

Roma and Sinti, paths of participation in public memory. The pedagogy of recognition through art

Rom e sinti, percorsi di partecipazione alla memoria pubblica. La pedagogia del riconoscimento attraverso l'arte

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Abstract

This contribution starts from the description of the slow process of building a collective memory in relation to the past of persecution and extermination of the Roma and Sinti people. The genocide of this population struggles to fit into the definition of public memory of a Nation, but also of the majority collective memory. Rather, it is a community memory, which is born, consolidates and survives in particular thanks to orality and the fundamental role of art. In the essay I propose, the Pedagogy of Recognition, as a necessary construction of a shared space for discussion and narration in a multidisciplinary educational context, appears as the only solution to the condition of strong ghettoization and social stigmatization suffered by the majority of the Roma and Sinti community. In this context, the analysis takes into consideration the TRACER project, as an example of a European action-research project, built in reference to the concepts of the Pedagogy of Recognition and full participation of young Roma and Sinti in the activities, ending with a look at the ability of some professional stories to point the way towards pedagogical paths.

Keywords: pedagogy of recognition, public history of education, genocide, Roma and Sinti, social history of education.

Sommario

Questo contributo muove dalla descrizione del lento processo di costruzione di una memoria collettiva in relazione al passato di persecuzione e sterminio del popolo rom e sinto. Ad oggi, il genocidio di questa popolazione fatica a rientrare nella definizione di memoria pubblica di una Nazione, ma anche di quella collettiva maggioritaria. Si tratta piuttosto di una memoria comunitaria, che nasce, si consolida e sopravvive in particolare grazie all'oralità e al fondamentale ruolo dell'arte. Nel saggio che propongo, la pedagogia del riconoscimento, in quanto necessaria costruzione di uno spazio condiviso di confronto e narrazione in un contesto educativo multidisciplinare, appare come unica soluzione alla condizione di forte ghettizzazione e stigmatizzazione sociale subita dalla maggioranza della comunità rom e sinti. In questo contesto, l'analisi prende in considerazione il progetto TRACER, come esempio di Progetto europeo di ricerca-azione, costruito in riferimento ai concetti della Pedagogia del Riconoscimento e della piena partecipazione di giovani rom e sinti alle attività, terminando con uno sguardo sulla capacità di alcune storie professionali di indicare la via verso percorsi pedagogici.

Parole chiave: pedagogia del riconoscimento, public history of education, genocidio, rom e sinti, storia sociale dell'educazione.

1. The slow process towards the memory of the Roma and Sinti genocide

On April 8, 1971, the first World Roma Congress (in *romanes* language *Mashkarthemutno Romano Kongreso*) took place in Orpington, near London. The location was kept secret for fear of possible *anti-gypsy* attacks, frequent in Great Britain in the 1960s. The Congress was attended by 23 representatives from ten nations – Czechoslovakia, Finland, Norway, France, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Spain and Yugoslavia – and observers from Belgium, Canada, India and the United States. Five sub-commissions were created to examine social affairs, education, war crimes, language, and culture. Precisely here, the path towards the construction of a

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common narrative on the memory of the Roma and Sinti genocide began, which could become an instrument of cohesion and recognition of a transnational people; «the global need was to unite and have a common voice» (n.p.) stressed Grattan Puxon in 2021 during the Jubilee of the First Congress. A path begun towards what will mainly be a community memory, built thanks to orality and the fundamental role of art. The story, in fact, began to be constructed through images: at the Congress, the *O styago le romengo* – green and blue flag born in 1933 during the Conference of the General Association of the Gypsies of Romania and embellished with the red, sixteen-spoked Ashok chakra – was reaffirmed as the international emblem of the Roma people. In addition, the song *Gelem, Gelem* – also named *Opré Roma* or *Romale Shavale* –, written in 1949 by the Serbian musician and composer of Roma origin Žarko Jovanović, was adopted as the Roma anthem for its significant historical images, which referred to the history of the extermination perpetrated by the Nazis, in particular by the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), the *Black Legion*:

A Romale, A Chavale (Oh Roma, oh brothers)
Vi man sas ek bari familiya, (I once had a great family)
Murdadas la e kali legiya (the Black Legion exterminated it)

During the 1970s and 1980s, the story about the genocide was limited to an academic level. Ian Hancock himself, Roma scholar, linguist, and political advocate, recognized that Roma intellectuals played an important role in the process of building memory, but not enough to involve the entire Roma people.

