

HIDDEN HISTORY: PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROMANI HOLOCAUST IN ROMANIA VIEWED THROUGH CONTEMPORARY RACE RELATIONS

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Romanian authorities stirred up international outrage in 2003, when they denied that the Holocaust took place in Romania, despite the deportation by the pro-Nazi regime led by Ion Antonescu of hundreds of thousands of Jews and tens of thousands of Roma to Axis-occupied Soviet territories. In the wake of this scandal, then-President Ion Iliescu bowed to international pressures and created the International Commission for Studying the Holocaust in Romania, headed by Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel. In November 2004, the Commission presented its conclusions to Iliescu, stating that the Antonescu regime was responsible for the deaths of at least 280,000 Jews and over 11,000 Roma. Noting that its report came after six decades of Holocaust denial, the panel urged authorities to disseminate materials on the Holocaust and to organize public debates to raise awareness of this hidden history.

As Romania was grappling with these wartime atrocities, it was also trying to solidify its Euro-Atlantic ties through admission into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and had entered accession talks with the European Union. Decades of omission and denial had passed, forcing the country to re-assess its memory of the Holocaust. Communist-era dominance of the Soviet-informed narrative had allowed Romania to shape its collective memory of the Holocaust so that solely Nazi Germany bore the burden of genocide, while Romanian involvement in atrocities was minimally covered. As was Poland, Romania was forced into what Genevieve Zubryzcki calls *narrative shock* that accompanied the repositioning of the national narrative about the Holocaust (Zubryzcki 2006).¹ Instead of

reinforcing the dominant narrative in which Romanians were victims of the Second World War, the Wiesel Report produced a counter-narrative in which the Romanian regime perpetrated genocides against Jews and Roma, adding complexity and new meanings to the Romanian conceptualization of victimhood during the War.² The presence – or absence – of narratives of genocide also shapes other peoples' identities (Young 1993, Gocek 2006, Zubryzcki 2006, Olick 2007). Even though the report produced relatively little new knowledge,³ it forced Romanians to reconfigure, in part, their national identity. The report made clear that not only Jews had been victimized, but that Romanian Roma were also persecuted. The addition of Roma as victim category also constitutes a new counter-narrative in its departure not only from current views that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish experience, but also in its challenge to

Neighbors: The destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001; *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, edited by Anthony Polonsky and Joanna B. Michlic. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004; Zubryzcki, Genevieve. 2006. *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

² In interviews, Romanian teachers told me that Romanians were victims of WWII because some Romanian soldiers had suffered in Soviet POW camps, hundreds of thousands died at the frontlines, and countless civilians became war refugees when the Soviet army invaded Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1940. They were also victims because even though Romania switched alliances in 1944, Western allies let the USSR take over the country and set up a repressive communist regime.

³ Many of the reports' authors had previously published books or articles in Romania about the topics they wrote on for the report.

¹ In the case of Poland, the narrative shock was more severe than in Romania, where debate and dialogue were less intense. The data here demonstrates that for Romanians, the reconfiguring of Holocaust history is also a narrative shock. For more on Poland's coming to terms with its Holocaust history, see Jan T. Gross,

contemporary perceptions of Roma as asocial victimizers of Romanians.⁴

In this article, I examine Romanians' perception of their past to better understand how its conceptualization influences the present. While a few studies depict Romanian perceptions of the Holocaust, none focus specifically on the fate of Roma.⁵ First and foremost, I want to know what recollections of the Romani Holocaust reveal about the collective memory of Nazi persecution. Have these narratives entered the collective memory of Romanians? If so, what do Romanians think about Roma and the Holocaust, and are their views subject to transformation? How have these stories reconfigured the relationship between Romani survivors and dominant members of contemporary Romanian society?

To apprehend Romanians' perceptions of Roma as victims of the Antonescu government, I use audience reactions to a documentary film entitled *Hidden Sorrows: The Persecution of Romanian Gypsies During WWII*,⁶ which I produced and directed.⁷ While it is not the only

film on this topic, it was the first distributed through the Romanian educational system, which meant it was the first exposure many viewers had to the subject. The film stands as a proxy for the Holocaust history of Romanian Roma, and viewers' reactions to it in surveys and discussions provide insight into their prior knowledge of the genocide while revealing present attitudes toward the Holocaust and toward Roma. Understanding Romanian interpretations of Romani Holocaust history is essential since Roma, unlike other victim groups in recent Romanian history, continue to be the main target of prejudice and racism in Romania today.⁸

Given the above context, in addition to decades of denial of Romania's role in the Holocaust, the low socio-economic status of Roma today, and the widespread negative attitudes of the general Romanian public toward this ethnic group, many respondents had trouble reconciling their views on Roma with the new information about Romani suffering. The film made it difficult to deny the validity of victims' narratives as Roma tell their accounts, which are then corroborated

⁴ According to a study, World Bank Final Report: Qualitative Survey (Focus Groups) Attitudes Towards the Roma in Romania July 2005, most Romanians believe that Roma are social deviants (criminals) who seek advantage at the expense of Romanians.

⁵ See: Viorel Achim si Constantin Iordachi, Romania si Transnistria: Problema Holocaustului. Perspectiva istorice comparative (2005) Editura Curte Veche. See also: "Survey of opinions regarding the Holocaust in Romania and perceptions of inter-ethnic relations," National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, May 2007.

⁶ I use the word *Gypsy* in the title because my respondents declared a preference for *țigan* over *rom* (*Gypsy* over *Rom*) in interviews. On the necessity of situating the term *Țigan* in the Romanian context and the difficulties that inhere in attempts to translate it into English, see Woodcock, this issue.

⁷ I use *Romanian* to refer to viewer citizenship, as audience members' ethnicity was not recorded. The majority of Romanian nationals are ethnic Romanians (89.5%), followed by ethnic Hungarians (6.6%), Roma (2.5%), ethnic Ukrainians (0.3%), ethnic Germans (0.3%), etc. Roma are considered to be underrepresented in the

census figures, and the unofficial population estimates are around 8%. In this paper I gauge the non-Romani Romanian reaction to the Romani Holocaust. Even if one assumes that Roma were representatively present at screenings and talks in high schools, teacher-training programs, universities, and public screenings, the vast majority of the audience members would still be non-Romani Romanians. Furthermore, as the Open Society Institute's *Roma Inclusion Barometer* survey indicates, only 15% of Roma attend high school or vocational schools and less than 1% go on to higher education (p.159). Thus Roma are not represented proportionately to their population statistics (official or unofficial) in the educational venues I visited, which were the primary sources of this research.

⁸ From 1990-95, some 40 incidents of anti-Gypsy violence broke out across the country, leaving several Roma dead, some severely beaten, and others homeless after their properties were destroyed by neighbors. Discrimination against Roma in education, health, housing, human services, and employment continues to be a problem in Romania according to the World Bank, the U.S. Department of State, the European Union, the Council of Europe, various human rights organizations, and numerous academic studies.

with archival evidence. Romanian audiences, faced with psychological discomfort, tried to make sense of the history by appealing to the present and thus sought justification for Antonescu's policies by pointing out today's tensions involving the Roma minority and by blaming Roma for failing to integrate in society and for other social problems such as crime.

