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Memorialisation as an Alternative to the Antigypsy Gaze in Igor Krikunov's *The Leader*

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to discuss the memorisation of the Romanian and Ukrainian Roma Holocaust ("pharrajimos" in the Romani language) in Igor Krikunov's play *The Leader*. Adapted to stage from Zaharia Stancu's novel *The Gypsy Tribe* (1968), the play powerfully evokes the conflicts within a Roma community, the waning of traditional patriarchal values and the threat of annihilation. The play's central character is a patriarch guarding the family and the wider Roma community under inhuman historical circumstances, who is conflicted between the dangers of the survival of his community and the needs and expectations of the younger generation that defy traditional gender norms. This paper identifies Krikunov's play as a major work that not only reflects on the relatively underrepresented genocide against the Roma population in Romania and Ukraine under Ion Antonescu's regime, but it also dismantles Gypsy stereotypes and shows role models for the new Roma and non-Roma generations through theatre education. Therefore, the paper will focus on the following questions: What artistic counter strategies can *The Leader* provide to the antigypsy attitudes? How can theater education widen historical consciousness and create a mutual understanding between Roma and non-Roma audiences? How should the character of the leader be understood in the context of patriarchal tradition in the Roma communities?

On this latter subject, Krikunov seems to offer a rather conservative view. In a 2006 discussion with Tatiana Nikolayevna Gabrielson, he opposed women's emancipation, claiming that such movements might lead to the dissolution of communal values, which would altogether mean the end of poetic creativity.¹ Yet, in the same interview, Krikunov argues that the Roma theater should reach out to the new generation by adapting its storytelling techniques to their language:

"Our wish here was to reach the young audience as soon as possible and to establish contact with them. Only by speaking their language one would be able to find contact with them. [Excitedly] That is, when they see these contemporary movements, contemporary text, all that contemporary slang that we use in our performance, and songs,

¹ Tatiana Nikolayevna Gabrielson, 'Propaganda of Romani Culture in Post-Soviet Ukraine,' unpublished M.A.-dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2006, p. 140.

including the soul style, they immediately allow contact with you, they like it. The Gypsy and Non-Gypsy youth alike vedutsya odinakovo—are digging it.”²

With this argument, Krikunov echoes Ian Hancock’s words, who in a 2005 broadcast of Radio Prague International saw education and culture as key to improving positive identity and a sense of pride in Roma youth:

“If you look at the facts of Romani history; it’s pretty sad. There has been the slavery that I mentioned, the Holocaust, the transportations, the sterilizations, the mass killings, the pogroms; and, we’re still here. We still have our identity - without a country, without an army, without a government, without an economy – we’re still here. We have our language and our culture; and to me, this is a triumph of survival.”³

As I will argue in this paper, *The Leader* offers a great alternative to establishing this identity. In the play, the leader and his community embody self-sacrifice, self-conflict, compassion, and purity, which concepts are in stark contrast to the brutality of the time. The problem of the play is how old patriarchal values are tested and what strategies should be employed by the community for them to survive. In the following, I will expand upon these.

² Ibid.

³ 'Dr Ian Hancock: eminent Romani scholar, activist - and highschool dropout - on the value of education,' *Radio Prague International*, 01.07.2005. Available: <https://english.radio.cz/dr-ian-hancock-eminent-romani-scholar-activist-and-highschool-dropout-value-8094574>, access: 31.01.2022.

2. Memorialisation and Heroism in *The Leader*

Igor Krikunov's *The Leader* enjoyed a warm welcome upon its performances in Ukraine and Russia. Subtitled in the original as *The Seven Circles of Gypsy Hell*, the play was seen by many of its reviewers as a "sorrowful confession of the people who survived the Holocaust tragedy"⁴ and a work of "important social significance" that tells just as much about the murders of the Roma people in the past as about their contemporary persecutions in Ukraine.⁵ In an interview to ukr.radio, Krikunov describes the plot as "impressive, worthy of Shakespeare," where the Roma community "reflects the model of any human institution, from family to state."⁶ As Krikunov points out, central to the drama is the moral character of Him, the community's leader who is ready to sacrifice himself for his people.⁷