A crucial role but a tricky one, because intellectuals, academics who are themselves Romani, are a tiny percentage of the global population of our people [...] there is that distance created simply by education, but the fact is most of our people now still don't read and write have other priorities to get through the day which really had very little to do with where we came from and how to read and write our language. So educated people are useful because they are a bridge between the actual Romani population of millions and the non-Roma, the *Gagé*, who are really in charge of everything (Hancock, 2021).

Hancock, a crucial figure in the battle for the recognition of the racial matrix of the Roma and Sinti extermination, started the reflection on the dignity of this specific genocide, which until then had remained almost totally silenced at a majority level (Hancock, 1987). He denounced the fact that the first to be recognized *Lebensunwertesleben* – *lives unworthy of life* – were indeed Roma and Sinti (Liebich, 1863) as a consequence of a narrative that considered crime their *genetic defect*. At a time when the Shoah in its *uniqueness* was most in public attention (Lewy, 2000; Bauer, 2001; Gilbert, 1986; Barenbaum, 1981)¹, then defined only after *singularity* (Traverso, 1998), Hancock criticized the tendency of the majority academics to the minimization of the Roma and Sinti genocide, due to a substantial lack of interest in this population:

The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies is a dangerous book. It is another title representing the antiquated tradition of being an expert treatise on a people whom the author has never met nor has made any effort to meet. How can you feel compassion for a people you don't know? We are an abstraction, to be discussed in our absence and, worse, even in our presence, as though we don't really exist, with no thought for our feelings or our dignity (Hancock, 2000, p. 6).

At a majority level, in the 1980s a kind of memory was being built that still had Hermann Arnold's theories (1958, 1965) as its reference (Burleigh and Wippermann, 1991). Theories that insisted, even after the end of the Second World War, on a theme – the heredity of the instinct towards asociality and nomadism – which had laid the scientific foundations (Ritter, 1941; Justin, 2018) since 1935² for the justification of the Nazi extermination. On the opposite track of the popular community narrative, the 1990s were the scene of important oral testimonies from survivors of persecution. The popular story is part of a moment, the era of the witness (Wieviorka, 1998), in which the voice of the victims has a fundamental role in the construction of public memory; it is necessary to underline, however, that the focus of the story was still the Shoah.

It is possible to point out some exceptions that preceded this wave of testimonials: Giuseppe Levakovich, a Roma man from Istria, already in 1975 told his story to the academic and friend Giorgio Ausenda, together with whom he published *Tzigari, Vita di un nomade* (*Tzigari, life of a nomad*). At the end of the 1980s, the siblings Ceija and Karl Stojka, Austrian Roma siblings, described life in the Nazi extermination camps in their paintings. In her *Dark pictures*, Ceija paints the traumatic events of her life as her memories emerge. She shows the oppression against the Roma people under the Nazi regime, including arrest, atrocities, exterminations, survival and liberation. Karl's paintings, next to his signature, bear the writing Z 5742, which testifies to the tattoo impressed to the prisoners upon their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau: the letter Z stood for *Zigeuner* (gipsy) and was followed by the serial number. The two siblings were then among the great protagonists of the oral history of the Roma and Sinti genocide, alongside the well-known Otto Rosenberg, a Sinto born in Prussia and raised in Berlin, and Hugo Höllenreiner, a Sinto from Munich. In 1995, Rosenberg recorded his memories on tape, and three years later he published *Das Brennglas* with the writer Ulrich Enzenberger.

In the concentration camps, I lost my entire family: my father, and nine brothers and sisters. My mother died later, but still due to imprisonment. No one was saved, they were all exterminated. I'm the only one left. Being the only survivor was not an easy thing to accept. I always wondered why only I survived. When there are holidays, like Christmas for example, I start crying in pain. It's something I'll never be able to explain (Giuseppini, 2021, n.p.).

