

Impediment-, Absence-, and Silence-Based Methodology and the Study of Romani and Sinti Musicians in North Slovenia

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The author's research on Romani and Sinti musicians from north Slovenia has revealed several methodological obstacles. The author dealt mainly with deceased Romani and Sinti musicians, their absence from the archives, silence among their descendants, and anecdotal information. This paper therefore addresses methodological approaches to fragmented data, and the silence, absence, and distortion in the archival and ethnographic sources, exploring how to turn these impediments into a productive scholarly endeavour.

• **Keywords:** Romani and Sinti music and culture, minorities, anthropology of silence and absence, archival and ethnographic methods, historic ethnomusicology, Upper Savinja Valley

Pri raziskovanju romskih in sintskih glasbenikov in glasbenic iz severne Slovenije se avtor sooča z večjimi metodološkimi ovirami, kot so preminuli posamezniki, njihova odsotnost v arhivih, molk med njihovimi potomci in anekdotična narava podatkov. V članku obravnava metodološke pristope k pomanjkljivim in popačenim informacijam, k tišini, molku in odsotnosti v arhivskih in etnografskih virih ter k preoblikovanju teh ovir v produktivna znanstvena prizadevanja.

• **Ključne besede:** romska in sintska glasba in kultura, manjšine, antropologija tišine in odsotnosti, arhivske in etnografske metode, zgodovinska etnomuzikologija, Zgornja Savinjska dolina

Introduction

... it is important to understand that there are [...] fundamental aspects to the way the Roma fit into history. First, and perhaps most conspicuous, is what we call the *vacuum*. (Gelbart, 2012: 209; emphasis in original)

If we are not in someone else's memory, do we exist at all? (Gospodinov, 2020: 53)

In this paper,¹ I examine methodological challenges and solutions in the historical and ethnographic study of Romani and Sinti musicians in north Slovenia (particularly the Upper Savinja Valley and its surrounding areas), a region that is absent from Romani and Sinti historiography and that is usually not recognized as an area with any significant presence of Romani or Sinti population (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023;

¹ The article is part of the project Roma Musicians in Slovenia: Social Position, Cultural Practices, Interactions (ARIS J6-50204 PPS 28-122460.J6-50204).

Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d.). Nevertheless, this epistemological absence belies a vibrant historical presence of Romani/Sinti people in the region, also demonstrated in the following example. Therefore, before I delve into the examination of specific methodological problems in my research, I first present two brief stories related to one Sinti music family from the Upper Savinja Valley that are based on the information I gathered through a combination of two different methodological approaches. My intent in this relation is not only to convey some general historical and cultural outline of the main topic of study (the historical presence of Romani and Sinti musicians in the Upper Savinja Valley) via one concrete example, but also to initiate some of the main methodological concerns of this paper.

In this regard, I ask the readers to consider which methods were used for the gathering of information used in each of the two stories. The options are:

- a. letters and diaries of Romani and Sinti individuals,
- b. archival bureaucratic records containing performance licences,
- c. journalistic articles from the relevant eras,
- d. narratives of the local non-Romani populations (interviews, memoirs),
- e. a wide population survey about musical practices conducted in the Slovenian countryside.

This exercise can encourage us to think about the nature of different methods used in our research, the type of information we associate with each method, and the expectations we have regarding the types of data we will be able to gather by using specific methods of research (specifically, how particular methods we choose to operate with shape our data, description, and analysis, as well as our research designs).

Story 1:

Jožef or Josip Roj (also Roy) was a travelling musician and carousel operator (in addition to a 5000 kg carousel, he also owned and operated a fairground shooting gallery and a travelling cinema). He travelled around in a wagon with his wife Marija (née Pestner) and four children (in the order from oldest to youngest: Marija, Julija, Josip, Ivan). Jožef Roj was born in 1870 in Ljubno, Upper Savinja Valley, and was regularly returning to the region throughout his life until his death in 1936. However, according to some accounts, due to his “incessant travelling”, he and his family were rarely seen in the Upper Savinja Valley, mainly during winters.

Jožef Roj liked to play music in guesthouses and coffeeshouses, and also “every year” at the annual “grand fair” in Ljubljana. He travelled all over Slovenia with his family, and before 1914, across the whole Austro-Hungarian Empire, as Jožef Roj was in the music and carousel business since the 1890s.

Locally, in the Upper Savinja Valley, he was considered a trustworthy and “honest man”. However, Jožef Roj preferred playing in “bigger towns and cities” and said he didn’t like performing in the “countryside”, because the people there “don’t have the right sense for this kind of music”; he also complained he “cannot make any money there”.