The data were collected starting in spring 2005 and finishing during summer 2007, with over 1,000 Romanians viewing the film in recorded private or public screenings.⁹ Four methods were employed to record audience reactions: audio- and/or video-taped discussions; written, anonymous surveys about the film and its topic; free-form essays by the participants-viewers; and field notes based on participant-observation taken either by me or my research assistants. For this article, I focus on a portion of the data by concentrating on responses of high school students who viewed the film in their classrooms because in their reactions I discovered patterns of conceptualization of the Romani Holocaust that repeat themselves across audiences, regardless of age, gender or occupation. Themes such as surprise that "Gypsies have a history," denial of the genocide of Roma, guilt over the Romanian role in the destruction of the Roma, gratitude for having learned the "real" history, and confusion between present and past portrayals of Roma are some but not all of the categories which emerge from the data.

While comments reveal incredible insight to students' perceptions of Roma in Romanian history and of Roma themselves, the students' remarks also must be taken in context of Romania's postsocialist transition to liberal-democratic government and the attendant struggles to come to terms with its troubled past and its treatment of national minorities. The heightened sensitivity to and discussion about Romania's Holocaust history have evolved primarily in response to geo-political pressures, shaped in large

⁹ The film screened in ten cities across Romania in high schools, universities, museums, nightclubs, film festivals, etc. Screenings also took place in Poland, Hungary, Croatia and the United States, but those discussions have been excluded from this sample. The film also aired on Hungarian National Television on 2 August 2007 and on Romanian National Television-Cluj on 5 July 2007.

part by the U.S. and Israeli governments, rather than emerging from an internal desire to confront past atrocities.¹⁰ The bulk of the Holocaust discourse focuses on the fate of the Jews, though a minuscule space exists for examination of the fate of Roma. Additionally, over the last decade various foreign governments and institutions have pressured Romania to improve the country's dismal human rights record toward Roma, which has prompted much national debate in the media about the place of Roma in Romanian society.¹¹ Although my research about the Romani Holocaust as depicted in the film was independent of the events surrounding Romania's confrontation of its Holocaust history and its post-communist treatment of Roma, the impact of these larger discourses are reflected in the students' discussion regarding Roma.

"Were Gypsies victims of the Holocaust?"

In 2005, I finished *Hidden Sorrows* and began screening it in Romania.¹² The first half of the film focuses on the interwar and wartime history as it unfolded in Romanian-controlled territories, while the last part of the film concentrates on the lives of survivors in the late 1990s as they applied for humanitarian funds for surviving victims of the Holocaust living in

¹⁰ This differs from the mainly internally driven examination of the atrocities committed by the communist regime that has gained in strength over the past few years.

¹¹ For instance, media coverage of reactions to the European Court of Human Rights' (ECHR) 2005 decision about the Hădăreni case show how polarized discussions are when Roma are victims of violence directed toward them by non-Roma. The ECHR awarded €238,000 to Romani victims of ethnic violence in 1993, when their homes in Hădăreni were burned by non-Romani locals with the assistance of the local police. The media discussions reveal public dissatisfaction with the court's decision. The Romanian judicial system grossly failed to adequately resolve the 40-odd cases of violence directed towards Roma by non-Roma and the ECHR decision was viewed by many as a blow.

¹² The one-hour documentary was also produced by Alexandru S. Alexe.

Eastern Europe. Survivor narratives feature prominently in the film, providing viewers with Romani accounts of their lives before their deportation, during their incarceration in camps, after their return to Romania, and at present. The idea for the documentary came to me while transcribing oral history interviews I had conducted with Romanian Romani survivors.¹³ I wanted others to see and hear survivors, so that they could transform the facts and figures of the Holocaust into faces and names. A film thus seemed an excellent medium for disseminating information about the Romani Holocaust.

I first learned about the fate of Roma during the war when I moved to Romania in 1994. On a Fulbright fellowship, I went to Romania to collect life histories of Romani women. I came to Romania prepared to talk with women about their roles as wives and mothers, and as keepers of Romani language and custom. Instead, they shared a virtually unknown history with me, one replete with emotional and physical scars. Their testimonies shook me to my very core and I pursued an entirely different course of study than initially planned. As Roma welcomed me into their homes, their trust in me deepened and I began recording oral histories and found myself in the privileged position of listener to their hidden sorrows. Roma survivors rarely speak with outsiders of their sufferings, but the women, dressed in brightly colored floral skirts and headscarves, told me of deportations to a place they called in the Romani language, *ando 'Bugo*, "at the Bug River."¹⁴ Later, I learned that they

were in camps in Transnistria, a Soviet territory between the rivers of Dniester and Bug, which Axis-aligned Romanian troops occupied and administered during the war. Although a Romanes word has been created by international linguists to represent the Romani Holocaust, *Porrajmos* (Devouring), it is an unfamiliar term to the Romanian Roma who were its victims. For them, the horrific event that now called the Holocaust was conflated into the words *ando 'Bugo* as the Romanian-run theatre of persecutions was carried out in the territory between the Bug and Dniester rivers. For Romanian Roma the name of the land signified all the trauma and terror inflicted upon the deportees by the pro-Nazi regime of Antonescu.

Before meeting survivors, I knew little regarding the Nazi genocide of Roma. Although an estimated 500,000 Roma perished in the Holocaust, research on the genocide of the Roma is paltry. Almost no published documentation was available in English or Romanian concerning Romania's role in the destruction of Roma when I began my research in 1995. In order to address this lacuna, I concentrated my research on the tragedy of the Roma. From archival sources, the logistical aspects of the deportation emerged. The Romanian government under the leadership of military ruler Ion Antonescu deported over 25,000 Roma to camps in Transnistria, a region occupied by Romanian and German forces from 1941 to 1944. Allied with Nazi Germany, Antonescu's military regime attempted to rid Romania of what it deemed "undesirable populations," namely Jews

¹³ I interviewed Roma in Romanian and Romanes, with a preference for Romanian. An estimated 30% of Romanian Roma are Romanes speakers. As not all Romani respondents were native speakers of Romanes but they all fluently spoke Romanian, we mainly interviewed in Romanian.

¹⁴ *Porrajmos* is a term promoted by Dr. Ian Hancock, who served as the first Romani member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, as part of a standardization of the Romani language in an academic attempt to coin a term to represent the Holocaust, to act as the Hebrew word *Shoah* does for many Jews. The term *Porrajmos* is problematic because unlike the word *Shoah*, it is an invented one that currently holds no meaning of genocide or Holocaust for most speakers of Romanes. In some Romani dialects, this term means "violation" or "rape" and thus for them it is

insulting to use it to represent the Nazi genocide of Roma and Sinti (thanks to Saimir Mile for pointing this out to me). Alternatively, *Samudaripen*, or "collective murder" is a term that others such as Mile propose, but it is also problematic because it was constructed from the root words "all" and "murder." Furthermore, *Samudaripen* does not provide a distinction from any other kind of mass killings as school shootings, wars, and massacres all fold into this term. Perhaps it will have meaning over time, just as Raphael Lemkin's term *genocide* has, but for now fails to resonate with Romanian Romani victims and their families, who use the term *ando 'Bugo*. For a concise look at the construction of meaning around the Holocaust, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

and Roma. A temporarily controlled territory given to Romania by Hitler as a war prize for victories in the East, Transnistria provided an ideal location for deportation. The deportation of Jews began in 1941.¹⁵ A year later the Roma were also targeted for deportation.