Höllendreiner was a very important witness to the atrocious experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele; he himself was one of his victims, together with his brother Manfred. In the crudity of his stories, devoid of sugarcoating, we find the courage and resilience that led him to salvation:

We were transferred to Mengele's barrack, a kind of sick station. We entered, everything was silent and no one spoke; some had gray coats. They had turned a boy into a girl; while with the girls they had done the opposite, they had transformed them into boys: everything sewn with stitches, I have never seen something like this and I will never see it again. [...] I went in and they stuck – I can't say – a bent piece of iron between my legs up to where it hurt; but I kept saying «no, I won't die, I won't die, I resist, I don't die». I can't even describe the strength that can be found within (Boursier, 2006, n.p.).

Alongside oral testimonies, typical of a tradition generally distant from the *writing culture*, in which subsequent generations will then recognise, the support of the *Gagé* community was fundamental, between the end of the 1990s and during the 2000s, to

concretely focus on the Roma and Sinti genocide and extend their memory at a majority level. Consider that only in 1994 was the Sinti origin of Settela Steinbach recognized, the girl with the headdress protagonist of one of the most famous photos relating to the history of Auschwitz, who until that moment had embodied the symbol of the persecution of Dutch Jews.

Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, who already published in 1972 *The destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, dedicated volumes of the Collection *Interface* of the University of Hertfordshire Press to this very theme (Kenrick and Puxon, 1995; Kenrick, 1999). Also noteworthy here are the works of the activist journalist Isabel Fonseca (1995); of the scholars Matthias Bahr and Peter Poth, in the written reconstruction of Höllenreiner's testimony (2014); and the publications of Karola Fings, deputy director of the Nazi Documentation Center in Cologne (2009, 2016). While in Italy, of particular influence were the magazine *Lacio Drom* edited by Opera Nomadi, and its publication *Il Porrajimos dimenticato. Le persecuzioni di Rom e Sinti in Europa (The forgotten Porrajimos. The persecutions of Roma and Sinti in Europe)* (2004); the studies of Giovanna Boursier (1995; Boursier, Converso and Iacomini, 1996), Leonardo Piasere (2009, 2010, 2015, 2021), Luca Bravi (2002, 2007, 2009, 2024), Paola Trevisan (2005, 2024) and Stefano Pasta (2022, 2023). Finally, to be highlighted are the interventions between research and activism born inside the Roma and Sinti community by Santino Spinelli (2012, 2016), Eva Rizzin (2020), Gennaro Spinelli (2022). Despite a clear increase in the narrative, which unites Roma and non-Roma communities, the memory of this genocide struggles to fall within the definition of public memory.

Was the extermination of the gypsies a genocide comparable to that of the Jews or not? Whatever Lewy's opinion on the matter, after reading this book, it is difficult to accept that a calendar day has been established in many Western countries as a *Day of Remembrance* of the Shoah rather than of genocide in general. Like the Armenians exterminated by the Turks at the beginning of the twentieth century, like the Tutsis exterminated by the Hutus in Rwanda at the end of the century, the gypsies exterminated by the Nazis deserve to share a place alongside the Jews in the collective memory of human shame (Luzzatto, 2000, p. 5).

Beyond the comparisons, the problematic nature of the lack of public recognition of the memory of this people is evident, who currently continues to suffer mechanisms of social marginalization and disinterest. Yet, «it seems paradoxical that while the era of the witness is about to end and while questions about what will happen after the last witness have raged for decades, someone still insistently asks to be heard» (Bravi, 2024, p. 35).

2. TRACER project and the Pedagogy of Recognition

The process of public recognition of the history and memory of the Roma and Sinti people must inevitably consider the involvement of this population in the majority educational and training paths. The European community is very clear on this aspect: in July, 2020, in Strasbourg, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers adopted a Recommendation that for the first time ever calls on its 47 member States to include the history of Roma and/or Travellers in school curricula and teaching materials. The Recommendation emphasizes the importance of teaching the Holocaust, as perpetrated by the Nazi regime and its allies as well as other acts committed against Roma and Travellers across Europe. It calls on governments to integrate activities related to the remembrance of the Roma Holocaust into formal and non-formal education, in

connection with the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day (August, 2nd) or with a date more adapted to the historical context of the country concerned, for example local anniversaries connected with the imprisonment or deportation of Roma to concentration camps. According to the Recommendation,

teaching of the history of Roma and/or Travellers and its inclusion in national school curricula and teaching materials should [...] include information on the contribution that Roma and Travellers make to national economies, such as trade, metalwork and other handicrafts, as well as animal husbandry. It should reference the various aspects of Roma and/or Travellers' history and culture, such as storytelling, literature, religion, music and traditions, while also raising awareness of the «asymmetric social progress and unequal access to social rights» that they have experienced throughout history (Committee of Ministers, 2020, p. 4).

