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*Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its
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Book review by

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As an active citizen, I approached the book with curiosity about the fluidity of the concept and understanding of the “family”, because I live in a time and space where it is being re-negotiated and violently redefined by politicians as well as minority advocates. As an educator who works on the topic of the Holocaust, I was curious to gain new perspectives and a nuanced knowledge of victims’ emotional lives and the factors which informed their decisions. And, as a Romani youth worker, I was above all interested in learning something new about the history of the Roma, our cultures, and identities. The introduction promised just that, and, to an extent, it delivered. Of the eleven chapters, only three explore the fate of Sinti and Romani families; both the editors and the authors of those chapters make it clear that the scarcity of data and information on the lives and deaths of Romani people from before, and during, the Holocaust is one of the most significant obstacles to informative and qualitative research.

The eleven articles in the book are divided into three parts: the first section focuses on Jewish and Romani families during the Holocaust, and the other two explore the meanings, functions, and compositions of families after the war. The articles in the first explore family relationships in the ghettos and in hiding, with a chapter on Romani families and communities. The second section describes the different policies pursued after the war by national or international institutions, which affected family relationships – with no Romani-related content. The third and final section, however, which is about family relationships after the Holocaust, devotes some time to the experiences of Romani people and communities. The lack of data, mentioned earlier, is offset by the critical approach of the authors, the analytical examination of already existing interviews, and testimonies and use of secondary sources. Researchers analysed local memorial books, museum exhibitions, archival documents, and, most importantly, interviews and testimonies of Sinti and Roma survivors, their descendants, and other members of local communities. I think it important that, besides consulting official, written data produced by non-Roma, the authors often used testimonies and interviews, the words of Roma themselves, granting them the agency we so often lack in academic research.

How can choosing the family as an analytical unit and a lens contribute – and to what? One might wonder, as I did, why the editors chose to work with the concept of the family to create new, or challenge existing, knowledge. The introduction claims that “[a]pplying the family perspective allows us to see how even extended families engaged in decision-making processes that revolved around more than individual imperatives”, especially regarding decisions about where people decided to migrate, which tend to be explained by political ideologies rather than by the practicalities of “a search for where one had a relative to join”. On the flipside, because we all have relationships we consider as family, portraying historical events through family histories brings victims emotionally closer, and allows us to identify with them, which seems to be crucial at present where far right ideologies, antisemitism, and antigypsyism are increasingly regaining ground. Instead of applying a romanticizing approach, the introduction emphasises that the family is a social construct, with various meanings across space, time, class, religion, and communities. Historical events and political ideologies contribute to these changes and the book provides examples of these and influential factors during a specific historical period.

How policies and events influenced the meaning of family and how family relations impacted decisions, strategies, and fates

We see two different approaches in the chapters of the book: one tries to understand how the very meaning of family changed during the Holocaust; and the other uses the family as a medium to add new layers to our knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust, such as how events of world history manifest in family histories, or how space and identity are connected through history and family relations.

Natalia Aleksiu in “Uneasy Bonds – On Jews in Hiding and the Making of Surrogate Families” analyses family-like relationships emerging in hiding between Jewish people (surrogate families) as well as between Jewish and non-Jewish ones in Eastern Galicia during the Second World War. The author worked her way through testimonies and personal journals. One type of non-biological family relationship occurred between Jewish children and adults hiding in the same place. Often, the connection between abandoned children and temporary caretakers might have simply been limited to the practical processes of cleaning and feeding them. Another common bond between Jewish people in hiding were sibling-like relationships, which lasted over a long period of time, and in other cases, Jewish women were helped by single or widowed non-Jewish men through faking identity and marriage documents, who in return kept house and performed other duties. What is remarkably interesting in this article is the analysis of the relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish people, and the author’s contemplations on their dynamics. We tend to think about the ones in hiding as victims, rather than people with agency, and about their helpers as heroes. However, very often, these relationships were exchanges, beneficial for both. Sometimes the bonds grew so strong that they remained alive after the war, and the relationship was legalized through adoption or marriage. In other cases, the children were taken by their biological parents after the war or sent to an orphanage. Entering these new, “surrogate” families often required Jewish people to pass as non-Jewish, and the truth came to light later. In these cases, family came to be a means of material sustenance or emotional support, rather than kinship or a unit of tradition and religion.