The Romanian government selected two categories of Roma for deportation: all nomads and some settled populations deemed “dangerous” (*pericolosi*) by the regime. For weeks rural police escorted nomads in their own caravans across the border and into camps. Crowded cargo trains transported non-nomadic Roma rounded up from cities. In Transnistria, authorities converted Soviet-style collective farms into makeshift camps. Roma were used as forced laborers to help further the war effort. The dispersion of deportees was chaotic. Food was rarely distributed, housing consisted primarily of overcrowded pigpens and cow sheds, and medical care was nearly absent. Deportees were terrorized by the cruelty of guards and roaming German troops. By 1944 when the Eastern front fell and the camps were liberated, fewer than half of Roma had survived. The rest succumbed to starvation, disease, wretchedness and brutality.¹⁶

While the documents gave me an overall image of the destruction, the survivors taught me about the horrendous suffering of the Roma. Even though over sixty years have passed since the tragic events occurred, the wounds appeared yet unhealed as survivors evoke the horror of the experience. Dashu, 14 years old upon deportation, witnessed his father gunned down by a guard while trying to sneak out of the camp to procure food for the family. Aristita, then eight, watched guards cut off her mother’s toe for not yielding the last of their gold. Enuta, just twelve when she was

deported, recounted soldiers “played” (*jucat*) by butting her head together with her sister’s until her sister slipped into a coma from which she never woke.

Several researchers report that custom prohibits Roma from speaking about the dead, implying that Romani culture prevents Romani survivors from telling their stories of the Holocaust and from becoming in turn subjects of Holocaust scholarship (Fonseca 1995, Clendinnen 1999). I have not found this to be the case among Romanian Roma. Rather I have found that fear of new persecutions (ethnic violence against Roma is a real and continued threat in Southeastern Europe), institutional barriers such as limited access to archives, and widespread racism and discrimination have kept Roma from sharing their story.¹⁷ I wanted to provide a forum for Roma to voice their stories, thus survivors’ accounts carry the documentary. Mirica tells of eating grass to survive. Juberina recounts witnessing guards shoot her father because he was too sick to work. Crai remembers waking up each morning to find that family and friends had died during the night, and those with a little strength left had to bury them. So many died during the harsh winters that burials were no longer possible as the ground had frozen over. Berbec recalls watching a dog devour his mother’s corpse. A snowstorm had prevented her burial and left her lifeless body exposed to the elements. Even though liberation came in 1944, death had yet to retreat. Anuta, orphaned, cries while remembering having to leave her older sister who was ill with typhus on the side of road because no one could carry her. The film transitions from the horrors of the Holocaust into life today. Five survivors are featured as they wait for their claims to be processed for humanitarian funds for impoverished Holocaust victims from the German government and Swiss Banks, broaching the themes of accountability, responsibility, and justice for victims of state-sponsored violence.

“Too bad Antonescu didn’t finish the job”

Hidden Sorrows has been shown at cultural institutions, museums, teacher-training

¹⁵ On the deportation to and murder of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews in Transnistria, see, for example, Jean Ancel, *The German-Romanian Relationship and the Final Solution*, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 19:2 (2005) 252-75; Dennis Deletant, *Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942-1944*, *HGS*, 18:1 (2004) 1-26; Vladimir Solonari, *An Important New Document on the Romanian Policy of Ethnic Cleansing during World War II*, *HGS*, 21:2 (2007) 268-297; Rebecca L. Golbert, *Holocaust Sites in Ukraine: Pechora and the Politics of Memorialization*, *HGS*, 18 (2004) 205-33.

¹⁶ Kelso, p. 115.

¹⁷ For similar findings in Russia, see Alaina Lemon, *Between Two Fires: Gypsy Performance and Romani Memory from Pushkin to Postsocialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 167-8.

seminars, conferences, universities, high schools, and in Romani communities across Romania. It was duplicated so that every Romanian high school will receive it in 2007-08.¹⁸ My hope for the film was to start a much-needed dialogue about the place of Roma in both Romanian and Holocaust history. Indeed, it has provoked strong reactions among Romanian audiences wherever it has screened. Understanding the life experiences of Romanians is critical to understanding their reactions when confronting an almost unknown portion of their history. One journalist who recently interviewed me suggested audiences would be upset as the film depicts yet another black spot in Romania's history.¹⁹ Certainly, emotional responses have been the most conspicuous in discussions, but nevertheless many viewers attempt to make sense of a portrayal of their history that differs drastically from the one they knew beforehand. While some knowledge of the deportation of Roma has woven its way into collective consciousness (comments such as "too bad Antonescu didn't finish the job," are common) I believe that there is a misconception about the deportations and that Romanians actually know little of the wartime history.²⁰ Romanians' reactions to the film reflect rather current perceptions of non-Roma towards Roma. The language used to describe the events that took place between 1941 and 1944 signifies how Romanians conceptualize the Holocaust. Many use the term *deportation* (*deportare*) when referring to the Holocaust. One hears of talk of "the deportation of Jews and Gypsies."²¹ While indeed

both groups were deported, the term *deportation* is used in a more benign sense than the more powerful terms *Holocaust* (*holocaust*) or *genocide* (*genocid*). After WWII in Romania, many groups faced deportation. German-speaking Romanian citizens accused of collaboration with the Nazi regime were deported to camps the USSR. Romanians who protested the heavy hand of the Soviets during the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 were deported as forced laborers. Others were forcibly relocated within Romania for their opposition to communism. Romanians came to equate deportation with misery and sometimes death. These deportations were terrible events that produced much pain and suffering, but unlike the deportation of Jews and Roma, these later deportations were not part of a larger genocide of ethnic minorities. Antonescu implemented and carried out genocides of Jews and Roma. The misconception of the Holocaust in Romania today is rooted partially in the manipulation of history by the communist regime whose propaganda blamed Germany for the commission of genocide and absolved Romania of any guilt or responsibility for crimes against Jews or Roma.²²

During the 13 years I have conducted research in Romania, I have often heard Romanians lament Antonescu's failure to rid Romania of "its" Roma: taxi drivers, shop

me for a special issue her newspaper published on the Holocaust. Betea asked me to clarify for the edition why 'deportation' was not the correct term for the Holocaust in Romania. She told me after the interview that Romanian academics were not clamoring to change the terminology, and she needed a foreign scholar to convince audiences that a terminology change was necessary. I argue that Romanians do not use the terms 'Holocaust' or 'genocide' because they do not fully understand what happened during the Antonescu regime due to the communist government's re-scripting of history, and deportation is not the appropriate term to describe the events.

²² This is not unique to Romania as omissions about the Holocaust were common across communist countries. For more about the Polish case, see Geneviève Zubryzcki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006; Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, 2001.

¹⁸The U.S. Embassy in Bucharest, Romania generously donated funds for duplication.

¹⁹ TVR Cluj: *Good Evening Transylvania*. Taped on July 5, 2007.

²⁰ It is hard to believe that large segments of the Romanian population actually espouse the most radical approach to ridding a nation of an unwanted group, which would mean they espouse genocide as a solution to the so-called Roma problem. While no polls exist on this topic, I believe that it's more likely that most Romanians perceive "deportation" in today's context as relocation within or removal from a territory, and not as a genocidal campaign.

²¹ *Deportarea evreilor* (the deportation of Jews) or *deportarea țiganilor* (the deportation of Gypsies) are the Romanian terms. In November 2005, Lavinia Betea from *Jurnalul National* interviewed

keepers, newspaper sellers, university professors, teachers, lawyers, journalists, and numerous others have shocked me by uttering this statement in my presence countless times. The remarks require little provocation; simply passing by a beggar on the street of Bucharest who appears to be Romani could prompt such an outburst, regardless of class or gender. The ease with which Romanians express such sentiment, I hold, stems in part from misconceptions of the Holocaust in Romania promoted by the former political regimes whose manipulation of the education system produced inadequate portrayals of the genocide of Jews and Roma.