In implementation of the analogous EU Council Recommendation of 12 March, 2021 on *Roma and Sinti equality, inclusion and participation* of the European Commission, Italy has developed a national strategy pursued by the Office for the promotion of equal treatment and the removal of discrimination based on racial or ethnic origin (UNAR), in order to liaise directly with associations representing this community and with national and local institutions impacted by their presence. The objectives of the strategy, and on a larger scale of the European Recommendations, are in line with the concept of *pedagogy of recognition* developed by Elke Gryglewski (2013), managing director of the Lower Saxony Memorial Foundation and head of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. Pedagogy of recognition means, first of all, building a common area of narration in which different people can express themselves. In this open and free space, the minorities finally have the chance to narrate the past events they truly believe central for their own group, telling what very often is neglected and silenced by public memory.

The relationship between collective memory and history is linked to the possibility of telling, disseminating and sharing a narrative: societies select what to remember and what to forget by virtue of the social and political context they live in the present, as well as in relation to the possibilities and control they have over the communication tools that characterize the different social classes. The pedagogy of recognition is structured on the possibility of recovering minority narratives, with the main intent of making stories a topic of critical and collective debate, that is an educational process (Bravi, 2024, p. 31).

This reflection is in line with the theories of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who in *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*The social Frameworks of Memory*) investigates the roots of community identity as formed on the basis of selection and removal of past events. Also, the historian Yuval Noah Harari (2015) has reflected on the importance of the construction of collective narratives as identity glue that characterizes the Homo Sapiens species; building and sharing common narratives becomes a tool of collaboration between individuals. The deconstruction of *dominant narratives* and the erasing of new minority-centered ones can stimulate and activate educational paths of memory aimed at peace and democracy, in which finally everyone is recognised. As Bravi stresses in *Looking back at the history to understand the present*, these processes must necessarily be composed by two main elements: the historicization – punctual historical narration – as the base for a «methodology made of pedagogically connoted tools that can direct the

story of the past, towards the objectives of fighting against prejudice and racism and strengthening the direct participation of minorities alongside the majorities» (p. 33).

The delicate transition that leads historicization to become a tool for an adequate educational process that has personal, community and public memory at its center, requires a methodology that has been structured and implemented as action-research in the European project TRACER (Transformative Roma Art and Culture for European Remembrance). It has been an example of a project, but also of an educational tool for which the element of direct participation of the Roma and Sinti communities has been considered fundamental for the development of a public space for discussion and knowledge. This has allowed the participants to develop a reflection on the memory of the twentieth century that has recovered the history of a minority in the European context. The pedagogy of recognition has been used as a tool to create relationships starting from the story of the Roma. The approach used has indicated art as a central element of the story because, as already highlighted, the Roma communities have often entrusted art – music, poetry, painting – with the task of historical narration. Pedagogy of recognition has also meant acknowledging the sources selected by the communities to tell their own story: recognizing art as a source of historical narration was the first step to begin to discuss the past. TRACER is a European project funded under the European commission's citizens, equality, rights and values (CERV) program, which involved groups of Roma and non-Roma youths and teenagers coming from Italy, Portugal and Poland – a leader group of about 45 people between 16 and 30 years old –, with the principal aim of building a shared collective memory on the Roma and Sinti Nazi genocide. As an action-research project, one of its strength points was the active participation of the stakeholders during all its phases, promoting empowerment and engagement of each individual. The Pedagogy of Recognition allowed TRACER project to focus its action on training and developing an educational process through history, as a tool to relate the past of persecution and the present of stereotypes and prejudice not yet deconstructed. History has become an instrument of active citizenship, through its public and collective narration, which concretely represents a possibility of education and training in a European perspective.

