

The Roma Inside the Warsaw Ghetto's Walls

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The experience of the Roma within the Warsaw Ghetto—the space of indirect extermination—has been relatively little studied. In writings that touch on the Holocaust’s effects on the Roma, the context most frequently addressed is that of the death camps. It therefore seems particularly important to excavate traces of the Roma presence in the Warsaw Ghetto. Since the release of Jerzy Ficowski’s book *Cyganie na polskich drogach*,¹ in which the subject of the Roma in the Ghetto was discussed for the first time, no texts have appeared in Polish to expand upon Ficowski’s findings. This is primarily a result of the fact that documentation of the fate of the Roma in the Ghetto remains sparse. Unlike the Jews, who produced many personal writings, preserved today in large part through the work of the Oneg Szabat group, the Roma did not write down

¹ The book was first published in 1965. See also passages in the article by M. Juszkiewiczówna, *Tragiczny los Cyganów na okupowanych ziemiach polskich w latach 1939–1945*, [in:] *Biuletyn Głównej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej* 1992, vol. XXXIV.

their war stories and did not pass them on to succeeding generations. Those stories thus did not function as an essential element of their identity. This was conditioned by their culture, which, in keeping with *romanipen* – Roma tradition, was not directed toward remembrance of the past.

There was not a special “gypsy camp” set aside inside the Warsaw Ghetto, a kind of ghetto within the ghetto, as there was in Łódź from 1941 on. In Warsaw, the Roma were not isolated from the Jews. In personal documents, the greatest number of references to “gypsies” – as they were called – occurs in spring and summer 1942, that is, shortly before the great liquidation operation. Furthermore, in May of the same year, orders were given in Warsaw for the forced resettlement of the Roma to the ghetto and confiscation of their property. At the same time a press release appeared in the *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* in relation to that decree, with the significant title: “Together with the Jews, the Gypsies too inside the walls.”²

Adam Czerniaków, head of the Jewish Council, wrote in his diary about such events as the arrival of a transport of Roma from Łowicz and others from abroad Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Germany. It should also be noted that many Polish “gypsies,” who had hidden in the woods before these persecutions, were frequently shot on the spot in extemporaneous executions during local roundups.

² See *Nowy Kurier Warszawski* 131/1942. According to Jerzy Ficowski Roma were being exiled to the ghetto as early as 1941.

The direct testimony available to us from Roma who lived in the ghetto is fragmentary. Aleksy Kozłowski, who was in hiding in Warsaw in the Powązki, Powiśle and Konstancin areas when he was arrested, remembers: “The Germans took me to the ghetto in Warsaw, that was in autumn 1942. I was working in a forced labor camp located on the outskirts of Warsaw, probably in the Ochota district.”³ At Okęcie airport, he did earthworks and built various kinds of fortifications. Due to a disease of the eyes, he was released from the camp after the intervention of a German doctor. His taste of freedom did not last long, however, since he was apprehended as a “loitering gypsy” and transported to the camp at Majdanek. For her part, Leokadia Bejman, captured by the Germans in a forest near Warsaw and moved with her husband and children to the Warsaw Ghetto, reports:

There were other Roma there too – from Kozłowszczyzna, Pawłowszczyzna, Iglenic and others, some are still living today. It was autumn 1942. We didn't stay here long, because I was transported to the camp at Treblinka. At that time I had three children. They took me to Treblinka with a transport of Jews from the ghetto, with my youngest daughter, who had just been born, and my husband. Two of my children remained in the ghetto – Helena and Ignacy [...], who were raised by other Roma from our family.⁴

³ J. Dębski, J. Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Prześladowania i masowa zagłada Romów podczas II wojny światowej w świetle relacji i wspomnień*, Warszawa 2007, p. 154.

⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

Bejman's husband and daughter died in the camp, while her two children in the ghetto were saved and lived in Gostynin after the war.

Historians comparing the extermination of the Jews and the Roma have underscored that though the slaughter of "Gypsies" was dictated by the same racist logic as the destruction of the Jews in the Holocaust, it was not carried out in the same systematic form. The Third Reich's attitude toward the Roma was, moreover, ambiguous, and its decrees concerning them were often contradictory. The Ghettoization of the Roma also differed notably from that of the Jews. It was not implemented as methodically or prepared propagandistically as in the case of the Jewish population. Furthermore, as we read in the decree of the starost of the Warsaw powiat, Roma did not face the threat of punishment by death for leaving the ghetto, but rather a high fine and a heavy prison term. Nevertheless, the fact is that the settlement of the Roma without means of subsistence in ghettos, from which they were next taken to extermination camps, likewise condemned them to death through hunger and contagious diseases, as the words of Abraham Lewin bear witness:

Today there is an announcement in the Occupation rag put out in Polish in Warsaw that all Gypsies held in the Warsaw powiat will be transported to and settled in the ghetto. At the same time they list the following 'humanitarian' stipulations: men 'may' sent

to work camps and there ‘may’ be confiscation of all their belongings without reimbursement, including household furniture and horses, and in general everything that a gypsy family possesses and carries with them. In practice this boils down to the removal of gypsy men to work camps where they will die off from hard work and insufficient nourishment. And the rest of the Gypsies will be packed up, naked and barefoot, without any means of subsistence, to the ghetto, where they, too, will die of hunger and from the epidemic.⁵

