it was partially integrated with the Home Army.

13 Narodowe Siły Zbrojne (National Armed Forces) – Polish right-wing underground organisation of the National Democracy movement set up in 1942. They mostly fought against Nazi Germany and communist partisans’ groups, but also with the Home Army.

14 Obóz Polski Walczącej (Camp of Fighting Poland or Fighting Poland Movement) – minor part of Polish resistance movement operated in 1942-1944. Group was created by former members of political party Obóz Zjednoczenia Narodowego (Camp of National Unity).

15 Narodowa Organizacja Wojskowa (National Military Organisation) – Polish resistance movement organisation created in October 1939, politically related with the Stronnictwo Ludowe National Party.

16 Gwardia Ludowa WRN (People’s Guard of WRN) – Polish resistance movement organisation created in 1939.

17 Konfederacja Narodu (Confederation of the Nation) – Polish resistance movement organisation created in 1940 by the far-right political party named Konfederacja Narodu.

18 The notes of the Roma in the Polish Resistance Movement also appear in the Auschwitz exhibition. The display includes the information about Reinhold Buriański who fought in the ranks of the Polish resistance movement and Józef Kwiatkowski who was arrested and taken to Auschwitz while helping the Polish Resistance Movement.

National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej).

The variety of valuable information about Roma in the Polish resistance movement during the Second World War is provided in the research conducted by Jacek Edward Wilczur – a Polish historian, lawyer, political scientist, and a former soldier of the Polish resistance movement. He worked as a member of the Chief Commission of the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish nation. He was also founder and director of the Institute of Romani Heritage, Memory, and Holocaust's Victims based in Szczecinek. His study *Roma in the Polish resistance movement during the Second World War and the German occupation of Poland*, published in 2007 in the series *Roma yesterday and today*, bridges the gap in knowledge about Roma resistance.

Wilczur stated that during the Second World War in occupied Poland, Roma took part in the Polish resistance movement and several partisan units. He described stories and examples of Roma resistance heroes in several Polish resistance units including: the partisan group under the command of Sergeant “Kmicic”, the partisan unit of Major “Jarema”, and the group commanded by Józef Madej (nicknamed Jerzy). According to Wilczur, Polish Roma fought in Polish resistance units in the area of Nowogrodziec, Kielce, Lublin, Białystok, Wilno, Cieszyn, and Podhale. They gained a reputation for being great, brave, courageous, loyal and disciplined soldiers. Most Roma in the Polish resistance movement described by Wilczur had escaped from ghettos, camps, sites of pogroms, massacres, or in transit to sites of extermination.

Roma members of Polish resistance movement, however, were not only survivors of the Nazis extermination attempts. Within Roma communities in Poland, memories of individual Roma partisans<sup>19</sup> are preserved. In his autobiography, Edward Dębicki, a Romani musician, composer, and poet, speaks of his cousin, Niemo, who served in The Home Army: “Niemo during the war served in AK [Polish: Armia Krajowa]. He did not hide it because he thought, as we all, that fighting for Poland was a huge honour” (Dębicki 2004, 208). After the war, Niemo was sent to prison and murdered by communists for his participation in the Polish resistance movement. It can be assumed that the case of Niemo was not an isolated instance and that there were other Roma partisans like him. Thanks to Roma post-war memory, some oral histories

19 My family also keeps the memory of my uncle Piotr Ondycz – the brother of my grandfather who was a Roma partisan in Polish resistance movement and got wounded in the fight with Ukrainian Nationalists.

have survived and are still recollected among Romani families.

Available sources documenting Roma participation in the Polish resistance movement exist mainly in the form of oral histories. Stories document aspects of underground resistance activities, which allow us to deepen our understanding of Roma attitudes and reactions to persecution. Roma did not accept their fate and had the will to fight. In the case of Roma who escaped from the places of oppression and extermination and joined the Polish resistance movement, they demonstrate instances of double resistance. On the one hand, there are acts of resistance against persecution to survive, on the other, active resistance against Nazi-occupiers of Poland. Instead of hiding, they chose to fight.

## **Romani Women Resistance**

Besides Roma men, brave Romani women also took part in resistance efforts during the Second World War and were involved in the Polish resistance movement. Romani women were often considered as valuable to Polish resistance movements, particularly as lookouts, emissaries, messengers and couriers. Partisans' sent Romani fortune-tellers to spy in enemy-controlled areas and supply valuable information about the number of soldiers, and the equipment and weaponry in their possession. Romani women also risked their lives to save Jewish and Roma children being transported to extermination camps and pogroms. These are examples of outstanding and unique Romani heroism<sup>20</sup>.

