

VOICE OF COLOR: 3 ESSAYS ON THE TRANSNATIONAL ROMA MOVEMENT BY MARIA BOGDAN

Maria Bogdan is reflecting on Resistance, Belonging and Resilience as key-concepts of the transnational Roma-Movement through the perspective of great arts and culture productions of the community.

This essay-series is published in collaboration with Deutsche Welle Europe as part of the [NewsSpectrum Fellowships](#) for minority language Media. This is an initiative by the International Press Institute (IPI) and MIDAS. DW Europe and ERIAC are partner organizations of this program.

This 3-parts essay series was also published in German on Deutsche Welle Europe:

[Part 1 | Die Macht der Worte – Vom Schweigen zum Widerstand](#)

[Part II: Die Worte die Fehlen – Über Heimat und Zugehörigkeit](#)

[Part III: Die Worte der Heilung – Resilienz in der Roma-Bewegung](#)

*** Read this essays also in Romanes soon!

Introduction Voice of Color- Essays on the transnational Roma Movement by Dr. Maria Bogdan

Just like all the other social movements in the world, the Romani movements have been transforming in the age of social media. Their ways of communication have been improving in the last more than a decade, resulting in intensive and unifying combat against prejudices, negative discrimination, racism. The cultural field has become the most significant tool of the movement: the contributions of artists and scholars to its main causes have been increasing. Researching and deconstructing the European Roma history has become one of the main focuses, through some major organizing theories and unifying concepts such as resistance, belonging, and resilience. This series of essays intends to give an insight into the works of the transnational Romani movements in contemporary Europe through reviewing significant artworks that embody some of the main concepts of the movements. The goal of the reviews is to show the ways how the Romani movements have been trying to change the position of the Roma communities in Europe from the stranger to the acknowledged equal citizen and in the meantime to transform the hostile environments into welcoming open societies.

The Power of Words – From Silence to Resistance

Many survivors of the Romani Genocide stayed silent for decades about their experiences. The end of this silence – was the beginning of a new narrative on Romani people in European History.

The concept of resistance is broadly interpreted but with regards to the Romani movements, it can be understood as a response given to the inhumane, violent and hostile environment that Roma people have suffered from throughout history. Its recent understanding is mostly connected to the major traumatic event of 20th century Europe, The Holocaust, and through that developed several interpretations as a reflection on the past traumatic happenings and on the present community mobilizing acts against Anti-Roma racism today.

Resistance as Solidarity

Roma faced systematic state-level persecutions during WWII that was about taking away life: By destroying the freedom of communities and destroying individual liberty. The Romani name of the Holocaust, **Pharrajimos** reveals another understanding of this violent system from the perspective of the victims: the term (cutting up, destroying, devouring in English) also expresses the state of mind of being left alone as a group and as an individual. In this light, resistance means not only having and preserving the will of staying alive and doing everything to survive like hiding or escaping from captivity, but in the meantime, it is also about showing solidarity towards each other.

Showing care for each other, in a system of inhumanity by sharing food or making efforts to save each other from death – all of these are different faces of resistance.

For the latter, an example is the late Raymond Gurême, a French Manouche survivor who after escaping nine times from different French internment camps, joined the French Resistance, and fought for the liberation of Paris.

And I must also mention the uprising of 16 May here, because, although the State Museum of Auschwitz found out a few years ago that there are no real data on this, it has become a strong symbol and reference point for the Roma movements in the fight against Anti-Roma racism in recent years.

Resistance for Recognition

Zoni Weisz holding a speech at the German Bundestag talking about „the forgotten Holocaust“

The genocide of Sinti and Roma during WWII. is also called '*the forgotten Holocaust*' – as Zoni Weisz, a Sinto Holocaust survivor called it when he was speaking as the first Sinti/Roma on the Holocaust Remembrance Day in the German Bundestag in 2011. The expression points out that the persecution and murder of Sinti and Roma were for decades left out of the Holocaust discourse.