After an initial phase of historical training of the young people and adolescents involved in the project, a trip to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was organised, which brought together all the partner countries in a shared experience. The groups had the chance to study in deep the story of that place of memory, with a peculiar focus on the Roma and Sinti genocide. The process of historical knowledge was activated starting from the stories of the Roma and Sinti families involved through interviews conducted by the young participants with their relatives: some of them delved into events strongly linked to the persecution and extermination of the Auschwitz years (Poland and Italy), others (Portugal) had no connection with Nazism in their memory, but retained in their memory the experience – not necessarily direct – of other dictatorships; some families, with relatives in Spain, had had direct experience of the dictatorship of Francisco Franco which also affected the Roma population. All the participants had direct experiences of discrimination in the present or had witnessed the effects caused by stereotypes against Roma in different national contexts. The historical training that was achieved through at least three seminars for each national group, allowed to confront the events of the past but also to confront the material and immaterial cultural heritage that characterizes the European memory, extending it to the history of Sinti and Roma. To achieve this goal, in many cases, useful materials were found to reconnect the personal experience of memory of the young participants to the history of Roma in Nazism and Fascism as national and international events. History allowed the participants of the TRACER project to elaborate

historical knowledge, but also direct experience of travel to the places of memory, with the aim of expanding the cultural baggage and building personal and community awareness.

The leader group was an element of community activation useful to promote intergenerational relationships that can support a process of knowledge from the past to the present. It carried out two fundamental tasks: the promotion of historical storytelling in Roma communities at a local level, but above all the possibility of sharing the stories at an international level, in a context of building public memory that involved both Roma and non-Roma. The trip to the former camp of Auschwitz meant an extraordinary opportunity for experiential learning (Dewey, 1899, 1938): visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum today means not only commemorating, but also entering the context of educational processes that start from the need to know the past of Nazi and fascist extermination, to understand and deconstruct the mechanisms of hatred of the present. The young leaders had the chance to concretely touch the history of the place of memory and reflect on the other face of the town of Oświęcim nowadays. This aspect helped to understand the complexity of that place, also thanks to the presence of the Polish group who live it on a daily basis. In the book *Leaving a Trace. Action-research with Roma and non-Roma young people between history, memory and present*, Sabina, one of the Roma Polish young leaders, says:

For me past is very important. History is the teacher of life, like Cicerone said «*Historia magistra vitae*». It makes me really sad that people are forgetting the history, in fact nowadays many of them are choosing nationalism. And for me this means that they didn't understand the past, they didn't visit places like Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. My dream is bringing them all here and showing what the Nazi genocide was. I was lucky to grow up here. Oświęcim is a very interesting place. As a citizen of this city, I love it with all my heart, despite its dark side of history. But we need to understand that through education we can really make the change. And growing up here is a sort of continue life lesson, it's a way of always facing the history. So the young generation must educate itself to protect the future from the repetition of what happened in the past (Bravi, 2024, p. 107).

Simonetta, Roma member of the Modena group (Italy), underlines the importance of her visit at Auschwitz camp, shared with her family:

From the beginning I was enthusiastic about the project: the training part on the extermination of Roma and Sinti, the trip... Going to Auschwitz has always been a big dream for me, because I wanted to try to experience what I had learned about this page in the history of our people. A very sad story, which particularly affects me, because it speaks of me, of my community. Even just the opportunity to travel with my grandchildren was very important, it made me even more enthusiastic, because I would have had this experience with my family. I felt that in this way I could bring home a story that no one knows. Especially adults like me, experience it as something distant, almost as if it did not belong to us. Instead, thanks to this project, I understood that it concerns us closely, I gave meaning to all the discrimination that I have always suffered as a Sinti woman. I was able to understand the origin of the stereotype that we still carry with us today. In our community I notice a lack of mutual listening between the elderly and the young. Fewer and fewer elderly people talk about their past, because they tend not to be listened to, and vice versa. There seems to be a great distance between generations. But if certain stories are not told, they are forgotten.

Travelling to Auschwitz, delving into its history, allowed me to give voice to forgotten stories (Bravi, 2024, p. 108).

Senada, Roma young leader from Tuscany (Italy), underlines the strength of such a concrete experience to understand the dynamics of the resisting prejudice:

Going to *visit* the places of memory is the first step in reconstructing the past, because *crossing* the concentration and extermination camps is not enough if you don't start a reflection on the present and on what still feeds prejudice. The prejudices of the past have not yet been deconstructed and are always present in our daily lives. The image of the *gypsy* as a thief, dirty and criminal is a stereotype rooted in our society (Bravi, 2024, p. 106).

