The Cultural Genocide of the Children of the Country Road Programme and its Memorialisation in Mariella Mehr's *Stone Age* and Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to discuss the memorialisation of crimes committed by the Children of the Country Road programme in Mariella Mehr's novel *Stone Age* and its monodrama-adaptation, Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life.* The paper will examine actions taken by the Pro Juventute organisation against the Yenish minority community from 1926 to 1970, to 'stop vagrancy' and purify Swiss society from the 'genetically degenerate', during which almost 2,000 children were taken away from their families, put into psychiatric institutions, homes, prisons, or given to foster families, exposing them to mental and physical abuse. This work identifies Mehr's novel as a pivotal work, one of the first to reveal the crimes of Pro Juventute by a survivor, and as such, an important part of European memory culture. In her novel, Mehr deconstructs the language of stigmatisation used by Swiss authorities in the files on Yenish children, raising questions about power, racial identity, uprootedness and survival. In *Speak, My Life*, Dijana Pavlović reassesses Mehr's life and work as a 'heroic narrative', which has allowed room for the Yenish community to represent itself and restore a positive self-image. The paper will discuss the following questions: How can both novel and drama explore the crimes of Pro Juventute in the context of a collective European memory culture? What challenges must this memorialisation face?

Keywords

- Commemoration
- Yenish minority
- Stigmatisation
- Heroic narrative
- Genocide
- Monodrama

Introduction

Stone Age, Mariella Mehr's debut novel, is the first book to reveal the crimes committed against the writer and her Yenish community in Switzerland by the child and youth welfare organisation Pro Juvenute under their project Children of the Country Road *(Kinder der Landstrasse)*. Published in 1981, the book marked the beginning of a historical turning point for the Yenish minority group, a mid-point from their stigmatisation and systematic assimilation to their ultimate recognition as a national minority in 1999.

In reality, from 1926 to 1973, the focus of the Children of the Country Road programme was to assimilate traveller families, most notably from the Yenish community, by systematically taking children away from their parents. Their goal was, as Alfred Siegfried, its founder, says to 'fight against vagrancy', i.e. to bring up useful members of the Swiss majority society by eradicating inherited asocial behaviour from this 'genetically degenerate' people (Galle and Meier 2009, 7; Pavlović 2009, 108). According to official records, 586 children were stolen from their families. Each of these children was sent to foster families, educational and correctional institutions, made to do forced labour, or subjected to psychiatric treatment. A large number received no formal education, serving in households, or hired to help on construction sites or in factories, and many of them faced mental and physical abuse from their guardians or foster parents.

Mariella Mehr was one of the victims of the Children of the Country Road programme. Separated from her mother as an infant, in 1947, she was put into a hospital for mentally handicapped infants in Zurich. Much of Mehr's life was spent in mental institutions, reform schools, and foster families. She received her first electroshock treatment in 1952 in a psychiatric institution in Lucerne, after her mother was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Mehr's youth was overshadowed by institutional control, serial sexual abuse by her foster family or employers, escape attempts, and insulin and electroshock treatments. When she became pregnant in 1965, desperately hoping that she would be released from state guardianship if she married the father of her child, she was committed to 'administrative care' for 19 months at the Hindelbank women's prison and lost custody of her son, Christian, to the Children of the Country Road programme. After release from prison, she married a friend and was granted guardianship over her son. Over the following years, Mehr suffered severe bouts of depression, attempted suicide many times, and was sent back to psychiatric care. In 1975, Mehr founded, along with other members of the Yenish community, a self-help organisation for Yenish and Romani travellers, the Wheel Collective of the Country Road *(Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse)*, to publicly protest the actions of the Children of the Country Road programme. In 1986, along with other Yenish people, Mehr interrupted a Pro Juventute press conference, asking for a public apology and the disclosure of documents to its victims.

In *Stone Age*, Mehr records her traumatic experiences, blending fact with fiction, history, and artistic imagination. Written between 1979 and 1980, the novel is based on journal entries she made during her therapy sessions (Pletscher 1988, 187). For her, writing is a tool for survival, making sense of her trauma, and demanding justice for Pro Juvenute actions. As Mehr said in an interview with Marianne Pletscher: 'With literature, one always comes to terms with the past. There are no other forms of

writing. It is the only reason for writing, literally' (Pletscher 2007). In her novel, Mehr's identity is split into three parts: silvio, silvia and silvana. This fragmentation is notable for several reasons: It can be seen as a therapy as the author looks back and finds her own identity in the fragments; on a collective level, it allows her to testify to the shattered identity of her Yenish community, their physical and spiritual uprootedness over decades of persecution. As a writer from a minority group, she uses language to deconstruct the rhetoric of the bureaucracy of a system that stigmatised, criminalised, and dehumanised her people. Furthermore, I will argue, writing is an act of commemoration for Mehr, raising awareness of the past to prevent it from happening again. In this respect, I recognise *Stone Age* as an important and marginally explored work of European cultural memory that deserves its place among postwar and post-Communist European victim narratives.

Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life* is a stage adaptation of Mehr's novel. Performed at the International Roma Storytelling Festival in Budapest in 2017 and 2018, the play introduced Mehr's life and work to a Hungarian audience. In 2019, the play was published in *Roma Heroes: Five European Monodramas*, the first volume of monodramas to be written by Romani authors. What makes the performance and publication of Pavlović's monodrama remarkable is that it portrays Mehr as a role model for her Yenish community, one who uses her survival as a way of speaking up for her people and demanding justice and equal rights from the Swiss authorities. Pavlović effectively reassesses Mehr's story as a heroic narrative, which also offers the Yenish community a means of regaining a positive identity.

In this essay, I will discuss the cultural genocide of the Yenish community by Pro Juventute, as well as the way Mehr and Pavlović memorialise this in their work. In the first part I will discuss the actions of the Children of the Country Road programme with a special emphasis on individual cases, their use of language for stigmatising and criminalising children under their care, and the trauma this has led to. Then, I will explain in detail the way Mehr struggles to make sense of the past, the problem of uprootedness and her use of language to deconstruct the rhetoric that was used against her. Finally, I will turn my attention to Pavlović's monodrama, discussing why Mehr's story should be seen as a story of heroism and commemoration. I believe that such works of collective memory are particularly vital for Romani and Yenish minority groups in constructing, and maintaining, a positive identity.

1. Stigmatising through Documents: The Action of the Children of the Country Road

Alfred Siegfried and the Children of the Country Road

Although the term 'traveller' combines Roma and Yenish communities, there are some notable differences between them in origin and language. Romani tribes originate from India, came to Europe in the late Middle Ages, and have been influenced by European societies and cultures. In contrast, it is believed that Yenish communities emerged from poor and vagrant classes in the native population in the early

nineteenth century (Meier and Galle 2009, 30). Yenish people live mostly in Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland. The term '*jenisch*' dates to the late eighteenth century and refers to *rotwelsch*, a secret language used by marginalised groups in Germany and Switzerland. As a traveller group, Yenish people tend to separate themselves from the settled population and preserve their own language with many borrowings from the national language, Romani, Yiddish, and rotwelsch (Dreher 2018; Günther 2019). They have their own family names, their own territories and work mostly as blacksmiths, basket weavers, scissor sharpeners, peddlers, or merchants. Although there are no reliable sources about the number of the Yenish, around 30,000–35,000 Yenish people live in Switzerland, of which 500–2,000 have a nomadic lifestyle (Meier and Galle 2009, 31). For more than five hundred years, the Yenish and Romani communities were subject to countless pogroms by the Swiss authorities, all of which were undeniably capped by the Pro Juventute organisation.

Pro Juventute was the largest and most prestigious child and youth welfare organisation in Switzerland. Founded in 1912 by the Swiss Non-Profit Society, it existed until a restructuring in 2004. Although the original concept of the organisation was the treatment of child tuberculosis, it dabbled in many other areas relating to child and youth welfare, such as giving parenting advice, arranging holidays and spa stays for Swiss children, supporting children living in the mountains and children traumatised by war, awarding scholarships, as well as founding and running leisure workshops (Meier and Galle 2009, 13). Many well-known people in politics, business, and the military, as well as in health, education, and welfare had a seat on its committee. The chair was held by an incumbent or former officeholder from the Federal Council. Due to its sales of charity postage stamps and greetings cards, Pro Juventute was popular with the public.

Its central pillar was child protection, i.e. legal intervention by authorities in domestic matters if it was felt that a child's well-being was at risk. In 1927, a year after the foundation of the Children of the Country Road programme, its target group became the Yenish minority. In the eyes of the Swiss authorities, Roma, Sinti, and Yenish minorities were not merely a problem for, but a danger to, society. At the time Heinrich Häberlin, a Thurgau lawyer and Bern justice minister, representative of the Federal Council at Pro Juvenute, thought of the Yenish as 'vagabond families', whose members were 'a dark spot in our Swiss country that is so proud of its cultural order,' revealing the racist ideology behind the Children of the Country Road actions (Huonker 2009, 161). Alfred Siegfried, a former high school teacher in Zurich, convicted by Basel Criminal Court of committing indecent acts with a student in 1924, was appointed to work at the central secretariat of Pro Juventute and founded the Children of the Country Road programme to wipe away his dark spot: Yenish families. His responsibilities included reports about domestic conditions and applications to the authorities for parental custody to be withdrawn and the appointment of a guardian for the children if he concluded that parents were not carrying out their duties properly. Under Siegfried's guidance, close surveillance of families took place with the assistance of church leaders, teachers, neighbours, relatives, police officers, or Pro Juventute employees under the Aid Organisation for the Children of the Country Road ('Das Hilfwerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse').