A recent survey conducted for the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania found that while 65% of the Romanian population had heard about the Holocaust, only 28% of respondents agreed that the Holocaust happened in Romania. Of those, 79% considered the Germans responsible while only 11% identified the Antonescu regime as being responsible.²³ Therefore, most Romanians do not realize that the Holocaust took place in their country and even if they know about it, the Antonescu regime is not considered responsible for the crimes. While the study is informative for understanding general perceptions, it provides few clues about the level of understanding of the genocide against Roma during the war. Of the 65% of Romanians who noted that they had heard about the Holocaust, half reported that the Holocaust meant “the extermination of Jews by Germany” while only two percent responded that Holocaust included “the persecution of Gypsies,” a rather nebulous definition compared to the ones the survey uses for the fate of the Jews.²⁴ The “persecution of Gypsies” was also the only definition offered by the survey authors about the genocide of Roma. Furthermore, when the survey asks respondents who agreed that a Holocaust happened in Romania to identify what it meant in Romania, authors failed to include a survey response regarding the genocide against Roma. All possible responses focused solely on the fate of the

²³ “Survey of opinions regarding the Holocaust in Romania and perceptions of inter-ethnic relations,” National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, May 2007, pp. 33, 37.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p.34. The Romanian terms are: *exterminarea evreilor de către germani*, and *persecuție țigănilor*.

Jews.²⁵ Thus, the survey, while being informative on many levels, unfortunately fails to provide an adequate portrait of Romanian perceptions on the Holocaust in Romania since it did not include Roma as part of Holocaust history. This omission is surprising because the author of the study, the National Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania, is an outgrowth of the Elie Wiesel Commission, which devoted a chapter of its 2004 report on the Holocaust to the fate of the Roma.²⁶ Also, Roma are included in the Romanian’s government’s legal definition of the Holocaust.²⁷

An analysis of history text books used in the 11th and 12th grades (for world and Romanian history, respectively) from 1991-2006 reveals that the Holocaust is inadequately covered in most volumes. If Roma are mentioned at all as victim category, their fate merits at best one line in a few texts.²⁸ Even more disturbing is the trend to exclude Roma entirely from Romanian history. This is particularly troubling as Roma were enslaved in the Romanian territories for 500 years, yet few texts mention either their enslavement or the emancipation process in the mid-nineteenth century. Efforts are being made to increase awareness of issues regarding Roma by introducing a separate history of the minorities in schools, with activists seeking to make this subject mandatory, on par with the national history.²⁹

Misconceptions about the Holocaust extend further than the national curricula. Not surprisingly, they are also deeply ingrained in the way university students are taught history. As

²⁵ *Ibid*, p.36

²⁶ Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania. 2004.

²⁷ In 2005, President Traian Băsescu sent back to parliament the Emergency Ordinance 31/2002, stating that it left out Roma as victims of the extermination policy. A few months later an amended version of the legislation that included Roma in definition of the Holocaust was signed by Băsescu. I was part of a working group that initiated and lobbied for this legislative change. My colleagues were Ciprian Necula, Ruxandra Radulescu, Petre Petcuț, Florin Botongou, Florin Manole and Magda Matache.

²⁸ I surveyed the Romanian Ministry of Education’s approved texts.

²⁹ Interview with Florin Manole, historian and assistant at the Center for Roma Studies at the University of Bucharest. July 10, 2007. Bucharest.

Holocaust studies was a non-existent subject during communism and is barely covered at present, teachers graduating from history departments across the country are not trained in the topic. This is problematic because, since 1998, the Romanian Ministry of Education has required that for the seventh and eleventh grades between four and six hours of the curricula cover the Holocaust. As the manuals do not adequately provide information on the Holocaust and teachers are not sufficiently instructed in their universities, many expressed in training sessions on the Holocaust that I coordinated that they simply did not feel prepared to teach the subject and lacked resources to teach it.³⁰ Moreover, those teachers who speak only Romanian felt further hindered in educating themselves as Internet sources were predominantly in languages other than their own.

Romanian Exceptionalism: The Portrayal of the Holocaust During Communism

Under communism, the Holocaust was studied in very narrow terms. Nazi Germany was portrayed as the sole perpetrator of crimes against mainly Jewish victims. The period was characterized by distortion of facts, or a minimalization of the significance of the Holocaust, as well as a denial of the Romanian government's role as author of the genocides against Jews and Roma.³¹ In postwar state-issued textbooks, victims of the Antonescu regime were mentioned, but instead of stating their ethnicity as being Jewish or Roma, victims were labeled communists and/or Romanians.³² During Nicolae Ceausescu's regime (1965-89), fascism was figured as an imported product promoted by German agents, and its local roots were ignored. Romanians, in turn, were portrayed as victims of

³⁰ Training sessions were co-organized by the Association for Dialogue and Civic Education (ADEC), a Bucharest-based non-profit organization that I directed from 2005-07. Our partners were the Goldstein Goren Center for Hebrew Studies, the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, Yad Vashem, and Association IDEE.

³¹ "Distortion, Negationism, and Minimalization of the Holocaust in Post-war Romania," in the Report of the Elie Wiesel Commission, Chapter 13, pp.1-2.

³² Ibid, p.8.

the Second World War. Nazi Germany was blamed for Romania's political developments leading up to and during the war, thereby absolving the Romania of any responsibility for wartime atrocities committed by Romanians under a Romanian command. As the party line went, Romanians were not able to resist initially the external pressures imposed by the Germans but eventually rose to the occasion by actively demonstrating opposition to the regime when Romania switched sides by joining the Allies in August 1944.³³ In other words, the Antonescu government was relegated to the status of a puppet regime and Romania's fascist Iron Guard, which came to power in 1940 and ruled the country for one year alongside Antonescu, was described as a movement sponsored and controlled by Nazi Germany. The 2004 Wiesel Commission report notes the dominant discourse of Romanian exceptionalism to the Holocaust in its analysis of communist-era texts. One book depicted in the report states:

Insofar as Romania is concerned, the regime established in September 1940 did not elevate political violence to the same level of intensity that encountered Nazi Germany, Horthy's Hungary, or in other countries... Antonescu was not prepared to follow the Nazi model of repression of the Jewish population.³⁴

According to the report, another text cited states:

The Holocaust did not occur in Romania precisely because – with few and rather significant exceptions – the swastika-wearing executioners not only did not enjoy self-volunteered local cooperation, but also encountered outright refusal when they attempted – officially and otherwise – to recruit accomplices in the organization of the deportations or other genocidal actions.³⁵

Post-1990 democracy did not lead to an embrace of that part of Romania's troubled past but rather cemented the exceptionalism promoted by the previous regime. Each spring as I browsed through crowded stalls at Bucharest's premier book fair, *Bookarest*, more and more works

³³ Ibid, pp.10-11.