Story 2:

Members of the Roj family lived in the part of Mozirje (Upper Savinja Valley) called the “Gypsy Quarter” [*Ciganski firkelc*]. They rode around in a wagon, and they would let their horses to pasture in the fields on the outskirts of the town, where the new municipality building now stands.

They played violins, guitar and double-bass [*berda*]; the women played the violins. The whole family would also sing in a typical Slovenian multi-part polyphonic folk style.

They would sing Slovenian multi-part “folk” songs or their own “Gypsy” songs, but they could also play any “world” music, they were “cosmopolitans” [*svetski*].

They were “welcome everywhere”, but they didn’t play in every house, only in those where the people “knew how to listen”, where there was some “mutual likeness” between them and the hosts [*en drugmu všeč*].

They were more “noble Gypsies” [*nobl Cigani*], they were “intelligent”, “better Gypsies”, they “didn’t steal”. However, they themselves claimed they were not “Gypsies” at all, just “Roj’s”.²

Their wagon was decorated in a very “posh” way [*gosposko*], and it looked better than many “posh” [*gosposke*] houses.

When Jožef Roj died, in 1936, people say it was an “extremely magnificent” [*strašno veličasten*] funeral. The local municipality ensemble played at the event, in addition to multiple Romani musicians who came from near and far (some say there were 70, even 100 Romani “violinists” performing at that funeral).

These are just some of the fragments of information about the Roj family. They were gathered exclusively from the following two methods: archival bureaucratic records containing performance licences and related documents (option b, as related to Story 1;

² This was probably a strategic response by members of the Roj family to the label ‘Gypsy’ (in original: *Cigan*). In Slovenian academic literature (including some written by Slovenian Sinti authors), the members of the Roj (or Roy, Rhoi) extended family in Slovenia are usually considered to be of Sinti ethnicity (DiRicchardi-Muzga, 2011: 61, 94, 109; Ocvirk, 2013: 30; Zalar, 2015: 61, 62). I therefore also regard them as Sinti in this article.

see Roj, 1923, 1941), and the narratives of the local non-Romani populations, namely two interviews and one published memoir (option d, as related to Story 2).³ Overall, I collected more relevant information about the Roj family (including about other members of the extended family) than it is presented in these two stories, and I also used other methods not mentioned above in my research (for example, journal articles of the era, other types of archival research, and material culture research – see Image 1). Moreover, the Rojs were just one of the many Romani and Sinti families that I study and who were in the time period between both world wars living, travelling, and performing in and around the Upper Savinja Valley, including the following: Eremita, Repič, Pestner, Huber, Seger, Gartner, Müller, Rosenfeld, and Rak (but only the first three mentioned families, in addition to the Rojs, are according to my accounts still remembered locally today, albeit vaguely, and only by a few elderly non-Romani individuals).



Image 1: Jožef Roj's photo on his gravestone at the Mozirje cemetery, 17 January 2024. Photo by author.

The data behind these two stories reveal many biographical and ethnographic details relevant for my study, including insightful information about cultural, economic, and social interaction patterns of Sinti (and Romani) families and individuals living in north Slovenia between both world wars. Methodologically, the examples demonstrate the usefulness in combining archival and ethnographic methods. However, while these combined methods proved to be instrumental in unearthing significant aspects of information, the final results still contain many gaps and absences in the data (e.g. no information about specific music repertory or style, or which specific coffeehouses and guesthouses or other types of music venues the Roj family performed in; and many other missing biographic and ethnographic bits of information). This problem also relates to the broader problem of the absence and silence in archival, scholarly, and ethnographic sources regarding the Romani and Sinti populations in north Slovenia (and Slovenia in general), and to many other methodological impediments that I analyse below.

My aim in this paper is therefore twofold. In the first part, I examine methodological challenges as well as the archival and scholarly lacunae related to the study of Romani and Sinti music families and individuals present in north Slovenia (Upper Savinja

³ The two anonymous interviews used for Story 2 were recorded on 16 January, 2024, and 7 February, 2024. For the memoir, see Gregorc, 2009: 170–173.

Valley and the surrounding areas) between both world wars; and in the second part, I proceed with a discussion of several scholarly approaches aimed toward redressing the problematic methodological situation described in the first part of the paper, and turning it into a productive scholarly endeavour. In this way, I repurpose methodological impediments, absences, and silences that I encountered in the field by transforming them into a productive impediment-, absence- and silence-based methodology.