There were two objectives that Siegfried hoped to accomplish to stop vagrancy. One was the total alienation of children from their parents and family members, so all Yenish social reproduction could be prevented. The other was the turning these children into 'useful' and 'settled', i.e. 'socially acceptable' citizens through the dissolution of their racial identity (Meier 2008, 106). As Thomas Meier argues, '[a]s the parents were considered debauched and unfit to educate their children, their right to custody of their own children was removed with the help of the authorities, according to the relevant sections of the Civil Code' (Meier 2008, 106). By tightening its policy, the 'Relief Organisation' was entitled to systematically remove all children from their families, putting them under guardianship and placing them in homes and institutions, or with foster families (Meier 2008, 106). By this means, the purpose of the action was obviously not the welfare of the children but to purify society of the 'filth' of the Yenish community (Meier 2008, 106; Huonker 2009, 168). According to Thomas Huonker, from the beginning of the twentieth century, several measures were taken by the Swiss authorities to keep Switzerland 'practically "[G]ypsy-free"', including an entry ban on travellers, and the removal of Yenish children from their parents, and the sterilisation and castration of a great number of the Yenish people (Huonker 2003; 2006, 9).

Switzerland's entry and exit rules during National Socialist rule caused many controversies and affected not only Jewish refugees from Germany but also the Romani, Sinti, and Yenish population. Only a few were able to gain asylum in Switzerland during the war without the risk of being recognised as 'unwanted "[G]ypsies"' (Huonker and Ludi 200, 68). Switzerland's collaboration with the Gestapo and the SS took place not only at the level of consulate and border protection forces but also with the higher police forces (Huonker 2006, 11). As Huonker explains, '[t]he Interpol files, including an international gypsy register it had built up since 1936, were also transported to Berlin and were of murderous use to the SS when it came to accessing the Roma and Sinti in their domain' (Huonker 2006, 11). The Children of the Country Road programme, a campaign that ostensibly aimed at Yenish children's welfare was actually a systematic 'cultural genocide' similar to the administrative procedure carried out by Nazi officials against Jewish people during the Holocaust, founded around the time of the end of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler in Germany, which can be seen as more than mere coincidence (Schallié 2010, 143).

The Language of Stigmatisation

In this section, I will discuss the language of stigmatisation that is present in and behind the files on and about Yenish children; the files are similar in at least two ways to the Nazi administration of Jewish people, highlighting Yenish minorities as harmful and impure members of society, and also in representing a forbidding bureaucracy that renders human beings into documented case numbers.

For some critics of modern society, these two tendencies have been integral to pre- and postwar twentieth century and our twenty-first century civilisation. Zygmunt Bauman argues in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), that racism is a social practice that has certain aspects of architecture, gardening, and medical treatment, all of which are 'in the service of the construction of an artificial social order' (Bauman 2008, 65). In Bauman's view, a core concept of Nazi antisemitic ideology was to look at

'racially impure' elements of society as contagious diseases. Therefore, as Nazi ideology suggests, the restoration of social health requires the separation of the healthy and useful parts of the social organism from the infectious and harmful ones (Bauman 2008, 70–71). The language of stigmatisation is a double-edged sword, since it not only permits and legalises verbal and physical expressions of hatred toward minorities, but, as Richard Delgado and Stefan Jevancic claim, it makes stigmatised individuals 'feel ambivalent about their self-worth and identity,' basing their awareness of themselves on the way 'others perceive them as falling short of societal standards, ones that even the individual may have internalized' (Delgado and Jevancic 2018, 8). So, the language of stigmatisation involves both general animosity toward a minority and the internal negative identity that a minority might have, both of which seem to justify violent behaviour towards that minority.