³⁴ Ibid, pp.15-16

³⁵ Ibid, 17-18.

sprouted up with yet further historical revisions on the wartime period. The 1990s, however, witnessed more than an efflorescence of books glorifying Antonescu and his regime. The decade literally hosted an emergence of the cult of Antonescu as foundations were established in his name, streets were named after the General, and statues of Antonescu were erected in several cities.³⁶ Revisionism was in full swing and scholars such as Gheorghe Buzatu, Larry Watts,³⁷ Iosif Dragan, and others wrote that Antonescu was not the architect of the genocide of Romanian Jews, but rather their savior.³⁸

One plausible explanation for the post-1990 cult of Antonescu is that the ex-communists who seized power after the revolution fabricated the cult of Antonescu in fear of the rising popularity and eventual return of King Michael, Romania's monarch during the war who was exiled abroad after the communists consolidated power in 1947.³⁹ King Michael collaborated with several democratic parties that had been suspended by the regime in the organization of the successful 1944 coup d'état against Antonescu. The young monarch arrested the military ruler and realigned Romania from the Axis to the Allied camp. Antonescu was eventually executed after a trial by a Soviet-backed war tribunal in 1946. Posthumously, Antonescu was billed as a hero for fighting against the Soviet Union. By the time communism fell in 1989, Romanians had had decades to despise the USSR's control over the

Eastern Bloc. Antonescu's revival achieved two purposes at once: the King and some of the historical democratic parties that were also becoming popular again after the revolution were tainted for having betrayed Romania's savior against the much-hated Soviet Union. Also, the ruling ex-communists who were widely suspected of retaining ties to the Soviet Union were able to dodge the accusations as their opponents were also "tainted."

As Romania later consolidated its democracy and moved to join NATO and the European Union, however, Antonescu's popularity became a political stumbling block and efforts were made to combat the myth of Antonescu by legislative measures that forbade the promotion of fascism and Holocaust denial,⁴⁰ as well as by the appearance of more rigorous scholarship on the Antonescu period and the introduction of Holocaust history in school curricula. Despite these primarily externally driven efforts, it appears that the myth of Antonescu has yet to be entirely debunked in Romanian public consciousness.

In 2006 Romanian public television (TVR) launched a competition, modeled on a similar British Broadcast Company (BBC) production, to find out who Romanian citizens considered to be the ten most popular Romanians of all times. Antonescu made the cut at number six,⁴¹ taking his place alongside such icons as the medieval warrior-prince Steven the Great, the musician George Enescu, the philosopher Mircea Eliade, the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, and gymnast Nadia Comăneci.⁴² Each of the top ten finalists had a documentary made about them. The team working on Antonescu's presentation took a drastically different approach from the rest of the crews, which openly flattered their candidates.⁴³

³⁶ Ibid, p.23-34.

³⁷ In 1995, I interviewed Larry Watts, author of *Romanian Cassandra*, when he was working at the Project on Ethnic Relations in Bucharest. I asked Watts about Antonescu's role in the deportation of Roma. He assured me that Antonescu had nothing to do with the deportation and that if it happened, it wasn't under the orders of the General. This of course was not true, as archival sources reveal that Antonescu sanctioned the deportations.

³⁸ "Distortion, Negationism, and Minimalization of the Holocaust in Post-war Romania," in the Report of the Elie Wiesel Commission, Chapter 13, p.23-34.

³⁹ In 1990, former President Ion Iliescu refused to let King Michael enter Romania. A year later, Iliescu relented and King Michael returned to Romania for private visit. One million Romanians clogged over three miles of streets in central Bucharest to see the King.

⁴⁰ Emergency Ordinance 31.2002.

⁴¹ Available from www.mariromani.ro, accessed on July 6, 2007.

⁴² A lot of questions were raised on how the survey was conducted as one way for people to vote was on-line and repeat voting was possible if one had access to multiple IPs or could call from different phones. Nonetheless, Antonescu shows up in the top ten with some 37,000 votes.

⁴³ One of the TVR producers of the film, M. Rosca, asked me to contribute archival material to their piece on Antonescu, which I did. She screened *Hidden Sorrows* in my office to learn

Adrian Cioroianu, a history professor at the University of Bucharest and then Member of the European Parliament, presented Antonescu to viewers as the man who planned and executed the Holocaust in Romania rather than Antonescu the anti-Soviet hero. The fate of the Jews occupied a large segment of the piece and the genocide of Roma was also covered. This was not the image of war hero that viewers voted for when they ushered Antonescu into the top ten.

While the TVR documentary was not the first shock to the public about Antonescu's image, given that TVR reaches every Romanian household with a television it was perhaps the widest reaching attack on the cult of Antonescu.⁴⁴ The contradiction between Antonescu's persona as Romanian hero and as war criminal had surfaced before, namely with the passage of anti-fascist legislation in 2002 that made the cult of Antonescu illegal, though it is unknown whether the law negatively affected Antonescu's popularity. What can be assessed is the use of Antonescu's image as ethnic cleanser a few years earlier after the legislation was already in place. In April 2005, fans poured into a Bucharest soccer stadium to cheer on their respective teams, Steaua Bucharest and Rapid Bucharest. The history of the rivalry between Romania's two capital city teams is legendary, but its consequences rarely extended as far as they did that spring. In an attempt to demoralize Rapid supporters, whose team is based in a district with a large ethnic Romani minority, Steaua fans held up signs reading, "One million crows [Gypsies], a single solution: Antonescu," and "Die Gypsies."⁴⁵ Banners flashing with the faces of Antonescu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, who led the pro-fascist legionary movement until his murder in 1938, were also strewn around the

more about Romani Holocaust and she recommended it to TVR's documentary film buyer for their programming. In September, C.N. told me over the phone that TVR did not need the film as "they had enough documentaries on Gypsies already." I asked her if she had films specifically on Transnistria. She did not. She added, "Other people in this country suffered too, not just the Gypsies."

⁴⁴ The *Wiesel Report* came out in 2005, but it's hard to know how much impact it had on a wider public.

⁴⁵ Kelso and Popa, *A Teacher's Guide to Hidden Sorrows*, p.38.

stadium. For the racist behavior of their supporters, the National Commission for Combating Discrimination issued a symbolic fine of \$1,500 to Steaua.⁴⁶ Public outrage focused not on the pro-fascist banners but on the fine levied against Steaua. Slogans advocating the killing Gypsies did not provoke public outrage. It was not uncommon through 2005 to see graffiti sprayed on buildings reading "Death to Gypsies," or to hear the phrase, "Too bad Antonescu didn't finish what he started with Gypsies," uttered in casual conversation. In October 2005 at a top Romanian public university, the Romani studies classroom was vandalized. "Death to Gypsies," "KKK," and a swastika were scrawled on the walls.⁴⁷ The university brought in the authorities, but the matter was not discussed further with either the faculty or students. As a lecturer at that university, I was surprised and disappointed that the incident did not lead to departmental colloquia about the dangers of racism on campus, which would have been an appropriate counter-measure by the administration. Instead, the incident was hushed up, leaving a proverbial white elephant in the room. The university's solution to the unsolved crime was to place a guard in the building to deter further incidents.

"Gypsies have a history": High School Students Awaken to Romani History

Between 2005 and 2007, I screened *Hidden Sorrows* in three high schools in Bucharest, two in Târgu Mureș, and three in Sibiu, which meant that approximately 270 students saw

⁴⁶ Steaua received a 20,000€ fine and a suspension five months later from the Union of European Football Association for racist behavior towards players of color by Steaua fans in a game with an Irish team. Steaua's owner, millionaire Gigi Becali reported that, "Steaua is not racist, Romanians are not racists, supporters of Steaua are not racists..." after hearing about UEFA's decision. Available from www.9am.ro, accessed on July 8, 2007.

⁴⁷ This event happened days after posters went up announcing a screening of *Hidden Sorrows* at the faculty. One poster was vandalized with similar graffiti. I cannot be certain that the two incidents were connected, but I strongly believe they were. At the time, I was teaching a course on Race and Ethnicity at this university.

the documentary.⁴⁸ At each of the viewings I recorded post-screening discussions either on digital audio or video formats, or when this option was not possible I wrote-up discussions in my field notes. At all schools, I collected written, anonymous evaluations from students after the screening.⁴⁹ At one high school, the teacher also had students submit essays about *Hidden Sorrows* directly to me. Thus from their comments, I was able to assess not only their prior knowledge of the Romani Holocaust, but also their current views on Roma. Several themes can be found in the discourse that cut across the various classrooms that were visited, including but not limited to ignorance of the subject, cognitive dissonance, and negative contemporary perceptions of Roma.