Coming into contact with the history of the extermination of Roma and Sinti had a particular meaning for young Portuguese Roma: perfectly integrated into the social context in which they live, in peaceful coexistence with the non-Roma population, the Portuguese Roma declare that they have lost their attachment to the traditional references of their people, and even the use of the *Romanes* language – the transnational language that unites all Roma and Sinti communities, although presenting differences depending on the country of origin. Dealing with a part of history reserved for their people and doing it together with different realities – Italian Roma and Sinti and Polish Roma –, has stimulated processes of knowledge and construction not only of a collective memory, but also of a common European Roma identity. Communities are a *world of worlds* (Piasere, 1999) and the meeting of people from different contexts in Europe allowed them to perceive differences and commonalities and to question the construction of a European community capable of recognizing otherness and minorities as an integral part. Knowing the history of the extermination camp, as a place of elimination of diversity, allowed the participants to elaborate a reflection on the roots of prejudice and its effects in the past. A subsequent phase of the project was dedicated to recognizing how prejudice has reached the present. The phase after the visit to Auschwitz played a central role in the project, because it filled gaps in knowledge that prevented a more conscious reflection, but above all it proposed some questions: what makes us a community? How do we develop belonging to a plural community without the expulsion of minorities? How do we build democracy and justice? In fact, they were the same questions that animated the aforementioned International Congress of Roma Communities in 1971. An interesting element was the language used to build this dialogue between participants: all spoke the mother tongue of their country of origin (Italian, Portuguese, Polish), some (Italian Sinti and Polish Roma) were able to speak *Romanes*, others (Portuguese Roma), as mentioned before, due to the assimilation policies suffered in the past centuries, have completely lost the *Romanes* language and used English as the language to interact with the rest of the project group. This did not cause any particular problems in the activities, but certainly the choice of using art as the first tool for shared narration also allowed the participants to overcome any linguistic barriers that could arise. The main impact of the project can be identified both in the effects it has produced within the individual Roma and Sinti communities involved, who have been able to continue on the path of historical knowledge and recognition of their own memory, and in the effects produced around the communities. One of the objectives achieved was the activation of peaceful relations with the majority and the sharing of a story that has revealed the mechanisms of anti-Gypsyism. This has promoted dialogue and participation, especially within training and educational contexts.

Artistic performance and events were organized at the end of the project, as an unusual tool to disseminate a message on history, racism and prejudice throughout the territory. The leader groups together with teenagers and students became part of the narrative, using different artistic expressions according to the group they were belonging to. These events, together with other multiple disseminations activities in schools, formal and non-formal educational contexts, public places, were aimed to increase in the civil society knowledge and awareness on Roma and Sinti culture and history. The use of the artistic medium was a conscious choice: art is the very first means of communication and testimony used by Roma and Sinti in the process of building memory of the extermination of their people; furthermore, the visual and multisensory narration, intrinsically communicative and engaging in the first person, can be used as a pedagogical tool to educate and train, triggering more immediate emotional-affective processes than other narrative forms. «Art speaks a language closer to the emotions and imagination of every human being» (Dewey, 2023, p. 32), claimed John Dewey as he founded his philosophical thought on the centrality of experience:

[...] in Dewey's philosophical system the form of experience that has the highest quality is that offered by art, in which the senses and emotions reach their maximum potential. Art becomes the privileged field of experience in which to best develop the educational process and the integral formation of man (Cappa, 2023, p. 17).

The groups created murals, comics, and a theatrical performance, entitled *Objects that tell. Traces of Roma and Sinti history between past and present*, which took place in a symbolic space, the Deportations Memorial in Florence (Italy). During the event, the Tuscan group used the voice of typical objects of the Roma and Sinti tradition, as a sounding board for the memory stories of the past, and the personal stories of the participants, linked to each single object.

U blumi fun i mami (Grandmother's flowers), by Noell Maggini, Sinti stylist and young leader of the Tuscany group.

They took away our colors.

Camenle ta dicas kalo un ta vaiss.

They want us to see in black and white.

Scióla, my grandmother, was a woman who always struggled.

A Sinti woman, a Roma woman, does not have an easy life.

Every woman has to make room for herself in this world, and a Sinti woman has to make it even stronger.

Scióla loved flowers, colors, because, deprived of many things, she said that since she was a child they made her feel alive, important.