Methodological grappling with silence, absence, scarcity, and distortion in the data

In this section, I identify several methodological problems that emerged during my research on Romani and Sinti music families and individuals in north Slovenia, including the following: the nature of the field (demographic challenges), silence and absence among the local Romani and Sinti descendants, issues with interviews with local non-Romani people, absence in the archives, scarcity of data, the state of the scholarship, and the distortion in secondary written sources (cf. Gelbart, 2012).

Regarding the nature of the field (and demographic challenges), I am studying a region that historically contained lower numbers of Romani and Sinti populations than some other parts of Slovenia (in the first decade after WWII, only 4 Romani people were registered in Mozirje, Upper Savinja Valley, and an additional 23 in neighbouring municipalities; in comparison, the total Romani and Sinti population in Slovenia in 1954 was 4369).⁴ Historically and today, there are more Romani people living in the east and south of Slovenia (in the Mura region, Lower Carniola, White Carniola, Central Sava region), and less in the north and west (but with a significant presence of Sinti people in the north-west of Slovenia, i.e. Upper Carniola) (Janko Spreizer, 2004; Štrukelj, 2004). Moreover, while there used to be more Romani and Sinti families living in the territory of the Upper Savinja Valley and the surrounding municipalities (in eastern Styria and Carinthia) in the past, there are currently hardly any of these families remaining in the area. Some of them perished during WWII (Zalar, 2015: 61, 62), and many of the descendants of these families moved out of the region, or out of the country altogether in the decades after WWII. Consequently, only a few individuals from one of these families still live in the region, as they are in the process of quiet assimilation into the local majority society (via intermarrying). Therefore, there are

⁴ More precisely, between the years 1948 to 1954, there were 4 Romani or Sinti people registered in Mozirje (Upper Savinja Valley), 10 in Celje (Lower Savinja Valley), 5-8 in Slovenj Gradec, and 5 in Šoštanj. The total of Romani and Sinti population in Slovenia in 1954 was 4369 (Studen, 2015: 182). In the 2002 census, 40 people from the Savinja region and 4 from Carinthia self-identified as Romani, out of 3246 in total for Slovenia (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d.). The National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ) research in 2020 showed there are 6500 Romani people living in Slovenia. However, according to unofficial information, their numbers are higher (between 7000 and 12,000) (Fajfar, 2020).

almost no descendants of local Romani or Sinti people to talk to, and from those that I have found (three individuals), two refused to be interviewed while the one that I managed to talk to is estranged from his Romani side of the family to the point that he almost does not have any memories of his Romani predecessors.

Among the local non-Romani population, some people from the older generation still have some knowledge of the Romani and Sinti families who used to live in the region (especially about the Eremita, Repič, Roj, and Pestner families), but since these families were most active socially and culturally in the area between both world wars, and to a much lesser extent in the first two decades after WWII, many of the local elderly only vaguely remember them from their childhood, or can convey some second-hand information about them learned from the parents. Moreover, those individuals whom the locals tell me would most certainly know a lot about the Romani and Sinti people once living in the valley have mostly already died, and those who remain are few and far between, difficult to find, and often remember only a few vague details on this topic.

National and regional archives in Slovenia generally demonstrate a similar kind of informational paucity and omission regarding Romani and Sinti populations from north Slovenia (Štepec Dobernik, Tercelj Otorepec, 2006). In my research, I have contacted (and in many cases visited) thirteen regional archives, museums, and various other institutions with relevant archival collections, as well as some outside of the region, namely six in Ljubljana, and two in the Upper Carniola region, all together twenty-one.⁵ Most of them were very responsive and obliging, but the results themselves were scant. To be more precise, sixteen of these archives carried zero information about local Romani/Sinti people, and another four contained a relatively low amount of data (Institute of Ethnomusicology, Ljubljana; Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Ljubljana; Historical Archives Celje; Upper Carniola Museum, Begunje),⁶ and then there is one institution, the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana, whose archival records, quite unexpectedly, proved to be central for my research (I elaborate on this side of the research in the next section).

Furthermore, Slovenian scholarship on Romani and Sinti musicians in north Slovenia, and Slovenia generally, is equally limited. There are a few studies that mention information related to Slovenian Romani or Sinti music and musicians only briefly (Kumer, 1983: 74;

⁵ I have contacted the following regional (north Slovenian) archives and museums: Museum collection Mozirje, Mozirje church archive, Museum collection Gornji Grad, Rečica Municipality, Museum collection Ljubno, Historical Archives Celje, Museum of Recent History Celje, Celje Library (ethnologic collection), Velenje Museum, Velenje Library (ethnologic collection), Hotel Paka's archives (Velenje), Vila Mayer's archives (Šoštanj), Carinthian Regional Museum (Ravne na Koroškem); archives/institutions in Ljubljana: Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Institute of Ethnomusicology, Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, National Museum of Contemporary History of Slovenia, Ethnographic Museum of Slovenia, Slovene Music Artists' Association; and two archives/institutions from Upper Carniola: Sinti Association of Upper Carniola, Upper Carniola Museum, Begunje.