One of the most predominant themes running throughout the written observations from high school students is their lack of knowledge of the plight of Roma during the Holocaust. These young people have had limited or no exposure to collective memory of the Romani Holocaust. Many remarked that the screening of *Hidden Sorrows* was their first exposure to the subject:

Before seeing this film, I didn't know about the history of the Gypsies. I didn't have any idea about the fact that they suffered so much and about this important part of history. It would be good to learn more about this subject and maybe it can be discussed from someone "higher up" who can give us permission to have more hours in school covering this subject. (female, age 17)

The most important thing that I learned is that our country is a liar and that the Gypsies are neglected. History was hidden from us and this is a painful thing. (female, age 16)

The history of the Gypsies that we know is totally different than the reality. They are people with souls who suffered although they weren't guilty, they aren't

just thieves and bad people, like the majority consider them to be. (female, age 16)

I learnt that the gypsies⁵⁰ have a history. (female, age 16)

Before screening *Hidden Sorrows*, emerges from the comments, students either had never conceptualized Gypsies as a people with a rich history to be studied, or had imagined that the only history belonging to Gypsies was a negative one punctuated by stereotypical characterizations of Gypsies as "thieves and bad people." After viewing the film, some students began to understand that Gypsies/Roma are not all the same and certainly they do not possess the negative personas many ascribe them. In evaluations, several students commented that they would like to learn more about Gypsy history. The theme of deception also surfaced, and some students speculated that school curricula had been manipulated to hide historical events that put Romania in an unfavorable light.

The students' ignorance was disconcerting, given that the subject of the Holocaust has been mandated in school curricula beginning in the seventh grade; regarding the Holocaust they are arguably the best informed segment of Romanian society. Several factors converge, though, to render Romani Holocaust history nearly invisible to Romanian students. First, Romanian history texts fail to cover the deportation and incarceration of Roma in camps. Second, teachers raised and primarily trained under the communist system possess scant knowledge about general Holocaust history. According to Gabriel Stan, a history teacher and school inspector in Bacău county, by 2006 only around 517 of Romania's 10,000 history teachers had received supplemental training in

⁴⁸ Sponsors of the screenings were the Fulbright Commission, The U.S. Embassy-Bucharest, and the Projector Tank Project.

⁴⁹ When students noted their ages and sex in written forms, this information is included in a parenthesis beside the quote.

⁵⁰ Students wrote evaluations either in English or Romanian. When I quote from their English, I have not corrected for grammatical errors thus I have left their writing of "gypsy" with a small "g" as they do it so often do even though it is a mistake in English. When "Gypsy" is capitalized, it is because I translated it from the Romanian word *țigăni*, which some argue does not translate well. I do not believe the mistake with the small g is because the students are non-native speakers of English since they write with a capital *J* when they wrote the word *Jews*.

Holocaust education.⁵¹ Furthermore, just as Holocaust history was censored from texts, so too was the history of national minorities.⁵² If teachers wanted to do lessons on the fate of Roma, they would have few resources to draw on for lecture material. Surveys I conducted in teacher-training seminars on the Holocaust reveal that the majority of teachers report having little knowledge of the Romani Holocaust.⁵³ Third, many teachers carry the same anti-Gypsy baggage as the rest of Romanian society that shows high levels of intolerance towards Roma (Petre, 2004; Word Bank, 2005). One cannot presume that teachers are immune to stereotypical, prejudicial, and racial thinking, and these attitudes may hinder some from teaching about Roma.

Another disturbing theme that threads its way through the reactions to the film is that after viewing *Hidden Sorrows*, some students only now think of Gypsies/Roma as human beings:

I learned little history and I saw the life of gypsy. It is very interesting. In fact they are human. (female, age 18)

I learned the fact that Roma are people, they have a soul the same as others. I now have an admiration for their strength to have survived those problems and I also have a feeling a pity for them, their children, and their fate. (male, age 17)

The most important thing I learned today from the movie is: all gypsies are humans like all of us. (male, age 17)

The perception of these student commentators regarding Roma is clear: after

⁵¹ Presentation by Gabriel Stan in Iași, Romania at the conference The Iași Pogrom 28-29 June 1941, given on 28 June 2006.

⁵² Before the publication of Viorel Achim's book, *Țigani în istoria României*, București: Editura Enciclopedică, 1998, nearly fifty years had passed since a serious scholarly work had emerged on Roma.

⁵³ Surveys were done from 2005-07 while I was the director of the Association for Dialogue and Civic Education. We did teacher-training seminars on the Holocaust in seven cities, reaching some 400 teachers.

viewing the film they now considered Roma to be people. Is it that students have no empathy for Roma or is it that they truly believe what they write that Roma "are human?" From where does the image of the subhuman Roma come – their families, teachers, media, historical references, society at large? Further attitudinal studies should be undertaken to explore this disturbing and revealing theme.

While the majority of comments were fairly positive about the impact of the film on the students' learning experience, a few expressed divert opinions about the subject or the manner in which it was presented:

I consider that this incident should rather be forgotten. (male, age 17)

[I]n my opinion the movie was disgusting. It has too many negative scenes involving people's terror. We all know about the destructive effect of the holocaust and we are all sorry for what those people went through. It is not my fault that it all happened so why now should you try to create a positive discrimination towards gypsies and Jews. (gender and age unknown)

I wasn't there to see the film, but I did hear something about it from my classmates. I've heard of horrible traumas the gypsies have passed through; really terrible things seem to have happened to them...I can't even believe humanity can turn into that in such harsh condition...yet, why were they sent there? Were they absolutely innocent? Nobody ever explains that. Moreover, why can't we just pass over the Holocaust? It happened 50 years ago! I know in those times terrible murders have happened and this shouldn't be repeated ever again. But then again...why are gypsies like that now? It's like they didn't evolve at all, like they're living in their everlasting world. With their primitive culture, not integrating (I wonder if they actually do want to integrate). I don't want to be mean and I'm not discriminating them. I accept them, but I don't quite like them because they as well don't respect our

culture, our rules and the good manners. At least most of them.⁵⁴ (gender and age unknown)

The second and third comments above demonstrate a failure to understand that the present-day negative attitudes toward minorities are a direct result of their histories. While in the second comment the student expressed sorrow over the suffering of victims of the Holocaust, he or she undercuts this empathy in the commentary that follows. The viewer feels guilty (although the film never states that the Romanian people were at fault for the deportations and incarcerations) and rejects this guilt by stating that the blame lies elsewhere for the suffering. This attitude is reminiscent of the defensive reactions of some whites in the United States who reject the notion of a privilege that accords to color of their skin (Johnson, 2005). Some of those same whites refuse to concede that racism exists as it is not their daily experience, and they do not see history as a determining factor shaping current social problems for people of color. The Romanian student is unable to see the present situation of Roma and Jews in Romania as a direct result of history, and perceives the teaching of the Holocaust as an attempt to manipulate attitudes of Romanians in favor of “gypsies and Jews” rather than a correction of an inaccurate historical record.