It was only in 1982 when West Germany recognized the genocide of Roma during the Nazi regime and it happened only 30 more years later when due to international effort in 2012 the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma victims of the National Socialism was unveiled in Berlin. And finally, 2015 became a crucial point in the struggle for recognition and equity when the European Parliament declared August 2, as the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day.

By this time, many were brought up without even hearing about the Roma genocide but with putting equation between criminality and Roma. This ignorance resulted in some racist norms still staying in practice for long years after the war in Europe, like the control over the freedom of movement in France until 1968 or in Bavaria, Germany until the '70ies. So, having the Roma genocide recognized in the Holocaust discourse has the power of raising awareness on discrimination the Roma have been still suffering from and is a reminder of the dignity and respect Roma should be treated with.

How to tell the inexpressible and why does it matter?

In our mediated societies, art, media and storytelling have become crucial tools for defining, convincing, or reminding us about our shared values. They have also become the tool for the survivors to talk about what happened to them. Share it directly or with help. But not immediately. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, it was difficult for the survivors to describe what they went through. To find the right words so that it will never happen again. Many Roma, just like many of the Jewish survivors, chose to stay silent for long decades.

There is only one film director who tries the impossibility to reflect on the decades of the silence of the Roma survivors: Tony Gatlif, French film director of Romani ethnicity made films on the Roma genocide, and his full-length fiction film, titled *Liberté* in French and *Korkoro* in Romani (*Liberté* means freedom, *Korkoro* means alone) attempts to tell the unimaginable.

Trailer *Liberte/Korkoro* by Tony Gatlif | Source: Youtube Channel Lorber

His focus is not on victimization or accusation but mainly on expressing *how* it happened – which as well means reflecting on the soul, on the state of mind of being persecuted as a Roma. The complexity of how could it feel like to witness, sense, experience and fear the cruelty, ignorance, and evil of humankind is what we see in the actions of the character of Toloche who talks mostly with his body: his movements, and gestures that he takes on Gatlif's breathtaking music. There are multilingual dialogues but there is no need to speak French, German, or Romani to fill it all.

Resistance as Commemoration

The plot is based in Vichy France during the second world war. The film drama is inspired by the true story of a Roma man and a notary who helped him to be released from an internment camp in France and by the true character of Yvette Lundy who was a French resistance fighter in WWII and received the 'Righteous among the nations' (Les Justes) honorific after the war. The story of the Roma man was collected by Jacques Sigot historian as part of a testimony. Gatlif wrote the story with historical accuracy but also with the freedom of expression that the film could provide and he published the extended version of the story in a book that he wrote together with Erik Kannay.

Still, when we look at the film, we find that it is not a reconstruction but a commemoration. A cinematic tribute to the Roma who were persecuted and killed in the Pharrajimos, and to the 'Justes', the non-Roma people who took the risk to save Roma during the Holocaust.

The film guides the audience away from the clichés and stereotypes, the romanticized and vilified depiction of the Romani people, and the demonization of all non-Roma at the time by drawing real characters. Representation of traditions in the film, like music and beliefs, are not constructing the mystical strangers but on the contrary, they give a glimpse of the ways of a community who adopted to live through uncertainty for centuries.

So, the film points out something else as well: That hostility against Roma didn't start and didn't end up here.

Korkoro makes us understand that the decades of the silence of many Roma survivors was also about keeping this painful understanding at bay. Like in the case of the late [Ceija Stojka](#), who broke the silence only in her fifties, when she finally started to write down her memoirs and paint and draw what she experienced as a child in the concentration camps that she remembered with great details.

The Voice of Color

[An exhibition that opened on January 27, in Seville, Spain, on Ceija Stojka's graphic works titled 'La memoria invicta' / 'The unbeaten memory'](#) points out the long-term silence of the Roma survivors as a form of 'inner resistance', that in many cases was about the fearful dilemma of *how* to tell *what happened* so that the others, the new generations, listen and not let it happen again.