«Flowers reflect us, they tell what we are, never step on them!» she used to tell me.

I remember whenever I passed by her caravan all the windows were open and with the curtains moved,

Grandma wanted to see and feel everything around her, and she wanted the outside light to rest on her skin.

In her life she was a free woman, aware of her strength, so much so that she allowed herself to live even her weaknesses.

I turn, now, on myself, making the floral patterns that dress my body fly, telling the story of a people who fought without any weapons for their freedom (*Oggetti che raccontano. Tracce di storia rom e sinti tra passato e presente*). Theatrical

performance for TRACER project, 26/01/2023, Memoriale delle Deportazioni, Florence, Italy).

Artistic performances have allowed the groups to use a less traditional medium for telling stories. Within theater, poetry, street art, it has been possible to convey knowledge and emotions, personal involvement and community dimension. Different narrative processes have been developed, and they allowed the participants to revive the memory of a community in its many characteristics: the local aspect and the national and transnational one. The stories, the tales, the narrations that create memories can be easier perceived, especially if addressed to subjects in formation and growth, through the events of individuals who concretely embody a historical process. In this case, the story of Noell Maggini, at the center of the following paragraph, traces a linear process that from the family history crosses the present and produces the possibility of dealing with the history/stories through the art, which is lived by people and used by them to communicate and produce messages strictly connected to the educational field and social participation.

3. Noell Maggini, between hidden identity and memory paths through art

The choice to include the personal and professional story of Noell Maggini in this article derives from the desire to explore with a magnifying glass the example of a Sinti artist from Prato (Italy) who faced a journey of revealing his own identity, through the liberation from discrimination suffered during his childhood and youth. His participation in the majority society, between art and activism and educational paths of memory, can provide a practical tool to endorse the importance of the pedagogy of recognition in the public reclamation of a still minority memory. He was born in Prato, Tuscany, and grew up in a Sinti camp. For generations, his family travelled around Italy for work with carousels. His parents met at a luna park, and their two stories crossed, giving birth to him and his three sisters. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, discrimination was a very difficult presence to live with. It was a relationship with strong ups and downs, ending with the realization that everyone's story is what makes us unique.

For a long time, I hated being Sinto. Because of my family work, I often had to change schools; each time I was afraid and wondered: how will I be perceived this time? How will it be in this new school? With these new people? For years, I lived as if there were two versions of Noell: sometimes I was perceived as the cool friend who got you into the carousels for free, other times as the dirty gypsy to stay away from. It was very difficult (interview to Noell Maggini, 04/01/2025, Pistoia, Italy)³.

Noell discovered he was gypsy only at school; and above all, he realized that this label had a profoundly negative connotation in the majority society. *Thieves, dirty*, this is how his companions called the members of his community; yet, his mother sold plants door to door, his father worked iron, and their caravan couldn't be cleaner. Although everyday life at school was generally unhappy, Noell could not be absent: his father cared a lot about his education, considering that he had not been able to afford the luxury of an adequate and equal education, having experienced the trauma of the so called *Lacio Drom*, some *special classes for gypsies* (Bravi and Rizzin, 2024).

One day, coming home from school with tears on my face, I asked my dad why I was born Sinto and especially why they all hated us so much. I simply wanted to be a child. I simply wanted to be Noell. He sat beside me and told me that hatred is the key

of the unaware, and he told me the story of a people who in life fought only for their freedom, without hurting anyone. He also told me that I had to be proud of my roots, because I had grandparents who fought to liberate the country in which we live, so that their children and grandchildren, just like me, would live their childhoods in innocence and in the absence of hatred and discrimination. Since then, I have proudly lived my identity, and realized how much the memory of my people has affected my life (Interview to Noell Maggini, cit).

For a young Sinti boy, accustomed to defining himself with the idea that the majority society has of him and his destiny, it is hard to believe in the possibility to pursue future goals different and even distant from the Sinti camp. The dream of working in the fashion industry is something that Noell has always cultivated, since early childhood, when his mother came home with a bag of used clothes taken from Caritas, and he created the styling together with his cousins and organized fashion shows for the camp. A dream that he also shared with his middle school Italian teacher, a very important figure in his career, who encouraged him to believe in his potential.