Although the third reviewer did not view the movie, he/she is adamant that there is nothing to be gained in studying the Holocaust presently, and remarks that it should be passed over as a topic of study. In the same evaluation, however, we see the intrinsic value of studying the Holocaust that most of its educators cite; namely, that for the principles of tolerance to flourish, the origins of prejudice and discrimination must be understood.⁵⁵ While

⁵⁴ Although the respondent didn't view the film, I selected the comment because it was one of the harshest opinions about Roma received. It made me wonder why this person, who didn't see the film, had such strong anti-Romani feelings and also if the film then helped to mitigate other opinions registered.

⁵⁵ Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research, <http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/teachers/index.php?content=guidelines/menu.php>, USHMM's *Teaching about the Holocaust*.

the student claims that he or she is “not discriminating,” in fact the comments are racist as Roma are labeled as having a “primitive culture” that disrespects “our culture, our rules and the good manners.” Although the meaning that the author assigns to culture, rules, and good manners is unknown, it is clear for this student is that the term “our” that modifies them (“[Gypsies] don't respect our culture, our rules and the good manners”) refers to “Romanian” as a national category exclusive of Roma. The use of the word “our” leaves little doubt of the attitude present – integrate and conform to *our* Romanian society, or we Romanians might not like you, just as the student expresses dislike for Roma. The comment reflects historian Victor Neumann's theorization of the construction of Romanian national identity, namely that it is structured around being ethnically Romanian (Neumann, 2004). Even though Romania officially recognizes eighteen national minorities, the idea of being Romanian is still built on ethnic lines.

Another of the themes to emerge is that the Holocaust acts as a springboard for discussion regarding students' current perceptions about Roma. From the comments it is clear that often students have trouble separating their perceptions of Roma from the history that they have confronted on screen. Some students begin exploring these discrepancies in their writings by bringing up stereotypical attitudes of Roma as thieves, Roma as unnaturally wealthy, Roma as victimizers of Romanians, or Roma as asocials who do not want to assimilate in society. These attitudes, which hark back to the justifications for the genocide of Roma offered by Nazis and their allies, reveal the social stigmatization that Roma face from the majority population as well as the non-Romani students' perceptions of Roma. Furthermore, the comments inaccurately locate the blame for the current low socio-economic status of Roma within their communities. These students are either unable (for a variety of reasons) or unwilling to understand how complex historical events such as five hundred years of Romani slavery in the Romanian territories and the extermination policy undertaken during WWII have produced the present situation of Roma. They conflate their present perceptions of Roma with their perceptions of historical events:

http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/teachabo/part_2.pdf, p. 2

The movie was very interesting and it presents a side of the story some of us didn't know at all. However there are certain aspects that were omitted such as: gypsies can not fit in our society because they don't want to let go of their traditions. Plus, they are not qualified to get jobs, any kind of jobs. In addition to this most of the gypsies are robbers, thieves. They steal from us, threaten us with knives and that's why we are so reluctant to welcome them in our society. Some of them are wealthy and live better than some Romanians. So – yes there are poor gypsies that don't have anything to eat, but so are Romanians. And there are rich gypsies the same as Romanians. Either way, I would be scared to live in the same neighbourhood. They have the tendency to pick on everybody and give kids hard names. In conclusion I am sorry for what happened to them as human beings because they were treated like animals, but nowadays as gypsies I would not defend [them] in any case. (gender and age unknown)

I think that the information was useful, I didn't know those things about gypsies, however the documentary did not make me like them more. There are plenty of problems gypsies raise in the society and I'm sure their actual statute is not because of the Holocaust. A reason for that is that Jews also suffered a lot and they have not become what gypsies have become. (gender and age unknown)

[T]he movie we saw was interesting. However, one thing bothered me. How can they complain they're poor and have many mouths to feed when they make dozens of children who they send to beg. (gender and age unknown)

In the comments above students view Roma as a homogenous block of people guilty of a multitude of violations – theft, assault, bullying, freeloading – of the unarticulated but implied ethnic Romanian society. This is apparent in the first quote, “They steal from us, threaten us with knives and that's why we are so reluctant to welcome them in our society,” and in the second, “There are plenty of problems gypsies raise in the

society....” These stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes are not atypical, according to the results of a recent survey done by Ioana Petre at the University of Bucharest.⁵⁶ Petre and her colleagues did a comparative study between Hungarian and Romanian youths to discover levels of tolerance towards people of other nationalities and ethnicities. A commonality among both youth groups was the staggering figures of intolerance towards Roma: 85% of Hungarians and 79% of Romanians reported have no ability to trust Roma. These figures were nearly one fourth higher than the lack of trust reported about other ethnic or national groups in the survey. In 2005, the World Bank commissioned a public opinion survey as part of its recent initiative, the Decade of Roma Inclusion, in eight of the participating countries, among which was Romania.⁵⁷ The findings of the Romanian study concluded that the overall representation of Roma in Romania was negative as Roma were depicted as “troublemakers, sources of conflict and social deviation.”⁵⁸ Roma were also viewed as “contributing to an increasing deterioration of human relations and behavior” and that Roma were jockeying for advantages at the expense of non-Roma.⁵⁹ Like the students who commented above, most of the World Bank focus group respondents also mentioned the low socio-economic status of Roma. However, recognition of poor living conditions for the most part did not lead to an acceptance of a change to improve the living conditions of Roma.⁶⁰

Hidden Sorrows challenged many students to make an unpleasant confrontation about their history and it shook up the consistencies they thought they knew about Roma. Instead of reinforcing the victim role of Romania during the war, the film depicts the Romanian regime as a perpetrator in the Holocaust. Instead of reinforcing negative stereotypes about Roma as victimizers of Romanians, the film presents Roma as a group of people who were brutally victimized by the Romanian authorities. These presentations

⁵⁶ *Incredere si toleranta fata de altii natiuni sau etnii*, Ioana Petre (2004).

⁵⁷ For more on the Decade, see the project website at <http://www.romadecade.org/>.

⁵⁸ World Bank Final Report: Qualitative Survey (Focus Groups) Attitudes Towards the Roma in Romania July 2005, p.5

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

contradict the knowledge and feelings most students possess about their country's history and about Roma, leading to cognitive dissonance which happens when any two pieces of knowledge are inconsistent with one another. The greater the inconsistency, the greater discomfort or tension that one experiences that must be reduced by either sculpting the new information to match the old belief by adding consonant cognitions (making it seem like something known), by rejection of the new information (keeping original belief intact), or by making an attitudinal change (Cooper 2007: 6-7). Some students wrote tellingly of their struggle to integrate what they saw in the film:

Well since now we couldn't find out more things about the history of the gypsies who live in our country and I [am] really struggling the things I found out today. (female, age 16)

[T]he movie was well made from all the points of view. I didn't know about their suffering, I mean I suspected, but I never saw it, I never really understood what that period meant for them. I guess my reaction is a pretty normal one: I feel pity for them, and a little disgust at the fact that they still haven't been given money and stuff. Although I feel this, I still can't totally feel sorry for them. They beat me up at night or do other things related to physical injury and I can't not consider that when they ask for help. Furthermore, they complain about not having enough food for their many children... why do you have kids if you know you can't feed them?! There are condoms nowadays. Anyway, the movie was really nice, and it is important to show that not only Jews were the ones who were persecuted. (gender and age unknown)

[T]he documentary actually impressed me, but when I talked to some adults about it, they were all like "Antonescu took the gypsies there, but instead of being leveled, they multiplied" or: "he should have killed them all" or: "they went there like on a holiday" etc. this is actually confusing because you say "come on, they are adults, they should know more things than you do",

and then a foreigner comes and "commercializes" other views of the Holocaust in this movie...you don't know what to think anymore until further proofs or something. (gender and age unknown)

This battle to accept or reject the new information provided by *Hidden Sorrows* is apparent in the above statements. On the one hand the second student labels the film as "well-made" and "nice," and concedes the importance of knowing about the suffering, but on the other hand he or she is conflicted between feeling pity because of what Roma suffered and feeling angry over perceived social deviance on the part of Roma who "beat me up at night" and "complain about not having enough food for their many children..." The student has added consonant cognitions to make sense of the film. If the predominant stereotype (knowledge) is that Roma are thugs and beggars yet the film shows Roma workers and innocent victims, then the student resorts to fitting the new information back into the dominant belief that is held about Roma to reduce the discomfort of dissonance. In this case, the film has not shaken the student's original attitude enough to cause a rupture with past knowledge and beliefs: "I still can't totally feel sorry for them."