Poster of the exhibition „La memorial incite“ in Sevilla, Spain opened in January 2022 | Link: <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/noticias-andalucia/exposicion-memoria-invicta/6364202/>

When Ceija Stojka could overcome her silence, she became a well-known actor in the transnational Roma movements' struggle for recognition. Her works are educating us all about the power of words.

Link Video exhibition: <https://www.rtve.es/play/videos/noticias-andalucia/exposicion-memoria-invicta/6364202/>

This essay is also in reflection to the recent Jimmy Carr 'His Dark Material' TV show where the stand-up comedian is joking about the Roma genocide saying that no one ever talks about it '*because no one ever wants to talk about the positivities*'. While today's progressive stand-up comedies are popular because of their constructive and educative nature besides being entertaining [this cannot be said about this show](#).

But the most important to see is that there is never a place for joking about this horrible moment in history. The fact that he did so shows that there is still a long way to go in the struggle against Anti-Roma racism that is still an everyday experience for the Roma.

This is part 1 of 3 this essay series. The three parts of the essay series „Voice of Color“ are published between February and March 2022

Proposed readings: There are two books written on the topic of resistance in the Romani movements that I recommend:

<https://eriac.org/re-thinking-roma-resistance-book-roma-resistance/>

Book 2: Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and its Aftermath:

<https://tomlantosinstitute.hu/what-we-do/roma-rights-and-citizenship/publications/roma-resistance-during-the-holocaust-and-in-its-aftermath.html>

References

1) In the general parts of my texts, I use Roma as an umbrella term that includes the different related groups such as Sinti, Manouche, Kalé, etc. with all respect.

2) <https://viewer.joomag.com/memoria-en-no-10-july-2018/0531301001532506629/p6?short>

3) <https://www.dw.com/en/german-president-makes-historic-speech-at-auschwitz/a-14798859>

4) Jacques Sigot (1994): *Ces barbelés oubliés par l'histoire: Un camp pour les Tsiganes et les autres, Montreuil-Bellay, 1940-1945*. Wallada.

5) Gatlif, Tony; Kannay, Eric (2009). *Liberté*. Librairie Académique Perrin. [ISBN 978-2-262-03062-9](https://www.perrin.com/fr/9782262030629).

6) Voice of Color: Essays on the transnational Roma movements

The term comes from Critical Race Theory where minority status is regarded as bringing with it 'a presumed competence to speak about race and racism'. The term *Voice* refers to the 'ability of a group to articulate experience in ways unique to it'. (Delgado, R. Stefancic J. (2017): *Critical Race Theory. An introduction*. New York University Press. p.11, p.186)

Critical Race Theory is a decisive part of the emerging scholarly field of Critical Romani Studies

<https://www.babelio.com/livres/Gatlif-Liberte/145011#citations>

Part 2 of this Essay Series by [Maria Bogdan](#):

The words that are missing – Understanding the concept of belonging in the romani movement

This essay was also published in a shorter, edited [german version on DW Europe](#).

This essay series is supported by the News Spectrum Fellowship by MIDAS and the International Press Institute.

As a response to the centuries-long discrimination, hatred, and hostility (Antigypsyism) the Roma have been facing in Europe, belonging has become one of the most important organizing concepts of the local and transnational Romani movements in the past years.

On the one hand, their activities, have been focusing on empowering the Roma communities in the sense of developing a healthy emotional attachment to their ethnic roots and to the society they are living in (community building). On the other hand, they have been addressing and challenging the politics of belonging of different countries and the EU, in general, not only by pointing out the racist practices but also by constructively offering perspectives that highlight the commonalities between Roma and non-Roma that developed for long times despite the stereotypes.

The goal is to change how the Roma are regarded and treated in everyday practices, which is characterized by othering, ignorance, and discrimination. These attempts and practices also describe the position the Roma are given in society through the stereotypical representations that I identify with the position of the stranger, based on my research. Mostly understood by scholarly fields like social psychology, sociology, or philosophy the position of the stranger is a relation based on distancing symbolically and physically.

