

Ari Joskowicz. 2023. *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Book review by

Maria Yordanova Atanasova

atanasova.mya@gmail.com

Fulbright scholar, University of Maryland, College Park, United States

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6961-4786>

Maria Atanasova is a Fulbright scholar and a Romani activist from Bulgaria. She holds a master's degree in Political Science from the Central European University in Vienna where she also acquired an Advanced Certificate in Romani Studies. Her master's thesis investigated the electoral representation of Roma in Bulgaria. As a Fulbright scholar, Maria is pursuing a second master's in Public Policy at the University of Maryland, focusing on international security.



Who will tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust? For individuals to be able to tell these stories, they need to hear them. As a Bulgarian Roma, Romani genocide was one of the untold stories for me. The topic of the Holocaust appears in Bulgarian textbooks only in the context of Bulgaria as one of a few countries that saved their Jewish population during the Second World War. There is not a single word about Roma being part of the Holocaust or the position of the Bulgarian authorities about the deportations of Roma. Even if approximately 50,000 Bulgarian Jews were saved from the death camps, thousands of people across the old administrative territories of Bulgaria were sent to the camps. Since Bulgaria has yet to reflect critically on its history and the events of the Holocaust, as a result we do not know fully Bulgaria's historic position towards Roma or the objective reasoning behind the noble act of preventing some deportations.

Growing up Roma in Bulgaria, I only learned from informal education and activist work with Romani youth organizations that Roma were persecuted across Europe and that Romani genocide happened during the Holocaust. As a young scholar and an activist, delving into Romani experiences of the Holocaust is a way to connect with the collective history of Roma in Europe and learn about their untold stories.

Ari Joskowicz's book – *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* – reveals the untold stories of Romani and Jewish experiences during the Holocaust and discusses the tangled relationship between them within the timeframe of the Holocaust. Although Holocaust sufferings are incomparable, it is unavoidable, according to Joskowicz, that Romani and Jewish historical experiences are juxtaposed.

To begin, I approached this book with curiosity and a critical lens that focused on the historical position of Roma, their representation, and Romani knowledge production. Additionally, I highlighted the narratives and depictions of Roma that are still present in our societies – antigypsyism or anti-Romani racism lurking from the Holocaust until the present.

Joskowicz's book starts with the poem "Encamped Gypsies," written by Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever. The poem places a crucial question about the historic memory of Roma: "Who will tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" First, the poem serves as a reminder that Roma have been subject to persecution and atrocities, or as Sutzkever addresses "Encamped" and murdered. Second, the poem asks a question about the memorialization of Romani history and sufferings: "Will another memorialize the Gypsy extermination in song..." capturing the two main topics which I choose to focus on: memorialization of historical injustices committed during the Holocaust and Romani knowledge production.

Touching upon the question of racial persecution and a broader debate if Romani persecution were racially motivated, some Holocaust scholars argue that the persecution of Roma was not racially motivated. *Rain of Ash* in this regard leads to a different understanding. One might ask, if Roma deportations and killings were not racially motivated, what were they then? Those arguing against the idea of Romani racial deportation argue that Romani persecutions were based on Romani "asocial" behavior. Hence, Roma were labelled as "savages," unable to integrate and socialize among society. Here, it is crucial to understand that constructing the categories of the "criminal" and "savage" Gypsy or labelling Roma as "antisocial" contains and constructs racial perceptions of inferiority. The constructed categories and perceptions

about Roma are a result of historic antigypsyism or anti-Romani racism, a thread sewn throughout the Holocaust's history before the deportations, in postwar times and even today.

Romani communities across Europe have been a subject of racial hatred, facing similar policies of persecution and segregation as Jewish communities. However, there is a lack of critical reflection about the shared experiences of Roma and Jews. *Rain of Ash* reflects on these common experiences and highlights Romani stories of being “Encamped” and murdered, similar to Jews.

Joskowicz discusses postwar reconstruction and acknowledges the unequal position of Romani survivors in comparison to Jewish survivors. While recognized as victims of Nazism, their economic hardship was not taken into consideration, their cases were treated unequally, and they were left with no acknowledgement from the Nuremberg courtrooms. Consequently, the creation of a single Jewish narrative regarding the victims of the Holocaust has negatively affected not only Romani cultural and political memory but also knowledge production for future generations. Additionally, the courts at Nuremberg found it more important to devote time to debate racial questions rather than pursue justice for Romani victims – the legacy of which left Romani survivors in a position where they have been denied justice because of a racial debate.

Furthermore, during postwar reconstruction, Joskowicz narrates the stories of Roma seeking assistance and connections with Jewish organizations and Jewish survivors. Therefore, we need to recognize the help and the fact that the recognition of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust created a basis for Roma to pursue their cases and fight for justice for Romani genocide. Although crucial assistance was contributed by activists and individuals such as Kurt May in helping Roma recognition, in other cases, despite good intentions, activists held stereotypical views of Roma.