After the Holocaust, with the emergence of the aid-providing international organisations’ operations, the definitions and the desired characteristics of the family were directly and quite openly influenced by policies. Laura Hobson Faure analyses oral history interviews, organizational case files, and private and organizational archives to demonstrate how different the approach French and American Jewish welfare organizations took when deciding the fate of “Holocaust orphans”, and how these approaches may have shaped their embeddedness in, or exclusion from, their extended families in “Siblings in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath in France and the United States. Rethinking the “Holocaust Orphan” We are led through the lives of Racheal and Lea Z., who both lost their parents and were placed in a Jewish nursery in France and were later sent to the United States where they had relatives. The article reveals that the European organizations’ main interest was to replace parents, keep siblings together, and reunite them with remaining relatives or to create new families for the children. However, in the American social work ethics “[e]motions and compassion were associated with outdated charitable practices. [...] They] often separated siblings, placing them in different foster homes. [...] They] saw remaining family members as potential barriers to stable foster care placements.” The sisters then had very different experiences in separate foster families and were never placed with their relatives. Their story demonstrates that as

a result of American organizations' understanding of Holocaust orphans' needs, the girls had to seek their own definitions of family: one re-established a family by building one of her own, and the other re-established the past, by researching her family history and processing the death of her parents through therapy and giving public testimony.

However, "The Impact of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's Aid Strategy on the Lives of Jewish Families in Hungary, 1945–1949" focuses on the practices of the aid-providing institutions in terms of support for children who lost one or both parents in the Holocaust; the revelations of Viktória Bányai echo in the present, as similar questions are being raised, but this time concerning the care of Romani children. The main question of the article is why there were more provisions for children in institutional care than for children remaining in their (incomplete) families in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust in Hungary, and the answers are shocking and banal. Bányai lists and explains the reasons why many parents saw it better for their children to be placed in institutions rather than at home with them, how conditions emerged which made this a rational choice, and what other voices were present urging policy-change. The leadership managing the distribution of aid and its Zionist background saw parents unable to care of their kids due to lack of self-confidence and self-respect, inability to make a living for themselves and being used to living on alms, on the one hand; and, on the other, as obstacles to making these children part of the Zionist movement and make Aliyah. Although there were policy suggestions from within the leadership saying that families and communities should be strengthened and supported in re-starting their wage-earning activities, so that children could re-enter their original communities, the Zionist agenda and, later, communist influence did not allow them. Understanding the bits and pieces of how ideological power-games filtered into policies, the distribution of funds, and eventually determining the future of Jewish children who survived the Holocaust; in one of the final sentences Bányai states "[a]t the heart of this debate is the role of family in the upbringing of children, with special regard to so-called dys-functional families and those that pass on values considered inappropriate by the current powers-that-be", which is great food for thought for readers to contemplate the continuity of similar arguments and practices when it comes to poor and or/Romani families. It becomes clear that the functions and the meanings of family are being determined by ideology-based policies and decisions rather than some kind of organic change or evolution.

In "Looking for a Nice Jewish Girl ... Personal Ads and the Creation of Jewish Families in Germany before and after the Holocaust", Sarah E. Wobick-Segev explores the change in priorities of Berliner Jewish men and women looking for spouses before, during, and after the Holocaust. Through personal ads placed in Jewish newspapers, attitudes and desired partnership-building conditions are revealed, and how these changed over time due to the risks and the realities during the Nazi regime and attempts at recovery after the crises of the Second World War. The expectations in the advertisements relate the experiences, fears, motivations, and desires of those looking for life-partners. The article starts at the turn of the twentieth century when these ads started being published, when the main criteria was financial and social suitability, but love and affection started to gain importance, then goes on to describe the era between the rise of the Nazi dictatorship and Kristallnacht (1933–38) when wealth became relevant for emigration and connections abroad were a significant advantage. After 1938, a significant number of people who placed ads were men over 40, as they were thought to be at greater risk and needed partners with whom to leave the country. Marriage, and therefore the family, became

“an expression of significant accommodation to new realities”, even after the war when endogamy and pronatalism were the main concerns.