Robert Ritter, a psychiatrist and race theorist, whose career took a meteoric rise during the Third Reich for his eugenics policies, wrote about Yenish communities as 'asocial' beings, who are also 'incorrigible', suffering from 'a partial or disguised congenital idiocy' (Mehr 1990, 79). Such reports meant that the Roma and Yenish communities posed a threat to the pure German race, leading to their extermination in concentration camps and special death clinics (Mehr 1990, 76). Such rhetoric shows striking similarities to the administration and rhetoric of the Children of the Country Road programme. A strong admirer of Ritter's racial theories, Siegfried and his partners in crime never lost a chance to emphasise in almost all educational reports the 'hereditary nature' of negative personality traits. These negative qualifications range from the children's physical appearance ('fat', 'dwarf') and their mental health ('feeble-minded', 'debilitating', 'imbecile', 'psychopath'), to their sexuality ('endangered', 'guy-addicted', 'sexually unstable', 'sexually rotten'), social behaviour ('obscure', 'insincere', 'devious', 'mean', 'unstable', 'infantile', 'sucker', 'mischievous', 'antisocial') (Galle and Meier 2009, 129–132). Such documents include a report of an institution in Alstätten, a small city in Switzerland, on an 18-year-old girl, who is described as 'not entirely sincere and honest and lies a lot', and who's particular failure is that she is 'sensual' and 'has a strong urge to wander' (Galle and Meier 2009, 131). In one of Mehr's reports, a strikingly prominent argument is that her mother 'comes from Mehr's heavily burdened vagrant tribe, in which there are frequent cases of heavy drunkenness, depraved, sexually impulsive unstable lifestyles, criminality and mental deficiency', suggesting not only that there is a link between vagrancy, crime, and mental instability but that insanity is something that is inherited matrilineally, raising questions about patriarchal notions of femininity and reproduction in the Pro Juventute organisation (Mehr 1987, 65).

In 1989, the files were finally opened, and those who had been affected previously could learn about what had been written about them. This was a symbolic moment, since it was the first time that these files were made visible to both the victims and the public. The growing number of scholarly and literary works, including several studies by Thomas Huonker and Thomas Meier, an MA-thesis by Mariella Widauer, as well as novels by Robert Domes, Thomas Sautner, and Mariella Mehr, have at least four essential tasks to accomplish: help the public learn about the past, restore the dignity of those affected, tell their stories of heroism, and create a positive identity. In the following chapters, I will discuss these traits in Mehr's *Stone Age* and its Hungarian adaptation, explaining how these works can contribute to collective European memory culture.

2. 'Only the Living Must Remember': Coming to Terms with the Past in Mariella Mehr's *Stone Age* and Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life*

Making Sense of Trauma in Mariella Mehr's *Stone Age*

Stone Age is Mariella Mehr's first novel about her time as a child and a young woman under the care of the Children of the Country Road. The novel bears a striking resemblance to Mehr's biography, telling the story of silvana, a writer, striving to look back at her past, to piece a fragmented memory together, and give meaning to what happened to her as a child, a young woman, and a mother. Based on Mehr's journals kept during psychotherapy sessions after a suicide attempt, the text is at once journal sketches and survivor testimonies. Mehr's narrative voice struggles on the verge of pure anger and desperation. As a narrator, Silvana is aware of the danger that such a plunge into her past might involve. Like Orpheus, she descends into the past, while battling against its absorbing power.

Memorialising the past is both a personal and a collective matter. Although neither names, institutions, nor an exact period are mentioned in the book, the sight of white walls, the pain of a mother torn from her child, the cloaks of doctors and nuns, and the wailing of a soul tortured by electroshock therapy, all emerging from the fragments of the narrative, serve as a testimony for both Mehr and her Yenish community. As the first lines of the novel suggest: 'This book is dedicated to all unloved babies, all home children, all schoolchildren, all those who have been driven crazy by our society, all those who have become dumb, and all those who know that only love saves our future' (Mehr 1988, 5). The last lines in *RückBlitze*, a 1990 collection of Mehr's essays and poems is: 'Only the living must remember' (Mehr 1990, 280). Writing for Mehr therefore is and has been a means to break the silence by speaking as a survivor about herself and those mothers and children who have been mentally and physically broken and silenced.

The central question the narrator Silvana must face, and the question for Mehr, as well as those other unloved babies, schoolchildren, and people driven crazy and rendered speechless, is a question for society and the entire Yenish community: how to restore identities that have been disturbed and traumatised by the actions of the Children of the Country Road programme? How to come to terms with the past, if the past has a haunting presence in our everyday existence? In my mind, these questions link the book to postwar trauma narratives of the twentieth century, whose torchbearers are trauma narratives by Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees. What such works share with Mehr's novel is that they evoke the experience of a minority being oppressed by a bureaucratic power, shedding light on the complex dynamics between the individual, a minority group, and the institutionalised forms of power that make every imaginable effort to enslave and exterminate this minority (Adler 2017).