The third comment also displays this conflict of filtering new knowledge with the dominant collective memory of the event. The student writes that the "documentary actually impressed me," but the respondent is torn over the divergent perceptions that some adult non-viewers of the film have about Roma and the Holocaust, views that are extremely disturbing as they either advocate genocide ("he should have killed them all") or the denial of genocide ("they went there like on a holiday"). This student professes confusion amid the conflicting information received and withholds analysis until "further proofs" are forthcoming. Thus dissonance is temporarily set aside in until the discrepancies are resolved and no inroads are made to alter the erroneous collective memory.

Yet another theme to emerge from student evaluations centers on the nationality of the director. My foreignness was perceived as either a positive or a negative, depending on the viewer. For some, my Americanness brought me credibility, rendering me a presumably unbiased filmmaker looking at the history of Roma, which

has been ignored far too long by Romanian scholars. For others, my nationality discredited me on the grounds that foreigners cannot understand the issue of Roma in Romania:

I liked the documentary but I am not sure that the “director” understands the Romanian society as it really is. At some point I had the feeling that she was blaming Romanians for the gypsies’ drama. I felt as if she was saying, “look Romanians too have committed some unjust things” (I had this feeling when listening to her speaking after the film was over). Personally, I think that there are some aspects about gypsies’ image in nowadays Romanian society that she doesn’t fully understand.⁶¹ (gender and age unknown)

To begin with, I want to draw the attention upon the fact that I do not like gypsies as human beings. I do not like their traditions, their culture or their lifestyle....All the more this documentary made me change my perception about gypsies in a way, and I kind of started to feel pity for them. But that doesn’t mean that I will accept them as a nation; their lack of education and good tastes isn’t due to the Holocaust or to the Romanians. They always wanted to live in that kind of environment: wagons, tents and craftsmen. Not to mention the fact that their hands slip easily in other people’s pockets. To conclude, the gypsies weren’t the only ones who would get hurt from the Holocaust. For the Jews the impact/shock was even bigger. Nobles, living in luxury, were transferred into concentration camps, while the gypsies were transferred in the same poor conditions of living. (gender and age unknown)

⁶¹ I hear this often from Romanians who say that as an outsider, I cannot conceive of the injustices inflicted upon them by the Roma. My standard answer is that I understand well the situation of Roma, having worked for seven years in Romani communities. As a sociologist coming from a country long troubled by racism, I understand very well how racism functions in societies.

I consider it very important for people [who] live in cities to see this film, because many have the wrong image of gypsies because of the negative members of this ethnicity in their community. Maybe the movie lacked more information on how gypsies are doing right now, how much have their past tragedies affected their life and maybe it should propose some solutions to how the gypsies could better integrate in society and how they could erase their bad impression that many people have about them. (gender and age unknown)

Once again, the students’ statements are punctuated with prejudice and misinformation. In the second statement, the respondent writes, “They always wanted to live in that kind of environment....” He or she has not learned that nomadic Roma were allowed only a few days encampment in areas before local authorities forced their caravans to move on. Also disturbing is the discourse of relative suffering as the student implies that Jews suffered more than Roma because the Roma were used to “the same poor living conditions.” This demonstrates that the student, despite having been presented with genocidal policy of the Romanian regime in the film, still did not understand what the Holocaust was and how it played out in Romania. The third student, while more sympathetic, still views “the problem” of Gypsies as being their fault, rather than viewing it as a societal issue of racism that influences the majority population’s perception of Roma. He or she would like the director of the film to propose solutions for “how the gypsies could better integrate in society and how they could erase their bad impression.” The burden thus falls on the minority to change, according to this student, and for society at large to do nothing.

Another of the themes that emerged often in evaluations was attitudinal change. Students were able to overcome their cognitive dissonance once new information was presented through acceptance of it. Whereas before the viewing *Hidden Sorrows* some students harbored stereotypically negative sentiments about Gypsies, after learning more about Romani history and the suffering during WWII, these same students profess to think differently about Roma:

I have totally changed my attitude towards Roma. I didn’t expect this at all.

However, I know that there are still Gypsies who out of fear or something else don't behave like they should...luckily these are exceptions. (female, age 16)

I guess Romanians have been used to believe that the gypsies are divided and don't actually care so much for what happens in their families. I've learnt that they are really like us. I think today's session has helped me to consider carefully my attitude towards them. Though I can't help adding that none of the gypsies I've ever met was as interesting and worth helping. (female, age 16)

I learned about the hard life of gypsies. I never knew that the Holocaust and their deportation in Russia had casted so many dead souls. I had a bad opinion about the gypsies but it never crossed my mind what a terrible life they had to face... As I said my opinion about gypsies wasn't so good but through this film my interest for those poor souls arose. I would really like to have and to gather more information about this theme. (female, age 16)

As a filmmaker, it is gratifying to know that *Hidden Sorrows* had an impact, however fleeting, on attitudes of some non-Roma towards Roma. After all, one of my goals was to start a conversation about Romani history and I believe that this was successfully achieved having reviewed students' written evaluations. As a sociologist, it is interesting to note that the awakening declared by students may be less permanent than the filmmaker in me would like as attitudinal changes may swing back to where they were before the screening of *Hidden Sorrows* if a positive message about Roma is not reinforced at home, in school, or through the media.

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered how Romanian high-school students relate to part of their country's history. Based on the written evaluations of student viewers of *Hidden Sorrows*, I assessed both the previous levels of knowledge about Roma and the Holocaust in Romania and students' current views regarding Roma. In sum, Romanian students know almost nothing about the troubled

history of Roma, who were subjected to 500 years of slavery in the Romanian territories before emancipation in 1855-6, and then were targeted for extermination by the Antonescu regime during WWII. Even though some general societal knowledge of the Romani genocide has entered into Romanian collective memory, as demonstrated through comments on Antonescu as the solution to Romania's so-called Gypsy problem, students' responses reveal that Romani narratives about their suffering have not entered into Romanian collective consciousness. While overall students professed to have had a positive learning experience viewing the documentary, the majority of the comments were disturbingly racist and characterized Roma as social deviants.

Thus my research confirmed that the current status of Roma in society and race issues of today affect public perception of their suffering during WWII. Furthermore, the research illustrates that despite the historical facts, Roma are not widely recognized by Romanians as a legitimate victim group. Fortunately, the dominant narratives regarding both WWII victimhood and Romanian-Romani relations are not static, as some students professed attitudinal changes that demonstrate the possible transformations of collective memory and collective consciousness. The data in this study can be extremely useful for educators, activists, and policymakers as more information about not only the Holocaust, but also Romani history, language and culture should be incorporated into the national curricula to address widespread racism in Romanian society. Additionally, the celebration of diversity needs to be enforced through a variety of public venues to ensure that its accompanying message of tolerance is heard, especially by young people.

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