Before the war, the Roma belonged to a stigmatized group, situated in a kind of “cultural ghetto” at the margins of society, which was further reproduced in their predicament in the ghetto. A certain tension in relations between Roma and Jews can be observed in written records from the ghetto as well. In the ghetto—the space of the Jews’ exclusion—there were “outsiders.” Jewish refugees and those resettled from the provinces who had come to Warsaw before the closing-off of the ghetto were, according to Chaim Kaplan, noticeably different in their appearance and therefore seemed “exotic.”⁶ The

⁵ A. Lewin, *Dziennik*, ed. K. Person, Warszawa 2016, p. 83. English translation: A. Lewin, *A cup of tears: a diary of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. A. Polonsky, transl. Ch. Hutton, 1989.

⁶ *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, ed. and trans. A.I. Katsh, Bristol 1966, p. 75. Social welfare workers in the ghetto divided the Jews who had come there from less populated areas into those being resettled and those who were refugees. The difference was based on the fact that the first were assigned places of resettlement by the occupation government while refugees had made the choice of destination themselves. These terms have generally not been applied to the Roma, but following the above logic, they could also be referred to as resettled. Many of the Roma were in fact taken to the ghetto after extemporaneous roundups, after which they were placed in the prison on Gęsia Street.

Roma, however, were the most distinct and conspicuous group of outsiders. Their presence often became problematic for the Jews in terms of the cultural differences between the two groups. Their arrival in the ghetto was not perceived neutrally but generated intense reactions. An unknown author noted in his journal that in June 1942 about 2000 Roma were brought into the ghetto and at first temporarily assigned quarters on Pokorna Street; they then were to stay in a building on Wołyńska where some Jews already lived. He noticed that they attracted a group of curious onlookers who gathered around them:

Today the Gypsies appeared on the streets of the ghetto and stirred up a general sensation. I saw two Gypsy women with a crowd of children following them, and then later a few Gypsies surrounded by a herd of gaping passersby. They are shabbily dressed and speak in German. The Gypsy women immediately set about doing their usual business, that is, a bit of fortune telling, begging, a few apparently have already begun walking around the yards gathering alms. These Gypsies are taken from throughout the territory of the Reich and brought here.⁷

Kaplan also wrote about the fact that the Roma's arrival in the ghetto constituted a kind of "sensation" and asserted ironically that placing them together with the Jews was a logical maneuver on the part of the occupier,

⁷ N.N., *Dziennik*, [in:] Archiwum Ringelbluma: vol. 5, *Getto warszawskie. Życie codzienne*, ed. K. Person, Warszawa 2011, p. 83.

since they had many things in common. Both Jews and “Gypsies” were considered wandering nations, both were forbidden to marry “Aryans” and were subject to the racist Nuremberg laws. He wrote that in the ghetto the Roma would at first pursue their traditional activities: the men trading horses, the women telling fortunes, and, most importantly, they would assist the Jews in smuggling. Moreover, he believed that once they were settled in, they would begin to steal from “their brothers” in misery. In support of this hypothesis, he cited an incident on Karmelicka Street. In front of many passersby, one of the Roma had stolen a Jew’s overcoat, which elicited widespread indignation.⁸

Another instance in which Roma behaved noticeably differently than their new neighbors is revealed in the manuscripts, mentioned by Jerzy Ficowski, of the Jewish doctor Edward Reicher, who during the liquidation operation observed from the roof of a wrecked building as Jews were led out to the Umschlagplatz – the loading area from which trains left for Treblinka. Among them, a group of 100-200 “Gypsies” set themselves markedly apart in that, unlike the Jews, they moved energetically, even enthusiastically, as if unaware of what awaited them.⁹

Fears of this alien population were undoubtedly influenced to a significant degree by pragmatic considerations. Despite the continual reduction of the ghett-

⁸ *The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, p. 274.

⁹ J. Ficowski, *Cyganie na polskich drogach*, Kraków 1985, pp. 124–125.

to area, transports of Jews from Poland and other countries as well as Roma were proceeding unabated. Stanisław Adler drew attention to the housing problems that arose when in June 1942, together with the resettlement of Jews from Germany and Czechoslovakia, a group of Roma led by the “gypsy” king Kwiek was brought into the ghetto. Adler was responsible for organizing and assigning suitable housing for them, which was not an easy task.¹⁰ The ghetto was overflowing with people, menaced by a lack of food and worsening sanitary conditions. There were organizations at work providing support to refugees and resettled people in the area, but their help was found to be insufficient to the situation.