Like many Holocaust writers, what is at stake in Mariella Mehr's works is the brokenness and the re(dis)covery of identity. The questions central to all Mehr's novels are: how can identity be restored after it has been charged, demonised, and almost fatally wounded by society? How can the feeling of homelessness be eliminated and trauma be healed at the same time? How can one be given a proper name, a proper identity to which one belongs? In her trilogy – *Daskind* (1997), *Brandzauber* (1998), and *Angeklagt* (2002) – the fight for an identity presumes its very absence, the absolute denial of the self and its human existence. It is a difficult quest for all of Mehr's heroes since the traumas of the past are always passing through a veil of remembrance.

In *Stone Age*, Mehr splits the identity of her heroine into three parts: silvia, silvio, and silvana. In doing so, the narrative gives a clear picture of the shattered identity of the Yenish community, while, as Emma Patchett argues, it also 'mimics the perverse colonising trauma inflicted upon [the heroine's] body' (Patchett 2017, 6). In some places, these identities are separated from one another: 'for thirty-one years i have done nothing more than survived. the price was high. silvana – at earlier times silvia or also silvio – is an alcoholic, dependent on medication, incapable of social integration, depressive, scared, angry, destructive. silvana is scream' (Mehr 1988, 9). In other places, they flow into one another like subjects of the heroine's stream of consciousness – 'think, maybe this time, silvia/silvio/silvana, you can finally step away from everything, to cross that boundary, to go in the direction where the pain should no longer be felt, where nothing should exist but boundless indifference' (Mehr 1988, 144). Sometimes the narrative 'I' cries out with anger, with an 'ICH' that wants to survive, the 'ICH' that goes through corridors, over monster-like doctors and nurses, the 'ICH' that is displaced and that should be found among the fragments (Mehr 1988, 103–104). It is this 'I' that refuses to live as a victim and that aims to defy the system that victimises it by finding its way of survival. Yet, in many other places, there is a gap between two worlds, the world of screaming that Silvia as Silvana's baby alter ego inhabits, which is the world of foster homes, psychiatric institutions, juvenile halls, and prisons, and the world of writing inhabited by Silvana that requires her to plunge into the dark territories of memory (Russi).

Home in *Stone Age* appears as a place which Sigmund Freud conceptualises as the 'uncanny', i.e., the sphere of the domestic, the familiar, which is also a strange and frightening place, whereby 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud 1985, 340). Zero, the city where Silvana grew up, is the place of departure to painful and terrifying memories, where behind the familiar, the domestic, there is always an unsettling sense of being displaced and belonging nowhere. This uncanny feeling towards home appears in the novel as follows: 'after all, zero gave me twelve years to think about silvia-silvio-silvana, about her involuntary stays in children's homes, educational institutions, psychiatric institutions, about her involuntary failure as an adult, about her fear' (Mehr 1988, 7). At one point, the baby Silvia cries with fury out at her mother, saying:

> in reality, I felt a sea of disgust, cold and homelessness. my mother's hatred and despair spat me out into a landscape full of horror. she let me be petrified, even before i was allowed to live. the despairing scream of my mother was my lullaby, and the white of the house in which my birth took place, became the colour of terror (Mehr 1988, 21).

As Roger Russi explains, what Silvana comes to learn is that her accusation of and rage towards her mother is misdirected, since both the mother and the child are caught in a system that aims to destroy their family and their larger community (Russi). As she grows into adulthood, Silvana realises that home is a place of the 'aching body, it is as if the inside is turned outside', a place of torture where 'hands have their own language', and a place, which 'only needs you as a working machine, as a functioning working machine' (Mehr 1988, 95, 113). Therefore, home is also a place of dislocation and displacement, a world of control and oppression that constructs the vulnerable body (Patchett 2017, 9).