Karol Parno Gierliński and Elżbieta Jakimik, in their book *Kobieta w środowisku romskim* (The woman in the Roma community), mention several Polish Romani women who saved children during the Second World War. Among them, Noncia, Mamcia, Koto and Zolka (Gierliński, Jakimik 2009, 18). These are only Romani “nicknames”, which makes it difficult to identify the women. In my research, I only found information pertaining to two of the women – Noncia and Mamcia.

20 See Jerzy Ficowski, *Cyganie polscy – szkice historyczno-obyczajowe*, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1953; Jerzy Ficowski, 2013. *Cyganie na polskich drogach* [The Gypsies on Polish roads]. Warszawa: Nisza Press.

Alfreda Markowska (in Romani “Noncia”; born in 1926)<sup>21</sup>, is a Romani woman hailing from the ethnic sub-group, Polska Roma, who gained widespread respect across Poland. She is often referred to as “Romani Irena Sendlarowa.”<sup>22</sup> In 1941, in the forest near Biała Podlaska, the Nazis murdered her family, including her parents, siblings, and other relatives (in total between 65 to 85 Roma). Markowska was the only one to survive. She spent days searching the forests for her family’s mass grave before she would find it. She then searched for relatives, who she hoped survived the forest massacre, looking for them in places where there were known to be larger Roma groups, including the ghetto in Bełżec, Łódź.

In 1942, at the age of 16, Markowska married. She and her husband were arrested by Ukrainian nationalists, who then handed them over to the Germans. They were sent to the ghetto in Lublin. They managed to escape and settled back in Rozwadów, where, under conditions of forced labour, Roma were made to work on the railways. This gave Markowska access to trains transporting Roma and Jews to extermination camps, including Auschwitz. During transport stops, she managed to save children, given to her by their mothers. Among the children she saved was then three-year-old Karol Parno-Gierliński, later a well-known sculptor, prose writer, and poet.

Markowska wanted to save everyone, especially the children who had witnessed the pogroms and massacres. She secretly travelled to places where the Nazis murdered the Roma in search of child survivors. After returning to Rozwadów, Markowska organised false documentation for rescued Roma and Jewish children. She raised them by herself or secured refuge for them with other Roma families. She also returned some of the rescued children back to their families. During the Second World War, she saved approximately fifty Jewish and Roma children from death (Gierliński 2006, 10-11). In 2006, Markowska was the first person of Romani origin to be awarded the Commander’s Cross with the Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta<sup>23</sup> by the Pres-

21 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfreda\\_Markowska](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfreda_Markowska); <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/p/alfreda-markowska/>; [https://encyklopedia.wimbp.gorzow.pl/m/markowska\\_alfreda/markowska\\_alfreda.html](https://encyklopedia.wimbp.gorzow.pl/m/markowska_alfreda/markowska_alfreda.html)

22 Irena Sendlarowa (1910-2008) was a Polish humanitarian, social worker and nurse. During the Second World War she was smuggling Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. She was providing them false documents and sheltered them in Polish families, orphanages, etc.

23 See “Wyjątkowe bohaterstwo” [Extraordinary bravery], last modified October 17th, 2006. President of Poland website, accessed June 16th, 2020, <https://www.prezydent.pl/>

ident of Poland. In 2017, she was also awarded the title of Honorary Citizen of the City of Gorzów Wielkopolski. She became the subject of a documentary film entitled *Phuri Daj*, made by Agnieszka Arnold. Portraits of Markowska are also the subject of two murals in Poland, in Warsaw and Gorzów Wielkopolski<sup>24</sup>.

The story of Markowska's rescue missions has been proven by the testimonies of her family members who bore witness, and – most importantly – by the survival of those she saved. Even though some of the rescued children – mainly Jewish – left Poland, Markowska stayed in touch with some of them. It should also be noted that it is likely that some of the children saved by Markowska were unaware of her help. Thanks to the effort of Roma activists and the Polish Government, Markowska's story has received widespread publicity so that now she is a well-known and celebrated public Roma figure in Poland. This has raised awareness of Roma resistance so that it is now a publicly-known fact. Aside from popularising Roma resistance, it helps to fight antigypsyism and promote awareness of the fate and genocide of the Roma and Sinti during the Second World War.