Congestion was also a serious problem in the prison on Gęsia Street. According to Emanuel Ringelblum, by May 1942 it was holding four times more people than its cells could fit, leading to cases of fainting and a high fatality rate. He wrote: “Among the prisoners, there are also Gypsies, whom Auerswald, calls Gypsy-Jews. Some of them (those who are citizens of Romania) have been set free, The Gypsy women are kept in a separate cell. The Gypsy men are held together with the Jews.”¹¹

¹⁰ In the Warsaw Ghetto 1940-1943. An Account of a Witness. The Memoirs of Stanisław Adler, trans. S. Chmielewska Philip, Jerusalem 1982, p. 269. Adam Czerniaków, on the other hand, refers to King Kwiek already being put in prison in April 1942.

¹¹ E. Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego wrzesień 1939–styczeń 1943*, ed. A. Eisenbach, trans. A. Rutkowski, Warszawa 1983, p. 381. English translation: *Notes from the Warsaw ghetto. The journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and transl. J. Sloan, 1989. Heinz Auerswald was a commissioner for the Jewish quarter in Warsaw.

In the context of Roma survival strategies during ghettoization, reports on an uprising in the prison are illuminating. According to the testimony of Edward Reicher, some few dozen Roma men held at Gęsia raised a rebellion in autumn 1942. They took the keys from the guards and, having escaped from their cells, tried to penetrate through the prison wall. Many of them, however, were killed on the spot, while the rest were returned to the prison once apprehended.¹² Though the attempt at resistance ended in failure, it constitutes an example of opposition practiced against the conditions of the war.

In his journal, Adam Czerniaków twice mentions releasing “Gypsies” from the prison on Gęsia at the behest of the authorities in connection with the need to organize a place of refuge for them. Following his orders, he advised them to wear white armbands with the letter Z written on them in red, from the German word “Zigeuner” (Gypsy). Many Roma reported to the Jewish Ghetto Police in connection with this matter and at the same time asked for help, since they had no place to go. The head of the Jewish Council commented as follows: “out of humanitarian considerations I have to look after

¹² J. Ficowski, *Cyganie na polskich drogach*, pp. 124–125. Both Ficowski and Juszkiewiczówna further state that the most common form of extermination applied to Polish Roma (as opposed to those resettled from abroad to ghettos and camps in Poland) was extemporaneous execution, as a result of the fact that the Germans feared revolt among them or escapes. With the Polish Roma these possibilities were much higher due to their knowledge of the topography and the local context.

them, especially the woman and children.”¹³ We learn from his notes that he conversed with resettled Roma and took an interest in their fate to the extent that he was able. At the same time, however, he mentioned with a certain distaste that the “Gypsies” addressed him with the “requests of ‘loyal subjects.’” As one example, he cites a meeting with the Weiss family of Hamburg, who came to him asking for him to facilitate their return to Germany.¹⁴

It was not possible to guarantee the desired living conditions to the Roma in the ghetto, however, as Abraham Lewin’s testimony clarifies: “They definitely inspire pity and sympathy from us, though we will not be able to help them, just as we were unable to lighten the load of the many thousands of our own refugees who are dying off every day before my eyes.”¹⁵ Lewin pointed to the common experiences of Jews and Roma in the face of the Holocaust. Though he was convinced that closing the “Gypsies” in the ghetto would cause overpopulation and the spread of epidemic, he nonetheless, guided by “sympathy,” called them the Jews’ “brothers in suffering.” His words can be interpreted as a call to collective memory of the past tragedy that affected both the Jews and the Roma:

¹³ *Adama Czerniakowa dziennik getta warszawskiego 6 IX 1939–23 VII 1942*, ed. M. Fuks, Warszawa 1983, p. 290. English translation: *The Warsaw diary of Adam Czerniakow: prelude to doom*, ed. R. Hilberg, S. Staron, J. Kermisz, transl. S. Staron and the Staff of Yad Vashem.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁵ A. Lewin, op. cit., p. 84.

And in spite of that, I harbor deep sympathy for the miserable Gypsies. They are our brothers in suffering. They have grown in my eyes to the rank of god-fearing martyrs. [...] The blood of Gypsies, too, will cry out from the earth for all time and will cover the head of the German blond beast in shame and contempt. ‘The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth to me from the ground.’ That cry will never go silent and will demand vengeance!¹¹⁶

The history of the Roma in the Warsaw Ghetto ends with the operation of January 1943 when the last of them were taken to the camp at Treblinka. Their fates in the ghetto remain forgotten in a sense, and the memory of these events is situated at the margins of the dominant narrative about the history of the Warsaw Ghetto. In the ongoing discussion among historians about whether the Roma were victims of the Holocaust and whether there is justification for comparing the exterminations of the Jews and the Roma, it seems important to shift the center of gravity from such larger narratives to studies of individual experience and expanding work on hitherto overlooked themes. In the literature of personal documents from the ghetto, the Roma have most often been mentioned in the context of resettlement and transports, difficulties with dwellings or stays on Gesia. Threads that appear worth pursuing in the future, however, include reactions to ghettoization among the Roma, ways of dealing with captivity, survival strat-

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

egies they adopted, and how the awareness of extermination was felt and experienced during the liquidation campaign.

In our time, we can say that memory of the Porajmos has begun to reappear and further along may perhaps result in more intensive research into both the personal experiences of the Roma in the spaces of indirect extermination and relations between Roma and Jews during the time of ghettoization.

translated by Timothy Williams