⁶ I also need to mention the Velenje Museum, which did not have any information on Romani and Sinti groups with historical presence in the region that I am studying in this article. However, they have made available to me some relevant information on one specific Romani group of musicians who moved from Serbia to Velenje via Nova Gorica in the 1950s/1960s, which I am studying in my separate project (forthcoming).

Omerzel-Terlep, 1984: 12; Štrukelj, 2004: 221–232; Gregorač, Juvančič 2006: 166, 167, 171, 172; Sardelić, 2011: 111, 116, 130), and some that write about the representation of Romani people in music and songs of the non-Romani populations (Kunej, Serec Hodžar, 2006; Klobčar, 2022: 224–229, 275), or about the appropriation of Romani music by non-Romani musicians (Gregorač, Juvančič, 2006; Kovačič, Hofman, 2023), plus one study about a Romani-produced DJ program (Kozorog, Škedelj, 2006), but there was no systematic research conducted yet on Romani and/or Sinti musicians in Slovenia.⁷

In relation to north Slovenia, specifically the Upper Savinja Valley, significant is the local lay historian, Aleksander Videčnik, who often mentions local Romani and Sinti people in his writings (1985: 100, 103; 1991: 35, 39, 62; 1998: 138–153; 2001: 16–24; 2003: 51, 55; 2007: 55, 156, 157, 220). His publications occasionally offer some valuable biographical and historical fragments and clues, but otherwise also excessively and uncritically focus on folk fabulations full of stereotypes about local Romani people (this mainly relates to local anecdotes about Pavel and Urška Eremita popular among the older generation of local non-Romani populations).

Impediment-, absence-, and silence-based methodology

All of the methodological obstacles, absences, silences, and distortions mentioned above need not bring scholarly discouragement, or the opposite, obsessive urge to achieve fullness, but can potentially be employed as fruitful methods and areas of research. Many scholars in this way talk about fragments and anomalies, archival ruins, ruptures and absences, or ethnographic silences among the people, and discursive misinformation and distortion, not necessarily as negative but also as potentially productive tools and sites of scholarly research (Ginzburg, 1993, 2013; Hirschauer, 2007; Stoler, 2008a, 2008b; Bille et al., 2010; Ladwig et al., 2012; Hrobat Virloget, 2017; Weller, 2017). Moreover, this kind of research does not only concern the silenced and marginalized populations, but also the majority society that is the main agent behind the historical, archival, and discursive production of silence, ruination, discontinuity, and misrepresentation (Pereira, 2008; Stoler, 2008a, 2008b; Skarpelis, 2020). Furthermore, this is not only about the absence, but also about the tracing of archival or ethnographic presence behind this absence, about the unearthing of the forgotten historical vitality of Romani and Sinti music practices, and minority and majority interactions, of discovering Romani/Sinti persistent traces in the present, as well as about the un-muted and reconstitutive future that these revealing ruins, traces and clues of testifying presence among absence can help shape (Stoler, 2008a, 2008b; Bille et al., 2010: 34).

⁷ I should also mention one biographical lexicon of Romani musicians from Prekmurje, east Slovenia, recently written by a Slovene-Romani scholar Jožek Horvat – Muc (2024).

This impediment-, absence-, and silence-based methodology therefore becomes imperative in my research, especially in relation to the following three issues that I examine in the second and last part of the article: (1) methodological approaches to the silence and absence among Romani and Sinti descendants, (2) the tracing of hidden historical presence in the bureaucratic records of performance licences in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana, and (3) the autoethnographic scrutiny of the complicated music, social, and scholarly relations between Self and Other in the anthropology of/at home.