The play is about the fate of a Romanian Roma community which under the regime of Ion Antonescu was forced by the Romanian authorities to the Ukrainian side of the River Prut, where they would be annihilated on arrival at the final destination. The play's revelation of the genocide committed by the Ukrainian and Romanian states against the Roma during the Second World War owes much to Krikunov's personally felt moral responsibility to memorialise the events that haunted his community. Indeed, Krikunov is well-known in his country for his founding of the Romance Gypsy Theater in Ukraine in 1970, his hosting of the International Gypsy Art Festivals, and him representing Ukraine at memorial events in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other places of extermination.⁸ After 2000, Krikunov, with historian Yakiv Hryschchuk, collected information about the massacre in Divoshin, a small Ukrainian town, where in 1942 around 80 Roma were

⁴ Elvira Zahurska, 'Retsenziya na vystavu «Vozhak, abo Sim kil tsyhans'koho pekla»,' available: <http://teatr-romans.com.ua/7606/>, access: 01.02.2022. My translation.

⁵ 'Vystava «Vozhak» Kyiv's'koho akademichnoho muzychno-dramatychnoho tsyhans'koho teatru «Romans»,' available: <http://knpu.gov.ua/content/vystava-%C2%ABvozhak%C2%BB-ki%D1%97vskogo-akadem%D1%96chno-go-muzychno-dramatichnogo-tsiganskogo-teatru-%C2%ABromans%C2%BB>, access: 01.02.2022. My translation.

⁶ Halyna Babi, 'U p'yesi "Vozhak" na modeli taboru vidobrazheni vsi lyuds'ki instytuty — kerivnyk teatru "Romans",' Ukrayinske radio, 22.11.2018, available: <http://ukr.radio/news.html?newsID=82662>, access: 01.02.2022.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Vystava «Vozhak» Kyiv's'koho akademichnoho muzychno-dramatychnoho tsyhans'koho teatru «Romans»,'

murdered by bullets, and urged the foundation of a memory site, the plantation of the *Forest of Memory*, where each tree represents each victim.⁹

Yet, *The Leader* is not just about the extinction of a community but also the extinction of old values and the moral dilemma of a man responsible for his community to make the best possible choices for the survival of his people. As Elvira Zagurska argues, the leader is a “father of his society, because the play on the camp model reproduces the model of society.”¹⁰ This representation of the patriarch raises many questions of how the play approaches normative ideas about gender and society in the very historical circumstances in which the plot is set. When discussing women’s experiences during the Holocaust, Anna Szász claims that:

“The will to survive, putting the preservation of community at the center-point, constituted the fundamental resistance [...] Their resistance was not exclusively a fight for life, but also small sets of activities motivated by a conscious attempt to defy the Nazis and thwart their goal of depriving “Gypsies” of their humanity...”¹¹

Contrary to the national and patriotic upheavals in occupied Europe, Chiriac Bogdan identifies such acts of resistance as “less politicized and less articulated in its organization”, whereby the goal of the minority group engaged in it was “to preserve lives rather than bring about the fall of the oppressing regime or the defeat of the occupation forces.”¹² As Michelle Kelso argues, testimonies of the Roma Holocaust offer new ways to examine genocide from a gendered

⁹ ‘Gedenkstätteportal zu Orten der Erinnerung in Europa,’ available: <https://www.memorialmuseums.org/eng/denkmaeler/view/1610/Site-of-Remembrance-for-Roma-Murdered-in-Divoshin>, access: 02.01.2022.

¹⁰ Zahurska. My translation.

¹¹ Anna Lujza Szasz, *Is Survival Resistance? Experiences of Roma Women under the Holocaust* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012), pp. 81-82.

¹² Chiriac Bogdan, ‘Between survival and noncompliance: Roma “acts of resistance” in Transnistria during World War II,’ in Angéla Kóczé and Anna Lujza Szász, eds., *Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath Collection of Working Papers* (Budapest: Tom Lantos Institute, 2018), p. 27.

perspective.¹³ The Holocaust in Ukraine, and most particularly in Transnistria, says Kelso, “shook the foundation of familial bonds. The camps brought brutality, starvation, disease, and a systematic breakdown of the social structures.”¹⁴ Some children were orphaned, while some others “acquired new roles as providers and caretakers, eking out an existence for themselves and family.”¹⁵ Under these circumstances, girls and women were forced to adapt to strict gender norms governing their behavior for the survival of their group.¹⁶