She told me «Noell, you can do it!» and thanks to her I believed that I could do something else. I believed that I could move beyond the discouragement of my situation, beyond the thought of the context in which I was living. Thus, it was born my desire to react to the flattened idea that the whole society had of me, my desire to be an example for my community (Interview to Noell Maggini, cit).

After completing compulsory school, Noell began his training in fashion. In this context, he stopped suffering discrimination but not prejudice. If until then Noell had hidden his identity for fear of possible negative repercussions, in that environment he decided to reveal his origins from the beginning. The fashion environment welcomed this peculiarity with open arms, but the interest conveyed an underlying distorted vision of the Sinto Noell Maggini, linked to the romantic stereotypes that persist in the common imagination: free, son of the wind, vagabond, wild; he was being labeled once again. Thus, in 2020, Noell created a collection that he called *#NM Gipsy Collection*: a reference to his origins, yes, but also an open provocation against the resistant stereotypes towards his people. In his clothes, he denounced the cultural appropriation suffered by the Sinti, alternating lines that refer to tradition and high fashion fabrics.

Through my clothes, I wanted to tell the emotional essence of my people, I didn't want to tell the costume. I wanted to tell our sense of sharing, of union. I combined glamour, fashion and my roots, to make people understand how much my community is part of the majority social context, even if no one realizes it or knows us; how my people have been an inspiration for fashion, but also how my people are influenced by the world, despite living in a camp. I wanted to tell that we exist, but people don't realize it. I wanted to bring together all these perceptions (Interview to Noell Maggini, cit).

Over time, Noell has made space for himself in fashion without underlining his belonging, but also without hiding it. His commitment to transmitting knowledge about his people continued and took on the character of activism, thanks to the collaboration with *Kethane*, a non-governmental association composed by Roma and Sinti. Today he carries out, together with the academic Luca Bravi of the University of Florence, educational memory paths on the Roma and Sinti genocide. Its participation in numerous

national and European projects – including TRACER – makes possible a continuous dialogue between the Sinti community, territory, school and University. He is a bridge between the reality of the camp – even now that he lives in a house – and the majority society, and all his efforts are aimed at the final goal of public recognition of the memory of his people, so that the Sinti can finally stop hiding their identity for fear of not being accepted as an integral part of the context in which they live.

I'm tired of being considered special. I am not a rarity among my people, I am exactly part of it. I am Sinto, but I am not just a Sinto. I wish we could all enrich each other, in our differences. I would like people to start thinking that if you know a Sinti person, you enrich yourself, and not the opposite. But at the same time, I would like all of us to consider ourselves as one. This is why January 27th should also concern the memory of my people. It's a matter of considering ourselves part of the whole, not strangers. In the story of January 27th, we were also involved (Interview to Noell Maggini, cit).

Conclusions

The debate on whether or not to consider the Roma and Sinti genocide within the commemorations of Remembrance Day on 27th January is quite fervent even within the community itself. For some components it would be necessary to establish a separate date at a public level for the memory of this specific extermination, while others believe it is essential to unify the memories in a single day, in order to avoid any hierarchical distinction between exterminations. In any case, the fact that the Roma and Sinti community itself has started to discuss a topic related to its historical events is a sign of participation in public discourse. The pedagogy of recognition works precisely in this direction, and offers itself as a possible solution to the problem of the lack of participation of minority communities in public debate. Recognizing an open space for narration means guaranteeing dignity to the historical voice of every single minority. This is an essential process for the construction of Roma and Sinti genocide memory, which can really become participatory, collective and also finally public. From this point of view, including this genocide within the law that established the Day of Remembrance can represent a tool capable of starting educational and training paths, but above all of participation in a democratic and inclusive society.

Notes

¹ It is clear that the texts which address the issue of the uniqueness of the Shoah were published also between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, in relation to a debate that has developed in the academic field since the 1980s. For this reason, the most important reference texts cited here are published at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

² In 1935, Robert Ritter was given the task by the Reich Ministry of Health to «conduct a thorough biological evaluation of all Gypsies» living in Nazi Germany. The Reich *Research center for racial hygiene and population biology* was thus founded, with its headquarters in Berlin.

³ The interview to Noell Maggini, conducted in Pistoia (Italy) on 04/01/2025 was an open, unstructured autobiographical interview, which aimed to investigate the personal and professional history of Noell Maggini.

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