In addition to providing new information about how sedentary Roma and the local majority communities lived together and cooperated before the Second World War in the Belarusian-Lithuanian border region (which I will mention later), “The Romani Family before and during the Holocaust - How Much Do We Know? An Ethnographic-Historical Study in the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region” by Volha Bartash, gives us an insight into how specific family-like bonds affected the opportunities Romani people had during the Holocaust: Romani families who worked for farmers often built trust-based relationships with their employers and asked them to godparent their children in the hope of greater access to opportunities in the future. These extensions of family relations made it easier for many to go into hiding when the deportations began, even if most did not avoid such a fate. The make-up of families before the war had a direct impact on the chances persecuted people had.

Chapter 9 tells the story of a young Jewish woman escaping Germany in 1937, who then helps her brother and parents join her in England over the next two years, and her attempts to help other relatives or friends escape Nazi Germany. Beyond providing a new understanding or analysis of the family, Joachim Schlör in “I Could Never Forget What They’d Done to My Father. The Absence and Presence of Holocaust Memory in a Family’s Letter Collection” rather uses the family, and in particular the letters exchanged by its members, as mediums to understand how global history becomes family history, or how spaces and individual identities are mutually constructive. One member of the family, who had been criticized for having too many acquaintances, travels to another country fleeing the danger of deportation and the death camps, and her number of friends becomes an asset in saving others from death. More and more friends and distant relatives turn to her and ask for help. The article, via many stories of unsuccessful escape attempts by relatives and friends, also reminds us, that successful migration (then and today) cannot be separated from loss and is always a family drama. Not only in making the decision, that one family member leaves the rest behind becoming a traitor in the eyes of many, the uncertainty of reunification, or the fear and reality of not being able to save more relatives and friends, but in that it changes those families forever, who become detached from the land they had called home for generations and generations, which had been part of their identity.

These chapters, about families in the Holocaust and its aftermath, encourage us to reconsider the very definition of family, the role of the extended family, and what “family life” means. How we view it adapts to particular circumstances, changes as a result of decisions made by those in power rather than by its members; and how the very make-up of the family, the roles within it, may be utilized in order to survive.

Family as a means of survival and resistance

Besides thinking about the fluidity of the concept of the family, the book allows us to look at case-studies of family histories, during and after the Holocaust, as a set of strategies for access to food, hiding, and migration opportunities. Existing family structures were sometimes advantageous for one’s survival but, in other cases, being forced to live together made it even harder to endure the hardships.

“Separation and Divorce in the Łódź and Warsaw Ghettos” by Michal Unger and Dalia Ofer’s “Narrating Daily Family Life in Ghettos under Nazi Occupation. Concepts and Dilemmas” reveal stories of keeping families together at all costs, whether divorce or separation to different ghettos in Europe. We learn that there were spouses, separated before the war, forced to live together again in the ghetto, whole families, 8–10 people in one single room, or numerous families in a single flat. Conflicts over food emerged, men became frustrated by losing their roles as breadwinners, which occasionally even escalated into the murder of their wives. Both articles analyse the sources and the nature of conflicts within families living in the ghettos, but they also reveal certain survival strategies: some families stayed together in spite of their long-distance relationships before the war, because sharing food was more efficient than living on individual food stamps; parents separated from their children in the hope of saving their lives; and, where both parents were unable to work, children becoming breadwinners, securing the survival of the whole family. Sometimes, only separation and filing for divorce were able to secure the physical and mental survival of individuals. In terms of resistance, there were families who stayed together despite their wrecked relationships and tried to create a homely atmosphere in order to mimic normality as a way of coping with the terrible situation and precarity.

Robin Judd writes about the hardships of obtaining permission for marriages between British, American, and Canadian soldiers and European, mostly Jewish women right after the end of the war in ‘For Your Benefit Military Marriage Policies, European Jewish War Brides, and the Centrality of Family, 1944–1950,’ and we may wish he had done it in the form of a TV mini-series instead of an academic article. Through the personal stories of couples, we learn what administration hardships lay before military-civilian couples, and what ideological, stereotype-based assumptions allowed for policies which often removed the chance of married life for these mixed couples. Although we do not get a lot of information either about the motivation of the soldiers or the women, or about the future of those who did manage to get married, it is clear that besides love and affection, the prospect of escaping Europe might have made these marriages desirable for women who had lost their families or who were widowed during the war. It was a chance for them to build a new life, far away from the sites of horrors and memories.