The second brave Romani woman mentioned by Gierliński and Jakimik is Zofia Chojnacka (1913 – 1986), referred to in Romanes as “Mamcia” or “Chomyca”. Like Markowska, Chojnacka was a traditional Romani woman from the Polska Roma sub-group. Between 1939 and 1942, Chojnacka's family stayed in Warsaw. There, she and other Roma women hid and sheltered Jewish children placed in their care. In 1942, during one of the Nazi inspections to search for hiding Jews, the family was targeted. During the search, officers found and killed Jewish children, including a boy hidden by Chojnacka in her room. The rest of the Jewish children were mistaken for Roma by the Nazis and managed to avoid execution.

As punishment, officers gathered the Roma in the Grochów district square in Warsaw and shot a total of 30 Roma, including men, women and children. They then deported the rest of the Roma to the Treblinka extermination camp, including Chojnacka's husband. He managed to escape from Treblinka to Warsaw, but unfortunately, after a week, he died in one of the Warsaw hospi-

archiwum-lecha-kaczynskiego/aktualnosci/rok-2006/art,150,1064,wyjatkowe-bohaterstwo.html

24 Alfreda's Markowska murals adorn the walls of Primary School No. 1 in Gorzów Wielkopolski, and Junior High School No. 20 in Ochota, Warsaw.

tals due to exhaustion and lung contusion<sup>25</sup>.

Chojnacka, together with several other Roma and the children, managed to survive. Soon after, however, they were sent to the ghetto in Siedlce. There, Chojnacka rescued Jewish children from mass shootings. Later, thanks to the help of a Sinti guard, who warned her about the planned liquidation of the Roma, Chojnacka and most of her family escaped the ghetto the night before. They fled to the forest where they stayed with the partisans, and the younger Roma began participating in the Polish resistance movement.

Due to the realities of war, Chojnacka's family often changed their whereabouts. They mostly lived in rural stations, which they rented from local hosts. Finally, Chojnacka and her family ended up in the Rzeszów region. There, she continued to rescue Roma and Jewish children, travelling to pogroms to help save survivors, and looking after Jewish children left in her care. Despite being a widow with four children, she risked her own life to protect orphaned Roma and Jews.

During the Second World War, Chojnacka saved approximately thirty Roma and Jewish children. She displayed extraordinary heroism, courage, and kindness. After the war, she and her family led a nomadic lifestyle until 1964 (the year the forced settlement of Roma was enforced in communist Poland). The family settled in Sławno. Chojnacka was reluctant to talk about trauma, pain, losses, and wartime. Up until her passing, she was respected among the Roma community<sup>26</sup>. For years, Chojnacka's story was only known inside the Polish Roma community. Although Chojnacka's story is similar to Markowska's one, she did not live to see the day her heroism was publicly recognised. She did not receive any official awards; instead, she was awarded inside the Roma community with great respect for her service, courage and commitment.

Another brave woman, whose story is present in the collective wartime memory of the Carpathian Roma community, was Weronika Goga (1905-1977). In January 1943, the Nazis burst into Goga's house in Mordarka and arrested all Roma adults, leaving the children behind. The arrested Roma were transported to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they were murdered. Goga miraculously survived, as the Nazis did not notice her among the crowd of chil-

25 Zofia buried her husband in Warsaw. She remained faithful to him and never remarried.

26 According to the statement made by Zofia Chojacka's son - Jan Chojnacki and grandson Roman Chojnacki.

dren. Goga was the only adult left behind, alongside her four children and her relative's thirteen children.

Despite the war, and the constant danger Goga experienced as a lone Romani woman, she took it upon herself to feed, care for, and raise the 17 children. Her heroism, sense of duty of care and efforts to raise the Roma children, were admirable<sup>27</sup>. Goga's story was not an isolated case in the Carpathian Mountains region, where Nazis often arrested adults and left children behind. Pelagia Siwak and Sawko Bladycz from Powroźnik town took care of fifteen Roma orphans left by the Nazis during the Second World War<sup>28</sup>. According to the biography of one of the most famous Romani Poets – Papusza Bronisława Wajs (1908-1987) - she also adopted and raised an orphan of the war, whose family had been killed in a pogrom. She named him Tarzanio<sup>29</sup>.

Interpreting these events is difficult, and the exact number of such cases is unknown. It is not clear why the Nazis left and did not arrest the children together with the adults, and instead chose to leave them behind. Despite the lack of official sources, the above-mentioned testimonies and stories preserved in the memory of the Roma community are evidence of unique resistance among the Roma. Roma people – particularly women – supported, cared for and attended to other vulnerable people during the war, and especially Jewish and Roma children and orphans.