What brings Mehr's lived experiences and her novel much closer to the scopes and aims of Romani feminism is the fact that she went through, and subsequently wrote about, torture and abuse as a *woman*. At one point Silvana describes when she was seven years old, she was sexually abused by her foster father, an experience that has striking resemblances to Mehr's life. Silvana's description is both poignant and horrid: in a rather matter-of-fact voice, she reveals that her foster mother wanted her to sleep without her panties, shirts, and petticoat, and sent her foster father, who was groping her body parts under her nightgown (Mehr 1988, 87). She says that 'I had to stand up on the bed so that he could comfortably reach under the shirt. if I wasn't completely undressed, I had to do it before him. he watched. I was terribly ashamed' (Mehr 1988, 87). This nightmarish occurrence traumatised Silvana so deeply that it made her physical relationships with other men almost impossible. She explains that 'as the father of my son slept with me for the first time, I had to think of that ritual in neuendorf. he undressed me and the room was light green like the beating room in our house' (Mehr 1988, 87). By recording these events from the point of view of a victim and a survivor, Mehr's narrative provides a shocking revelation about the emotional, physical, and sexual abuses that took place behind the closed doors of homes, institutions, and female prisons, as well as their traumatic impact.

What is also disturbing, yet utterly apparent is how conventionally patriarchal the world of institutionalised power is, which is recorded in the book, with its typical patriarchal ideas about such concepts as family, reproduction, and gender differences. One of the ideas that entail to a certain degree all these concepts is the genealogy of madness as naturally feminine and hereditary, a sign of which is deviance against what is socially accepted as 'normal'. Whilst the novel describes the painful and shocking ordeal that the heroine silvana/silvio/silvia goes through during, and after, electroshock therapy:

> doctor anatov to silvia: 'we know you have inherited the illness of your mother. you are young, we will be able to heal your hysteria.' they pretend to heal silvia with the big black one, with the cannulas and blowpipes. they know nothing about silvia's images during the coma, nothing about her mortal fear. they only want to be right, that is all (Mehr 1988, 87).

Shocking as it is, the depiction above perfectly reconstructs the patriarchal reasoning that does its best to justify its actions by referring to psychiatric constructions of the matriarchal genealogy of madness that is in sharp contrast with a 'normal' society based on racial purity, gendered conventions, and the unity of the family. What is intriguing in Doctor Anatov's argument that hysteria was an illness that the heroine inherited from her mother, and that it could be healed by the institution of psychiatry is that it categorically reproduces patriarchal ideas about motherhood, femininity, and madness. In Luce Irigaray's words: 'What of that woman outside her social and material role as reproducer of children, as nurse, as

reproducer of labour power?' (Irigaray 1991, 35). It is this logic that permeated Nazi eugenics policies that saw women as reproducers of healthy and Aryan generations, in which Robert Ritter said that 'their [the Yenishes'] constant intermingling and reproduction contributes to the formation of new criminal clans and a characteristic rag proletariat' (Mehr 1990, 78). Ritter's racist reasoning was taken up by Alfred Siegfried, arguing that '[i]t must be said that sometimes the wood was rotten and that a lot has already been accomplished if these people do not start a family, do not reproduce unrestrainedly and give birth to new generations of depraved and abnormal children' (Mehr 1990, 13-14). What makes Mehr's writing an act of triumph is that by representing the gender-specific rhetoric of this ideology, she reveals its cruel and dehumanising workings as well as the devastating impact it had on her and many other women and men.

Consequently, *Stone Age*, along with Mehr's other novels, essays, and poems, is an essential yet somewhat neglected part of European memory culture in the twenty-first century for many reasons. Like many survivors of the Nazi and the Communist regimes, Mehr takes writing as a vehicle to unveil the mechanisms of a socio-political regime that bore a striking resemblance to Nazi leadership in Germany. In so doing, Mehr uses her own voice as a survivor to speak for those mothers and children who were tortured and silenced as antisocial, filthy, and depraved, and who, as a result, forever lost their sense of a positive racial identity. In this respect, writing is a constant struggle to come to terms with the past and restore one's identity that has endured many extermination attempts. In the next section, we will see how the stage adaptation of *Stone Age*, Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life*, approaches Mehr's story as a heroic journey, which offers the Yenish community a positive identity and a place in European memory culture.

Heroic Narrative in Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life*

Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life* was performed at the International Roma Storytelling Festival in Budapest in 2017 and 2018 and published in 2019 in the monodrama collection *Roma Heroes: Five European Monodramas*, the first volume of monodramas written by Romani authors. Both the festival and the book publication were arranged and organised by Independent Theatre Hungary. According to Rodrigo Balogh, the artistic leader of Independent Theatre Hungary and the editor of the volume, the publication of the collection hopes to create new artistic initiatives that raise awareness of complex social phenomena, make people from Romani and non-Romani communities sensitive to the problems of minority groups, and provide adequate intellectual foundations for Romani youth. As Balogh argues:

> When I was a drama student, I was looking for Gypsy plays and works in which my identity was valued and had positive connotations. I did not find any plays by Roma writers at all. And what I found in mainstream drama literature and theatres about us was not too impressive either. If theatres put on plays with Gypsy characters in them at all, my colleagues usually portrayed ungrateful children, fathers impregnating their daughters, soulless mothers, blokes who humiliate themselves for a few cigarettes, characters who talk like 'Gypsies' and loiter around. When I saw this, I felt both ashamed and as if I did not exist. As if the values and heroes that were important in my life were invisible (Balogh-Kondi-Merényi 2019, 7).