To read *The Leader* from a gendered perspective allows us to revisit Krikunov’s observation on the emancipation of Romani women. In this sense, the protection of the community during the Holocaust led to the safeguarding of gender norms. As a father figure to his people, Him realizes that any divergence from these norms could mean the absolute destruction of the community. In one scene, he says to the adulterous Lisandra:

“Come to your senses, Lisandra! Look around: there is a war! Death is in our corners. We are driven away like cattle. And in this difficult hour, you are breaking the oldest and supreme law that holds the residents of the camp together, that helps the camp to cling to its inhabitants, helps them survive. Do you want the camp to become like a runaway chariot whose horses are losing their minds? Because then the chariot will deviate from the road, the wheels will break, the belts will break, everyone will save their own skin, and everything will fall apart. Therefore, as the leader of the camp, I ask you to betray your love.”¹⁷

In another scene, he says:

¹³ Michelle Kelso, ‘No Shelter to Cry In: Romani Girls and Responsibility during the Holocaust,’ in Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren, *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), p. 140.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Igor Krikunov, *A cigányvajda*, in Péter Krasztev, ed., *Roma hősök: Öt európai dráma* (Független Színház Magyarország and Nők a Jövőért Egyesület: Budapest, 2021), p. 65. My translation.

"I want to gain time for our camp to reach "the remote areas designated by the authorities where the Roma will continue to live and work" as soon as possible. I'm afraid we'll have one job there: to dig our own graves. And if we can only stop for one day, I'll take advantage of it. One day maybe won't be enough to keep us alive. But one day this lost world must come to its senses."¹⁸

In a world that has lost its values and gone mad, the leader embodies reason and responsibility, attributes that reflect the strict patriarchal hierarchy within the Roma community. Him firmly believes that for the survival of his people, the ancient laws of patriarchy must be followed, and any betrayal of these laws is punished. Thus, before whipping Lisandra for her extramarital relationship with Ariston, another member of the community, Him reasons her punishment by referring to the laws, which "have made us live in harmony and friendship, but when they are broken for the sake of animal temper, when it urges one of us to grab an axe, or when people are ready to cut each other's bellies, the camp can drown in its own blood."¹⁹ What constitutes the existential crisis of the play is that although Lisandra and Ariston are punished by their Gypsy fellows for their actions, the rigid conventions of the camp seem to be forever broken by the love of Kera and Alimut. The purity of love stands against both the brutality of the outside world and the inner patriarchal laws of the community. Him must realize at the end that he is unable to act against the new generation's demand for freedom, and that nonviolent resistance to military power is no longer a viable strategy. The law of the ancestors is violated on two occasions in the play. Although Kera is engaged by law to Ujvor, another member of the community, Him ultimately gives his blessings to the romantic union between Kera and Alimut. The law of nonviolent resistance is broken when Him and the other members must beat to death a corporal after their strategy of slowing down their resettlement comes to light and the sentry-go, who was responsible for this delay,

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 68-69. My translation.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

is executed. Although the camp eventually survives, Him resigns by recognising that a new world is coming in the life of the camp, whose rules he cannot compete with anymore. He bids farewell to Alimut, his son, and, through him, the entire camp with the following wisdom:

“You too, Alimut, have a lot of misfortune waiting for you, but better times are coming. Because what was it before? Two people fight, while a third lives his life. This is how we gypsies lived in the side waters of everything. From now on, this is not going to work. We must share in the bitterness of others. Then there will be only other troubles of ours. And I feel like this time will come. Don’t miss the opportunity, Alimut! Look at the high mountain!”²⁰