Community building with the language of belonging

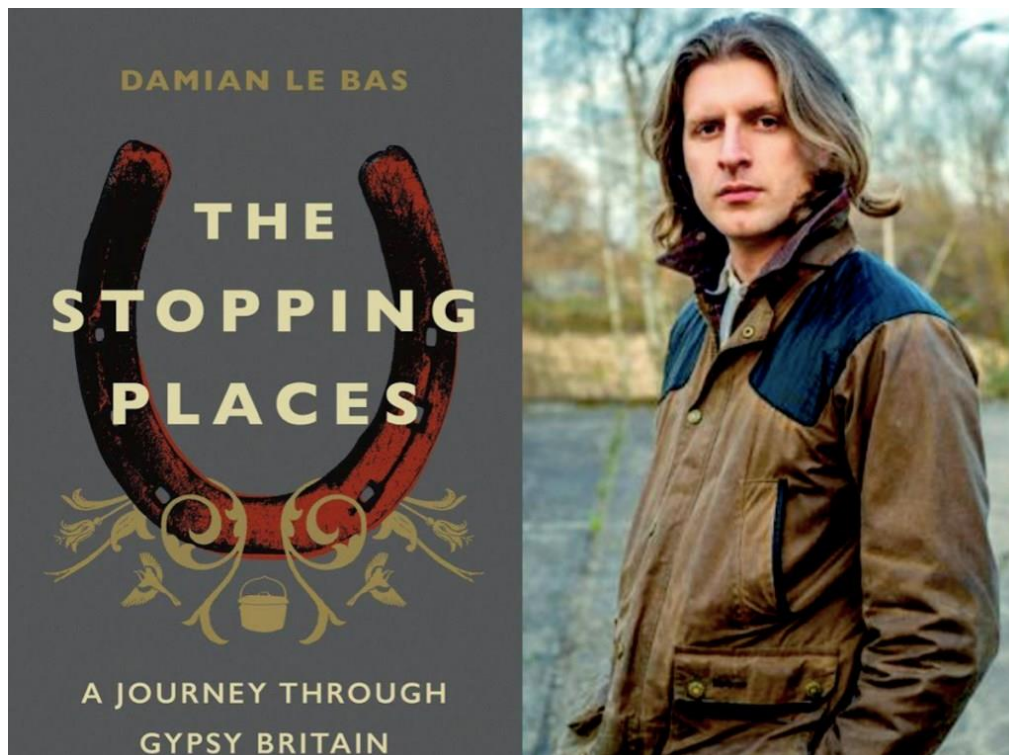
In regards to this position of the stranger, no change can be reached without empowering and organizing the communities, or in other words, without having communities with a balanced, healthy identity. It is hard to develop and maintain such an identity when the responses on your ethnic background from the major society are in general negative.

A negative response means not only words that directly hurt but also words that are missing: besides hearing the racist slurs, it also means not hearing anything about our history, our literature, our culture. As if Roma were a people out of these basic social criteria. Sometimes we hear that there is not too much record of the Roma in history as if they were an anomaly, the ultimate stranger. But are they?

Roma artists, scholars, and writers have been successfully working on bringing back these lost words and perspectives with the stories they write or collect, analyze or depict, based on their own experiences, research, family, or long-forgotten public archives, and collections. They all show a different world, that exists beyond the stereotypes. With the help of a book and a film made by Romani artists, I will attempt to show what the struggle for belonging and the freedom of identity for the Roma communities means in the everyday life of Europe.

Atchin tan – The Stopping Places

When Damian Le Bas started his one-year-long journey in the UK to explore the stopping places (atchin tan in Romanes) where his elders, especially his grandmother was stopping by as part of their nomadic lifestyle, he intended to explore the long trail of Romany history in the UK that started with the first Roma people entering the lowlands of Scotland at around the end of the 1400s. A part of the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveler (GRT) communities in the UK are still nomadic. Exploring these places through his book, *The Stopping Places*, gives us an understanding of the conflicts between the nomadic GRT communities and the settled non-Roma in the UK, the Roma and the non-Roma in general.