In “Return to Normality? The Struggle of Sinti and Roma Survivors to Rebuild a Life in Post-war Germany,” Anja Reuss argues against the importance of building and re-building the family of Roma and Sinti after the war as a cultural peculiarity, asserting that establishing new relationships and caring for children was a type of self-assurance and also gave survivors a chance to build their individual identities. Because Roma and Sinti did not have international religious or political organizations providing aid for them and, even after returning from the camps, faced with antigypsyism, their only source of support was the family, the concept of which had shifted to an extended community in the face of all the losses. Having children (or taking care of orphans within the family) was a way of returning to normality and escaping solitude. This was extremely problematic for women who had been sterilized in the camps or had been through the process earlier so as to avoid deportation. They often had to be estranged, excluded even, from their communities, unless they could take care of orphaned children from their immediate or extended families.

Helena Sadilkova presents a critical reading of Romani people’s experiences before, during, and after the war in Czechoslovakia as she places the emphasis on the agency and active decision-making of Roma, in

relation to migration, rather than portraying them as passive sufferers of events, more generally the case in research based on official papers and policies produced by non-Roma. In “The Post-war Migration of Romani Families from Slovakia to the Bohemian Lands. A Complex Legacy of War and Genocide in Czechoslovakia,” she argues that looking at decisions about moving elsewhere, as direct consequences of the conditions and situations of Romani families and communities before and during the war, helps us understand that migration was an active way for them to secure a better life. Emphasizing the responsibilities of the non-Roma all through the article, she states that moving to Czech territories from Slovakia en masse was an escape route for Romani families out of antigypsyist local conditions, and also an economic decision securing their upward mobility, a way of actively resisting the place local society had carved out for them.

Each family history is unique and very general patterns in their strategies are impossible to detect, not only because of the lack of sufficient data, but because of the very diversity of said strategies. Romani and Jewish families have actively re-constructed their understandings about the family in order to secure their survival or a better future for themselves.

New knowledge about Roma during and after the Second World War and today

Reading the book as a Romani civil society practitioner, a crucial aspect of the four articles provided me with knowledge which I think I can utilize in my work and activism. This was the general lack of reflection on what we know about our past, and how we interpret it for different purposes. Very often, as Romani activists or academics, we tend to take the knowledge presented to us by *gadje* about our culture and history for granted. We internalize it and base our international identities on these, often misrepresented, fragments. Articles such as the one by Volha Bartash tell us about the diversity of social status and interethnic relationships of different Romani communities before the war, and that we should nuance our perception about, and construction of, our relationship to the majority population and to our ancestors. We are extremely diverse, as are the forms of antigypsyism we have endured.

In her analysis entitled “The Romani Family before and during the Holocaust – How Much Do We Know? An Ethnographic-Historical Study in the Belarusian-Lithuanian Border Region”, Bartash differentiates between nomadic and (semi-) sedentary Roma in terms of lifestyles during the interwar period. After describing how the family was constructed differently in the two types of Romani communities, and how their relationship with the majority population varied depending on the life they lead, Bartash outlines how these factors may have played a role in the attempts families could make, and decided to make, in order for them and their loved ones to survive the horrors of the Nazi regime. She argues that nomadic, traveling groups had fewer close relationships with the non-Roma; however, they were part of the local economies. Interethnic marriages were also rarer, and these couples generally lived on the outskirts of populated areas, even though most of them did look for dwellings (renting rooms or service buildings from peasants) in the towns and villages when winter came. Because sedentary Roma lived within the majority society and even had formalized ties with non-Roma through marriages or godparenting, they had wider networks, more supporters, and opportunities to migrate elsewhere and ‘pass as non-Roma’ or be hidden by them. Every assertion in the article is backed up by testimonies from descendants of Romani people who experienced the horrors and whose stories were passed down in the forms of stories,

or by Jewish witnesses. Via these testimonies we can follow the lives of different Romani families and consider how differently we would understand what it means to be Roma today if a multitude of stories from before, and right after, the Second World War, had not been lost but written down or kept alive by the “Romani mail”.

“The Postwar Migration of Romani Families from Slovakia to the Bohemian Lands. A Complex Legacy of War and Genocide in Czechoslovakia” by Helena Sadílková and Anja Reuss led me to a similar conclusion, that is, if we rely only on policy documents and research written by, and from the perspective of, non-Romani scholars, our identities and present-day struggles will be defined by them. Therefore, research done by Roma, as well as a critical, self-reflective approach by non-Romani researchers are crucial, and we must question what we think we know about our history and the agency we, the Roma, had.