One of the important figures in the postwar reconstruction period – Philipp Auerbach – a Jewish-German patriot who worked on cases of Jewish survivors also fought for the recognition of Romani cases. Yet Auerbach's thought about Roma that “Germans should ‘approach them with love,’ because thus will it be possible to turn the few remaining Gypsies into full members of our human society”; “in doing so, they would ‘have to distinguish in this task between those Gypsies who were persecuted for racial reasons and those who were demonstrably imprisoned for asocial behavior.” Hence, Roma were stereotyped even by those who helped them to build their cases and seek justice.

Nevertheless – and seen as unproblematic by historians and scholars – labelling a group as “asocial” and unable to integrate not only denies the acknowledgement of racially motivated Romani persecution but also confirms and perpetuates stereotypes. The belief that Roma need to be civilized and turned into full members of the society reveals dehumanizing and discriminatory perspectives on Roma. These stereotypical narratives of the “asocial” or “criminal Gypsy” still exist and shape broader debates and discourses today, transforming into institutional racism and underrepresentation – historical, cultural, and political.

The lack of resources, structures, and individuals to create a network of support for Romani activists within the early Romani movement resulted in asymmetrical justice in comparison to Jewish survivors.

Hence, in many cases, personal and collective struggles went unacknowledged, and justice for Romani survivors was not received. Awareness about the Roma Holocaust and memorialization appeared years later, the consequences of which victims' families and Romani activists are still fighting today. Reflecting on history and postwar justice, and witnessing later recognition by states, institutions and museums, it appears that Romani victims were forgotten and hence still needed to demand justice. Both communities had common experiences but not common acknowledgement and visibility; the unfair position of Roma before, during and after the Holocaust limited their opportunities to demand recognition and visibility.

Joskowicz also touches upon the struggles faced by the early Romani movement and activists such as Grattan Paxton and their efforts for Roma Holocaust representation. From the early Romani movement until the present, Roma demands have not changed and remain a salient topic. Positively, today the Romani movement has expanded to include Romani youths. Together with Romani NGOs, they organize annual Holocaust remembrance events, especially on the second of August, visiting Auschwitz, paying tribute to Romani victims and passing on these untold stories.

Rain of Ash also sheds light on early documentation efforts on the Holocaust, where Romani testimonies and stories appeared in the margins of Jewish archives. Hence, Roma Holocaust history and testimonials still exist in Jewish archives. After the Holocaust, these early efforts at knowledge production by Jewish individuals and institutions also led to the rise of Roma Holocaust scholarship, created primarily by non-Romani experts.

Holocaust scholarship needs to be scrutinized critically about types of knowledge production produced in and inherited from the past. It needs to be questioned about who creates knowledge and what are the historical narratives and perceptions that this knowledge builds for future research and activism. In some cases, different scholars, anthropologists, and folklorists had a romanticizing approach to Romani-related scholarly materials, and Joskowicz looks at the produced knowledge with a necessary critical lens.

Knowledge production from the past serves and assists us in a quest for justice, quenches our curiosity, and allows for research, but it also needs to be filtered and critically approached. Although knowledge produced about Roma may appear to be respected, contemporary expectations about Romani memorialization and knowledge production have changed. Hence, it is unacceptable for experts and scholars to come unequipped with a basic understanding or intentionally build a single Holocaust narrative and perpetuate racial stereotypes.

Joskowicz's book about Jewish and Romani experiences and victimhood contributes to Romani scholarship and creates more awareness about the Holocaust. Recognizing the historic position of Roma Holocaust survivors, the author elucidates that they were unable to tell their stories. Sutzkever reminds us of the importance of asking: "Who *will* tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" Joskowicz then responds and provokes us to ask: "Who *can* tell the stories of the Roma Holocaust?" Joskowicz's question inherently acknowledges Roma's sufferings and highlights the uneven position of Roma in their pursuit of justice, as well as a lack of recognition, unequal resources, and uneven memorialization. Changing Sutzkever's question means to reflect on who is able to tell the stories while considering structural challenges and obstacles that need to be overcome in order for one to be able to "tell." For instance, position, social status,

knowledge, and cultural capital are all crucial for knowledge production. In short, intersectionality is crucial to the telling and understanding of these stories.

Reflecting more deeply on the relations between Jews and Roma, *Rain of Ash* does not provide much knowledge about the relationship between Roma and Jews before the persecution. Although some solidarity between them exists because of a common experience, common knowledge is missing despite Joskowicz's effort to uncover untold stories of shared experiences and victimhood. Additionally, the book reflects on the attitudes and narratives that are still being shared about Roma across Europe.

Joskowicz acknowledges that scholars, activists, and lobbyists recognized Romani genocide but also critically approaches Romani scholarship by questioning positionality and early scholarly work about Roma. *Rain of Ash* is an essential contribution to Romani knowledge production and an invitation for Romani scholars and activists to engage further and question the past.