Credit: Damian Le Bas | Damien Le Bas is the author of „The Stopping Places“

Photo 1.1 or 1.2 about the book cover

'I might at last find out where I belonged' starts Damian Le Bas his journey that ends up to be a mix of the experiences of a sometimes physically challenging traveling and a meditative exploration. He draws a geographical and mental map of his world, which is also an alternative one about the UK, that teaches us to see how complex we all are.

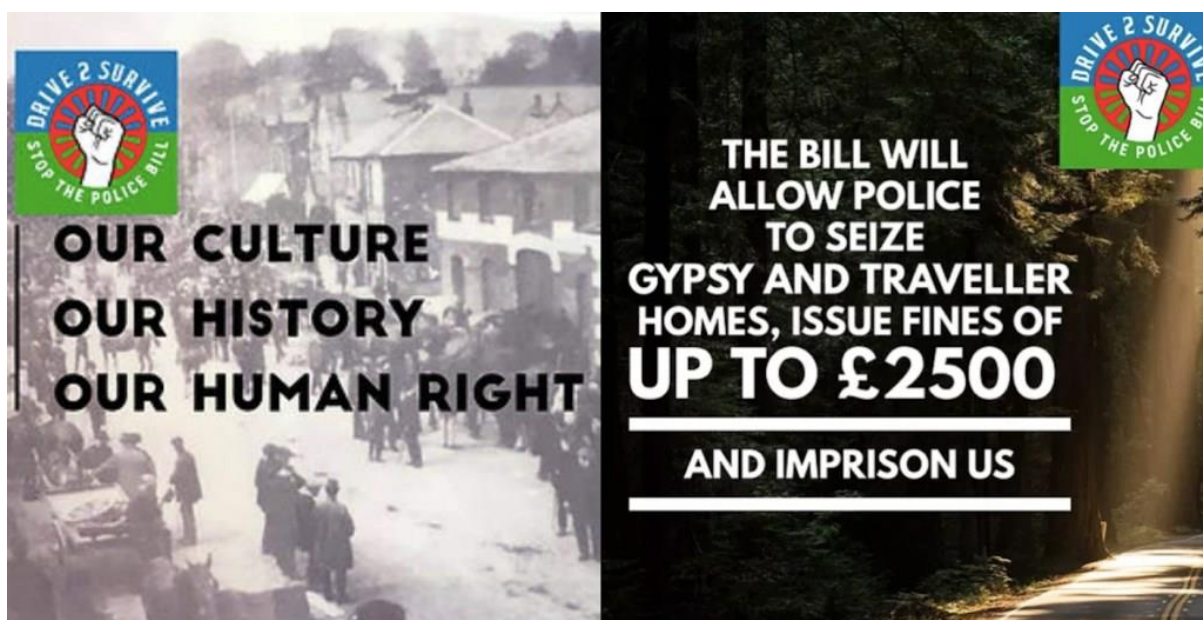
The Historical context – 'We are all somewhere, I tell myself'

But by sharing his experiences and some additional historical and cultural details and information based on his earlier made scholarly research, he also talks about the Roma in a historical context. This long-time missing, historical perspective in itself is empowering to every Roma while it particularly shows how deep the roots of the GRT communities in the UK are.

New rules for the nomadic GRT communities

Yet, it seems like we still have a long way to go for the change. In the UK, there are not too many authorized stopping places left, which means that many times those who by necessity or will follow a nomadic lifestyle have to stop and live at the side of the roads which often creates tensions among the locals.

A proposed new bill, [the 'Police, Crime, Sentencing Courts Bill, Part 4'](#), is threatening these people. It would criminalize the nomadic way of living, basically the nomadic GRT communities, by changing trespassing from a non-arrestable civic offense to a criminal one, and would introduce punishments like eviction, seizing the vehicles, fines, and imprisonment as regulation and would authorize the police to decide about them.



DRIVE2SURVIVE – COMMUNITY ACTION AGAINST INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

The acceptance of the Bill is in its final stages. There have been protests against the Bill since the summer of 2021, [under the community-led campaign named Drive2Survive](#). The last one was on March 19, at the March Against Racism. [Many more protests shall follow](#). Protestors regard the Bill as a violation of human rights because it would deprive the GRT communities to practice their culture and traditions, which would finally result in forced assimilation into the settled culture.