Balogh takes note of the absence of Romani writers and artists in the theatre who could have offered truthful accounts on intersectional problems that Romani communities face, including social stigmatisation, prostitution, early school dropout, the lives of Romani women within the patriarchal tradition of their families, as well as extreme atrocities by contemporary societies and throughout history affecting Romani communities. Therefore, there were two main principles contributing to the publication: to allow Romani writers to speak for their own communities on stage and to present a heroic narrative to a (non-)Romani audience. Such heroic narratives have proven essential, since there are two main portrayals of Romani people, both of which represent them exclusively within a victim narrative (Illés et al. 2020). One narrative depicts the Romani people as a threat to society, who are altogether vulgar, uncooperative, work-shy, and lazy. Such depictions are particularly present in Hungarian and European mainstream media (Illés et al. 2020) The other narrative focuses on the differences between Romani and non-Romani communities, with particular emphasis on the inability of Romani communities to bring about change in their own lives and their relationships with the majority population (Illés et al. 2020). In contrast, a narrative that interprets stories as 'heroic journeys' depicts heroes whose downfall is caused by negative influences from majority society, while being able to stand up, move forward, and make crucial changes in their lives and their communities. Such initiatives are not alien to monodramas: Through the direct, almost intimate, connection between performer and audience, the audience can easily identify with the hero and the issues he/she must cope with (Szirtes 2020, 8). Thereby, (self)representations in monodramas have two tasks to fulfil: to confront and encourage self-examination and to pave the way for positive (self-)identification.

Pavlović's drama opens with a general introduction to the atrocities against the Yenish community by Pro Juventute. It is followed by two video recordings – one about Mehr's interruption of the Pro Juventute press conference in 1986 and another Mehr's honorary doctorate from the University of Basel in 1998. To my mind, such a narrative technique serves two purposes. First, the play's audio-visual effects enliven our perception, creating 'a liminal zone between history and memory – that is, between the past as an object of dispassionate study and the past as an affective part of personal and collective consciousness' and, as Susan Sontag put it, 'builds our sense of the present and immediate past' (Sontag 2003, 85; Prividori 2008, 80). Through the recordings, the audience become observers, voyeurs of, and personally affected by, history. Second, as Kinga Júlia Király, the play's Hungarian translator notes, the portrayal of Mehr as an activist with an honorary doctorate recalling her past, in which Mehr 'in some places [tears up] the spiritual and physical wounds in a confessional, blood-freezing and poetic manner, yet in other places reveals with documentarian stubbornness the destruction that only the most determined, and with much luck, have survived' (Király 2019, 87). Pavlović's vision picks Mehr's story from a plethora of victim narratives, turning the heroic story of survival into a fight against inhumanity.

What heroic narrative does Pavlović's play follow? How can such a narrative be applied to Mehr's story? To understand this, we should first take note of the classic explanation of the concept of the 'hero's journey'. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Joseph Campbell identifies the hero's path as a triple path: inspired by various external forces, the hero embarks on a journey, descends into the unknown, where he triumphs over various crisis situations, and, finally, is spiritually transformed (Campbell 2008). From Campbell's theory comes the narratological pattern of the 'hero's journey', a concept which can be described in the following way. The hero sets off from the safety of his world to the unknown. His call to go out stems from a crisis in the unknown. In his journey, the hero is provided with the equipment,

usually a mentor, necessary for survival by supernatural forces (Illés et al. 2020, 54). Crossing the threshold of the unknown world, the hero must face the fact that his experiences and abilities are not enough to overcome danger, and that to win, he must learn the laws of the new world (Illés et al. 2020, 54). He faces various challenges, and since he usually has little strength to face these challenges alone and withstand the temptations of evil forces, he needs an ally, a weapon bearer (Illés et al. 2020, 54). After he descends into the underworld, at the bottom of the abyss, the hero experiences the death of his old self (Illés et al. 2020, 54). Shadows hold a mirror to the hero, showing him the man who he can become if he allows evil to triumph over him (Illés et al. 2020, 54). To conquer, the hero realises that he must break with his old self. The hero is reborn and transformed by this realisation. He understands that he has learned something new through the challenges, stands the test, fulfills his duty, and finally returns home a completely different person (Illés et al. 2020, 54).