For Him, humanity is key, and this humanity, based on traditional values and nonviolent behavior, is tested in the play. By portraying a caring leader loyal to his people, Krikunov offers beautiful alternatives to the antigypsy attitudes of society. These artistic alternatives are essential, since a collective historical consciousness of the pharrajimos can strengthen the cohesion within the Roma community, while it also can play a pivotal role in their battle for equality.²¹ Zoltán Kelemen cites Katalin Katz by arguing that “the Roma do not have a historical memory in the traditional sense, as it must be constantly re-articulated in constant confrontations with the other, the stranger, the external, which altogether demands interaction with the rhetorical strategies of other memories, in short: it must be internarrative rather than intranarrative.”²² As Slawomir Kapralski claims, scholarly views on the development of a discourse on the memory of the Roma genocide and the incorporation of cultural memory into Roma identity are divided.²³ Some argue that while the Romani Holocaust is already a part of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Zoltán Kelemen, ‘Lelkek üzenete: A roma holokauszt népi emlékezete,’ in *Alföld* 72. 3 (March 2021) : 54.; Katalin Katz, *Visszafojtott emlékezet. A magyarországi romák holokauszt-történetéhez* (Budapest: Pont, 2005), p. 115.

²² Kelemen, p. 54.; Katz, p. 115.

²³ Slawomir. Kapralski, “Symbols and Rituals in the Mobilisation of the Romani National Ideal.” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12 (2012, 1) : 77.

European discourse on memory, within the Roma community it is only a realm of elite groups without a sufficient impact on the masses.²⁴ Other sources have a more positive view, saying that the Holocaust is already at the centre of Romani cultural identity and historical memory.²⁵ Kapralski suggests that the memorialisation of the pharrajimos offers for the Roma new possibilities to “focus on their common past in order to create a better future.”²⁶ Andrej Kotljarchuk shares this view, noting that “[t]he political consensus between the Romani activists, Ukrainian genocide scholars, and the authorities created possibilities for inclusion of the Roma minor memory of the genocide into the major memory narrative of the Nazi occupation in Ukraine.”²⁷ In my view, *The Leader* makes one step further in these efforts to build out a collective memory culture. While the play confronts young Roma generations with the historical injustices and brutality that their ancestors suffered from, i.e., it builds out and widens their historical consciousness, it also draws the attention to the importance of collective values and a devotion to ancestral laws within the Roma community, as well as such human issues as love, family bonds, fear, and self-sacrifice, giving a fundamentally humanist picture on the Roma community for Roma and non-Roma audiences.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that *The Leader* was picked by the Independent Theater Hungary for a performance at the Roma Heroes – IV. International Roma Theater Festival on 4th November 2020 and selected for the volume *Roma Heroes: Five European Dramas* (2021). The genesis of Krikunov’s play perfectly fits into the artistic perspectives of the Independent Theatre Hungary. As it is argued in *Roma Heroes Foundation Bricks* (2020), an educational methodology book compiled by the Independent Theatre Hungary jointly with three other European Roma theater companies, Rampa Presentina (Italy), The Roma Actors Association – Giuvlipen (Romania), A.C. para La I+D Independiente Del Teatro Profesional En Andalucía (Spain), there are basically two narratives on the Roma that are enjoying popularity in the mainstream social consciousness.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Andrej Kotljarchuk, ‘Babi Yar and the Nazi Genocide of Roma: Memory Narratives and Memory Practices in Ukraine,’ *Nationalities Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021) p. 16.

There is an “own-fault” narrative which portrays the Roma as social misfits who do not want to work, enjoy living on welfare and illegal incomes, are aggressive, have criminal tendencies, and are dangerous to society.²⁸ Then, there is another widespread narrative, which focuses on the Roma as helpless victims of discrimination and segregation, highlighting that these minorities rely mostly on the support and responsibility of institutions and social majority.²⁹ Both narratives paint a picture on the Roma as passive sufferers of their own circumstances who neither can impact their own well-being, nor that of their larger societies. As the methodology suggests, “[t]he negative/passive/victim image is not attractive enough to the young people to believe that they can be tools for a change, and it does not motivate them to identify themselves with a positive Roma identity.”³⁰ This identity is radically different from the Roma stereotypes of social majorities, whereby there is a need for another narrative, presenting Roma heroes whose fall is caused by external forces, but at the same time they are able to stand up, move forward and make a difference with their choices.³¹ The educational methodology brings together Roma and non-Roma secondary school or university students to discuss the concept of the hero as an active participant of social progress, the different issues regarding European Roma communities, as well as the values, choices, dilemmas, and impact of the dramatic heroes.³²

Such an initiative bears great significance for the Roma community of Ukraine. As it is reported in “Roma in Ukraine – A Time for Action: Priorities and Pathways for an Effective Integration Policy” (2019), there is no reliable data on the exact number, health and living conditions of the Ukrainian Roma population.³³ There is an estimated record suggesting there are around 200,000 to 40,000

²⁸ Marton Illes, Ursula Mainardi, et al., eds., *Roma Heroes Foundation Bricks*, 2020, p. 21.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dézsi, Fruzsina, ‘Sokkal tartozik nekünk a szakma – Interjú Balogh Rodrigóval,’ *Dunszt Kulturális Magazin*.