United with the police, they see the solution in providing more stopping places.

As part of the campaign, a two-part TV series was made on the actual situation of the GRT communities in the UK, examining how the Bill would impact them. It was presented by Ed Safford who by the end of the 60 days he spends on the road, accidentally learns about his Gypsy origins as well. The series was produced by the Romani journalist Jake Bowers and the 2 parts aired this February on Channel 4.

Criminalization and the politics of belonging

The planned measurements completely ignore the perspective of the nomadic communities, who are not only Gypsy, Roma, or Travellers, but, for example, Brits too. Criminalization as a response to difference creates only tensions and divisions in society and traumatizes the Roma communities because it doesn't only ignore their ethnic identity but hurts their sense of belonging to society. This is not the first time it is happening in Europe.

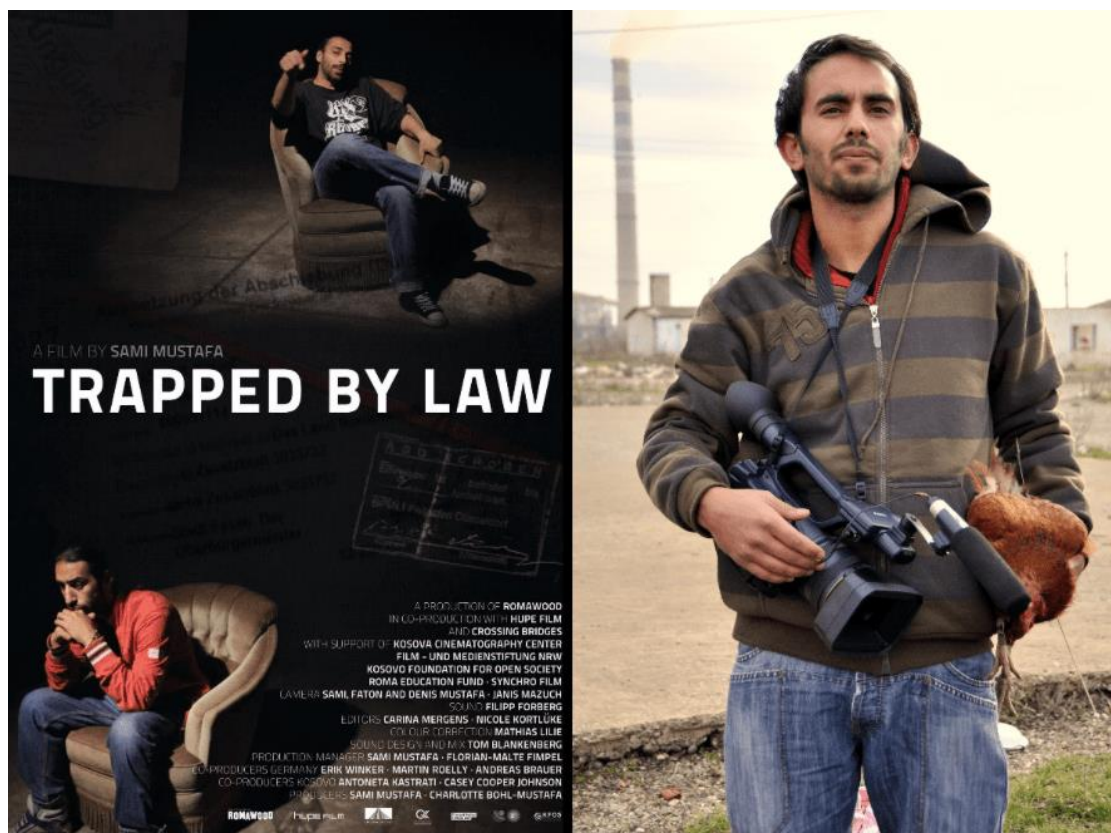
Putting the decision about the legitimacy of the nomadic GRT communities in the hands of the police reflects the criminalization practices the Roma have been suffering from in other European countries too. If we still remember, the bilateral agreement about the repatriation of Roma refugees from Germany to Kosovo was similarly conflicting. It happened more than a decade ago but what we learned from that situation resonates and is still very actual.