## Conclusions

Romani resistance during the Second World War is a particularly important part of the history of Roma and Sinti. The research addressed the increasing interest in the resistance of Roma and Sinti in Europe. Collected and analysed materials – mainly of scarce and fragmentary – may partially bridge the gap in the research of Roma resistance in Poland. The results of my study point to the significant participation of Roma in the different types of resist-

27 According to the statement made by Monika Sternal – Weronika Goga's granddaughter.

28 According to the statement made by Helena Siwak – a Romani woman saved with 14 other Roma orphans during Second World War by Pelagia Siwak and Sawko Bladycz in Powroźnik town.

29 See Kajan, Tadeusz. 1992. "Spotkania z Papuszą"[The meetings with Papusza] In Papusza czyli wielka tajemnica (Papusza – a great secret) p. 9, edited by Krystyna Kamińska, 8-17. Gorzów Wielkopolski: Gorzów Publishing House.

ance in occupied Poland.

Collected and analysed materials present a novel, deeper perspective of Roma Resistance in occupied Poland during the Second World War. The archival materials, documents, as well as new testimonial evidence, and the oral histories of survivors and their family members present strong evidence of Roma resistance. Roma resistance in Nazi-occupied Poland has a unique character because of the variety of forms of resistance and outstanding acts of heroism, courage and bravery. During the Second World War period, Roma fought and resisted, both individually and collectively. Unfortunately, for the most part, Roma heroes remain mostly anonymous.

Roma resistance events in occupied Poland such as individual escape attempts from the camps and ghettos, the Roma and Sinti Uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau on May 16, 1944, the Roma revolt in Karczew, and the Roma uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto represent outstanding examples of resistance against Nazi persecution. Despite problematic issues related to the scarcity of sources, these unique stories shed new light on Roma resistance and allow us to gain some understanding of Roma attitudes against the Nazis and their reactions to oppression. They were motivated to fight for their survival. Resistance was a Roma response to the attack the minority faced.

Available sources prove that Roma participated in the fight against the Nazis as soldiers in the Polish Armed Forces and partisans in the Polish Resistance Movement. Roma people in the Polish Exile Army such as Stanisław Nazarewicz, Karol Iglenc, Mieczysław Paczkowski, Wawrzyniec Racki, and Hyło took part in several important battles against the Nazis, including the Battle of Monte Cassino. Roma in the Polish resistance movement also fought bravely against the Nazis. It should be noted that the Roma, who escaped from places of oppression and joined the Polish resistance, are examples of double resistance: against persecution and Nazi occupiers. Roma soldiers and partisans demonstrated patriotism and a strong will to fight for Poland. They proved themselves to be courageous and brave citizens. Roma heroes made sacrifices, sometimes even laying down their own lives, and should be remembered and acknowledged by society. Sadly, the participation of Roma soldiers in the Polish Armed Forces and Roma partisans in the Polish resistance movements in the combat against the Nazis during the Second World War remains under-acknowledged in the mainstream discourse of Polish history.

The resistance of Roma in occupied Poland has a unique character in the case of Romani women. Romani female figures such as Alfreda Markowska

Noncia, Zofia Chojnacka, Weronika Goga and Pelagia Siwak saved and sheltered orphans and children in need. Roma women saved and rescued Roma and Jewish children from pogroms, camps and other places of extermination. Romani women made sacrifices to provide rescued children with care and food in extremely challenging wartime conditions, which was especially harsh due to Roma persecution.

Thanks to the efforts of Roma activists and the Polish Government, Roma resistance in occupied Poland has received public acknowledgement, including official recognition and commemoration. This narrative is limited mostly to Alfreda “Noncia” Markowska and the Roma Uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Aside from raising knowledge and awareness of Roma resistance and the Roma and Sinti Genocide during the Second World War, it also helps to create combat antigypsyism, challenge stereotypes and promote awareness of Roma contributions to European and national history.

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Statements:

The statement made by Jan Chojnacki

The statement made by Roman Chojnacki

The statement made by Monika Sternal

The statement made by Helena Siwak

Władysława Jaglenicz statement written by Ewelina Ferko about Roma Persecution in the Second World War from September 3rd, 1998 at Romani Historical Institute in Oświęcim (Poland) <http://www.stowarzyszenie.romowie.net/Wladyslawa-Jaglenicz-184.html>