In her play, Pavlović applies the concept of the 'hero's journey' in the following way. As the heroine, Mehr leaves the protective world of her mother's womb and enters the underworld of institutions and foster homes. While descending into the deepest forms of inhumanity and the closeness of spiritual and physical death, she learns that to be human means 'freedom and pride, searching, and for that matter defending yourself, love songs, romantic gardens for princes, princesses, but also brutality, pain, disgust, punches and whippings' (Pavlović 2019, 86). Along the way to the abyss of the underworld, Mehr is accompanied by such wordings as '[t]he love of a Yenish mother is as primitive as a wild animal' which 'had to be refined,' the logic of which led to the sterilisation of mothers after their second child (Pavlović 2019, 89). A shadow holding up a reflection to Mehr, the heroine, is her brother, 'who hanged himself when he was twelve, in an institution for the mentally ill because he could no longer bear life in that freezing cold. He wasn't sick enough to be able to rebel in some other way' (Pavlović 2019, 89). The moment of becoming a hero comes when Mehr, confronted with her mother's document, chooses to take off the burdens of victimhood, the burdens of suffering that her mother also had to carry. She uses memory to speak and stand up for those silenced by a larger political power (Király 2019, 87). The play's ending perfectly recalls the last lines of Mehr's *RückBlitze*:

> Now I must celebrate a birthday, mother of mine, your sixtieth birthday, which you were never able to celebrate. *Lacio drom*, dear mother, *Bachtalo drom*, my brave mother. I wish you a safe journey and happiness, I wish you peace and a long, calm death. Only the living shall remember (Pavlović 2019, 91).

As Pavlović's play implies, to come to terms with the past, Mehr needs to kill the dirty little girl in herself who the Swiss authorities rendered her to be. Mehr needs to use her anger and her hatred as constructive tools for her resistance, her power to survive and to stand up against injustice. In this way, Mehr – and Pavlović – deconstruct the rhetoric of stigmatisation used by Alfred Siegfried and his company to unveil the racism and inhumanity behind their words, as well as the tragic consequences such words meant for thousands of Yenish mothers and children. By speaking, Mehr and Pavlović not only confront the audience with contemporary racism; they also suggest that in order to fight effectively against racism, one must form a positive identity, i.e., a self-image that resists the negative connotations of being Roma in contemporary and historical European discourse. Such a self-image, triggered by what Aleida Assmann calls a 'heroic memory' and based on 'self-respect, free will, spiritual options, future, positive values and

a rhetoric of salvation', is indispensable for Romani and Yenish communities, since it allows them to find their heroes, recover their collective identity and reflect on themselves as people who can stand up together and make important changes in society (Assmann 1998, 147). Therefore, the role of heroic narrative is to reconstruct a collective identity, providing a new terrain for European cultural memory.

Conclusion

The present article has attempted to examine the cultural genocide of the Children of the Country Road programme, its effect on the Yenish community, and its memorialisation in Mariella Mehr's *Stone Age* and its monodrama-adaptation, Dijana Pavlović's *Speak, My Life*. Although there is increasing interest by contemporary scholarship in the atrocities of the Pro Juventute organisation and its legacy in Mehr's work, there is much to investigate in terms of what challenges the Yenish minority have faced in their fight to be recognised in writings by many contemporary Yenish authors, including Robert Domes, Thomas Sautner, or Romenius Mungenast (Widauer 2020, 28). Although the Yenish community has been recognised as a national minority since 1999, the number of stopping places where these communities can continue their traveller lifestyle has rapidly decreased (Vuilleumier 2019). Works by Yenish authors are therefore not only important but indispensable, since they pave the way for Yenish communities to represent themselves in a collective European discourse and raise awareness of the socio-political challenges they face.

The present article has aimed to discuss two important aspects in Mehr's novel and Pavlović's play. First, it has argued that making sense of the past is the basis for Mehr to deconstruct the rhetoric of stigmatisation of Pro Juventute, to regain her own identity, and to speak for the silenced. Second, it has identified Mehr's life and work through Pavlović's play in the context of a 'heroic narrative', whereby such narratives make self-representation for Romani communities possible, while dismantling the stereotypical representations of Roma, and making room for Romani people to find their heroes and, through them, a positive self-image. Consequently, both works are vital for a collective European discourse on minorities: while revealing the cultural genocide of the Children of the Country Road programme and its survivors, these works speak for humanity and recognition, and claim a place in collective European memory culture.

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