³² Marton, Mainardi, et al., pp. 94-95.

³³ Halyna Bocheva, ‘Roma in Ukraine – A Time for Action: Priorities and Pathways for an Effective Integration Policy’ (International Charitable Organization Roma Women’s Fund ‘Chirikli’ and Minority Rights Group Europe, 2019), p. 3, available:

https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/MRG_Rep_Ukraine_EN_Apr19.pdf, access: 04.02.2022.

Roma scattered around the country and the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Roma community is remarkably high.³⁴ Members of the Roma community generally live in high levels of poverty, around 30,000 of them have no documents, thousands live in economic hardships with little to no access to healthcare.³⁵ In most cases, residential segregation gives rise to the lack of substandard schooling, discrimination, and early school drop-out, which in turn results in high levels of illiteracy among adult Roma.³⁶ Added to it is the long history of persecution, exclusion, oppression, and discrimination of the Roma communities which continues to this day.³⁷

The antigypsy gaze of Ukrainian mainstream culture has encouraged Romani authors to find new ways of self-representations against non-Romani stereotypes. Accordingly, *The Leader* provides an effective counternarrative to the stereotypical representations of the Gypsy because it offers a “hero narrative” for the Roma and non-Roma audiences, whereby the Roma are portrayed as a community with its own culture and respect for others as opposed to the inhumanity of the external world that endangers their existence. It is a particularly challenging endeavour since stories of Holocaust survivors are mostly told within the framework of a “victim narrative”. By portraying a patriarch conflicted between his fidelity to ancient values and the demands of the new generation, a man who is ready to sacrifice himself for the survival of his people makes identification for the Roma audience effortless, whereby positive self-image becomes much easier to improve. Moreover, memorialisation of the Roma Holocaust provides for non-Roma audience to reflect on the past and the present of social discrimination and exclusion and find common grounds for a European solidarity.

³⁴ Bocheva, p. 3; “About 30,000 Roma in Ukraine have no documents.” The story of a Roma activist, United Nations Ukraine, 04.01.2021, available: <https://ukraine.un.org/en/106824-about-30000-roma-ukraine-have-no-documents-story-roma-activist>, access: 04.02.2022.

³⁵ Bocheva, p. 3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bocheva, p. 3.

3. Conclusion

This paper has discussed memorialisation as a counternarrative to the antigypsy attitudes in Igor Krikunov's *The Leader*. Although scholarly interest in the Eastern European Roma Holocaust has increased, there is need for artistic representations of it. As this paper suggested, since they not only provide true historical accounts of the events, but they also show heroes standing up for their community, thereby supporting a positive identity for the Roma audience and understanding and solidarity from the non-Roma audience. This work has identified *The Leader* as a pivotal work in this process since it portrays humanity and values in a Roma community in contrast to the brutality of the external world. The paper has recognised the character of the leader as a father figure who is conflicted between the old patriarchal values and the changing demands of the new generation, while he also must face the potential annihilation of his people. Central to the play are topics of love, family bonds, fidelity toward values and tradition, as well as self-sacrifice, whereby Krikunov sheds a much humane light on the Roma community.

As the paper has argued, such self-representative strategies bear with great significance in view of the contemporary socioeconomic issues of the Roma population in Ukraine, including segregation and discrimination. To acquire a positive self-image for the Roma, *The Leader* employs a "hero narrative" as opposed to the more stereotypical "victim narratives", whereby the leader is portrayed as a man who makes his choices for the sake of his community and safeguards their survival. Thus, while drawing attention to the historical persecution of the Roma community, *The Leader* also draws attention to the values and difficulties of Roma communities, thereby encouraging mutual understanding and cooperative intergroup attitudes between Roma and non-Roma audiences.

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