The forced repatriation of the Roma to Kosovo

The agreement ignored that these people already built a life in Germany where they found an asylum and a home for long decades. Many faced forced repatriation as if they were criminals, even their children, who were brought up or born in Germany. Just like Selami, who was born after his family settled in Germany, and his older brother Kefaet who was only 4 years old when they left Kosovo.

Trapped by law – The story of 2 brothers

The exceptionally talented artist brothers who belong to the German hip-hop culture were in their twenties when in the night people in uniform came for them without any previous notice to deport them out of the land. They were forced to leave their family, their friends, their life as if they have never belonged there.



Left: Selamet (above) and Kefaet (below) | Right: Film-maker Sami Mustafa

Sami Mustafa, an award-winning Roma film director from Kosovo tells their story [in his brilliant documentary film](#) from the moment they find themselves in Kosovo, a land unknown to them. He follows the brothers for 5 years and witnesses their extraordinary determination to get back to Germany.

Their sense of belonging never fades away, not even when they realize that on the level of legislation, they are forbidden for many years to go back to the country where their home is. When we see them back in Germany, even though they are finally at home after a long journey, we are left with the feeling of injustice, especially when we learn that they were only granted a temporary legal status when they returned.



The brilliant documentary received many prizes, still the situation of the brothers remains unsure in the end of the movie. Probably, we'll have to tell a lot more stories to shift the focus in the everyday practices from criminalization to belonging so that we have the chance to construct strong communities that are not about othering but respecting the difference of the Roma, besides acknowledging the long centuries of commonalities.

In the meantime, I hope that the [story of the Roma refugees who are fleeing the war](#) in Ukraine is not the next one in the row: [although reports talk about cases when they face negative discrimination when crossing the borders](#), while these people are just as frightened and seeking asylum as their non-Roma fellow Ukrainian citizens.

Part 3 of this Essay Series by [Maria Bogdan](#):

The healing words. Resilience in the Romani movement.

It's resilience, that makes the Hero – That's what we learn from those Roma who are celebrating their success against all odds. An essay by Maria Bogdan.

Resilience as Talking Back

The traumatic events Roma communities have been facing all over Europe in the past few decades resulted in putting emphasis on self-empowerment. Roma communities and individuals tackle stereotypes in everyday life and only some could build a balanced life against the odds. This resilient shift appears to be making a renewed basis for the Roma movements as it is focusing on taking back the authority over the representation – over the knowledge production about Roma. This reflects the thoughts of Professor Ian Hancock, one of the first Romani scholar, who calls it 'talking back' and finds it a key to challenging stereotypes and oppression.

Alina Serban: I declare at my own risk

If I said it is about constructing a positive identity that would be probably misleading to many. Especially because this shift is based on getting out of the world of binary oppositions and reclaiming the freedom of identity. And the attempt itself also makes all of us see that the centuries-old stereotypes about the Roma ethnic background don't destine us. Us – In other words, this shift is addressed to the non-Roma as well in a sense to overview or even question their position which is never questioned or defined and is invisibly and automatically assumed to be the authority position in regards to any relationship to the Roma.

Storytelling

Roma organizations, locally and transnationally, have come up with new identity projects in the past decade: They are all based on the powerful method of storytelling and are about displaying real-life Roma characters from the present and past as role models because of their achievements in life that are at the same times benefit the society.

The characters if they can, are speaking with their own words, making their own analysis and assumptions about their own lives.

This change in the perspective is also about getting out of the box of victimization which has been for so long dominant in the representation of the Roma. From the stories, we can understand that this is one of the hardest obstacles for individuals and also for communities to overcome.

In order to do that, these projects highlight that Roma history is also about overcoming the difficulties, healing from the past traumas, learning from these experiences, and preserving these pieces of knowledge in our family histories, in our communities, for the new generations to be able to grow. Introducing the perspective of resilience comes together with looking beyond the ethnic perspective and identifying with the gender and feminist perspectives in the Roma identity discourse.

Real-life Roma Heroes: The Golden Band Prize

Why is it important to talk about resilience? Because you cannot build individual identity, community, or movement on negativity.

Hungary in this sense could serve as a unique example. After the series of racist attacks committed by neo-Nazi terrorists between 2008 and 2009, which claimed the lives of six Roma, it was obvious that it will require a huge effort from the Roma communities to heal from this trauma, and that it is important to make the non-Roma realize that these racist killings shook the whole society. There were some outstanding projects created about this throughout the past decade.



„The winners of the Golden Band Prize“ Credit: Roma Press Center

One of them was focusing on finding successful Roma people who could inspire everybody with their professional achievements. Organized by the Roma Press Center in Hungary, the audience had to nominate people and then vote for the winner through social media, who at the end received a symbolic prize, '[The Golden Band Prize](#)'. It is named after the words of a Roma painter, Tamás Péli, who identified with his Roma and Hungarian roots equally, and as a declaration, he said: 'There are two golden bands on my forehead, one symbolizes my Romani the other my Hungarian identity'.

The participants were named 'Roma Everyday Heroes', on one hand as a symbolic acknowledgment from the Roma community about their resilience: because they were strong enough to succeed in an excluding society with unequal chances.

It was a long-time missed community act in the Hungarian Roma scene, very empowering not only to the winners but to everyone who witnessed it. And on the other hand, the name is about their will to share their knowledge with everyone who needs inspiration or support to carry on in life.

These stories were spread immediately on social media but besides the dynamic online representation, some of the winners got involved in social, caritative activities offline too, using their publicly well-known status for doing good for the Roma communities in Hungary.

Hero Culture and Healing Words: International Roma Heroes Theater Festival
The Independent Theater Hungary is turning 15-year-old this year. They organize the Roma Heroes international festival since 2017 where Roma theater companies and artists participate from all over Europe.



<https://independenttheater.hu/en/roma-heroes-festival/>

This is the only international Roma theater festival in the world. They draw attention to the everyday challenges and struggles of the Roma communities through the dramas written by Roma authors and actors based on their own or collected experiences.

As the organizers put it, their goal with the festival is: 'Showing another face of the continent'. Each piece is different in style: some use sarcasm, some jokes, while the words are purposely healing to everyone, to the always diverse audience, and to the actors as well.

With the festival, the Independent Theater put the Roma drama literature on the map of European literature. They also developed an educational methodology over the years, from the stories which can be used in university seminars or in small village school classes as well. This is the first educational methodology that is based on Roma drama literature to improve the communication and debate culture of the participants and make them more open to various opinions.

„Forver Holiday“

For those who missed the festivals, the Theater published the [Roma Heroes Drama Collection](#) which so far contains two volumes: 'Five European Monodramas' and 'Five European Dramas'.

If we read them, we understand that it is resilience that makes the hero: They rise from their own struggles to reach their goals while they always seek ways to share their experiences and inspire others to grow. And so, we realize: All the Roma are Heroes. And we all can be heroes.

About the author:



Dr. Maria Bogdan is a social scientist. Her main research interest is related to media representation and racism. She received her PhD from the Film, Media and Culture Theory Doctoral Program at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest.

She wrote her PhD Thesis about the media representation of the Roma in Hungary, titled: ‘The Visible Stranger’. She worked as a researcher at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, at Central European University and recently at the Antigypsyism Research Center of Heidelberg University where she was the first Romani Rose Postdoctoral Researcher Fellow in 2019-2020.

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Read also the other parts of this essay-series in english:

Part 1: [Voice of color: Essays on the transnational Roma movement by Maria bogdan](#)

Part II: [Understanding the concept of belonging in the romani movement](#)

Read the [portrait about Maria Bogdan](#):