Methodological approaches to silence and absence among Romani and Sinti individuals

Historical silence and absence, or fragmented or distorted presence of Romani and Sinti people (and other related groups), often emerges in the archives as well as in scholarly research or music practice due to power imbalances in the society (e.g. censorship, political repression, lack of representation) and ideology (e.g. racism, nationalism) (Van de Port, 1998: 19, 148; Pettan, 2011: 108, 109; Gelbart, 2012: 208–210; Silverman, 2015; Studen, 2015: 9; Tervonen, 2016: 91; Hemetek, 2017: 92, 93; Bartash, 2019: 16, 20; Brooks, 2020; Trevisan, 2020; Kapralski, 2023; Janko Spreizer, 2024). However, as many scholars argue, Romani, Sinti and other related groups themselves often refrain to silence or absence (as invisible presence) either as a strategy of survival, form of protest/resistance, or due to fear or mistrust of majority populations, including scholars (Williams, 2003: 23, 55, 83; Halwachs, 2005: 153; Jezernik, 2006: 14; Hirschauer, 2007: 426; Tauber, 2018: 624, 692; Bartash, 2019: 16, 23; Brooks, 2020; Rapport, 2021: 42). Furthermore, Patrick Williams asserts that for the French Mănuș, who practice silence as a form of respect toward their dead and also as a form of relation toward the world of the Gadzos (non-Romanis), silence is their “reality” (Williams, 2003: 83). Elizabeth Tauber similarly argues that for the Austrian Sinti, silence is their way of thinking and remembering (death), as well as a form of their relationship with Gage (Tauber, 2018: 624, 629).

Silence among Romani, Sinti and other related groups also emerges from historical trauma stemming from the experience of Porajmos (Romani/Sinti Holocaust) (Halwachs, 2005: 157; Dragojlović, Samuels, 2021: 421; Kapralski, 2023); or Romani/Sinti silence can also appear out of shame and avoidance of disclosure of ethnic identity resulting from racism of the majority society toward Romani/Sinti people (Csepeli, Simon, 2004; Pantea, 2014). In all of these cases, silence and absence often operate as forms of agency and empowerment for the subjugated, marginalized, and repressed populations (Weller, 2017; Bartash, 2019: 16; Kidron, 2021). It is also important to acknowledge in this place that these strategies of “silence” can function differently for different Romani, Sinti, and other related social groups (see Williams, 2003: 1; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018).

However, when it comes to the interpretation of these Romani/Sinti actions of silence/absence, it is difficult to ascribe any of the above-mentioned meanings to them,

when Romani/Sinti people themselves are silent or absent and therefore cannot offer their own interpretations. Thus, as Robert Weller argues, there are always probable “multiple readings of silence” due to its “fundamental indeterminacy” (2017). In the case of the two Romani and Sinti individuals that have chosen to remain silent in response to my interview requests, all of the above readings are feasible as potential ways of interpretation. Some of my non-Romani interlocutors who are familiar, in some cases on a personal level, with Romani/Sinti individuals that I wanted to interview suggested their silence could be interpreted as “shame” of ethnic identity in one case, and as “mistrust” of non-Romani/non-Sinti researchers in the other. However, I personally think “resistance” or “preservation of personal autonomy” could equally well be applied as potential interpretations of their silence. In the end, it is impossible to fix any of the meanings of silence precisely. However, as Weller claims and I would agree, regardless of its indeterminacy, “silence is interpretable when it has a powerful cultural frame” (ibid.), in which case the scholarly frames of interpretation suggested above, which all acknowledge the cultural frames of Romani/Sinti historical experiences of violence, repression, and marginalization are probably at least partially applicable to any such cases of silence and absence that scholars might experience when approaching Romani/Sinti populations for interviews.

Furthermore, as researchers, we have no other choice in these kinds of situations but to adopt silence as a form of method, and thus as a “language of exchange that does expressive justice to the encounter with otherness and accedes to real unknown meanings” (Rapport, 2021: 48, 49). However, we also have a responsibility to study the social and historical conditions that produce silence and absence among various minority and marginalized populations, and when possible, to keep searching for other Romani/Sinti people who will be able to speak to us, or to find alternative methods that can lead us to their voices (I propose one of them below). Nevertheless, our results will always be doubly incomplete, not only as an unavoidable condition of every scholarship (Clifford, 1986), but also as reflecting the historical (racist) ruination of Romani/Sinti livelihoods.

Performance licences in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia

Due to many complications in my research, as described in previous sections, I attempted to cast a wide net for the gathering of relevant data, not only by contacting all possible archives, institutions and scholars in the region, but also by employing a wide range of interdisciplinary methods, from ethnographic to archival, which many scholars recommend as a solution to addressing gaps and absences in the field (Blee, Billings, 1986: 448; King, 2016: 20; Tervonen, 2016: 91; Bartash, 2019: 24; Illuzzi, 2019: 75). Moreover, I was also open to surreptitious and accidental clues (Amit, 2000: 16; Poulos, 2018) that eventually guided me, among other directions, towards the archival bureaucratic records containing performance licences in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana (fond signature: SI AS 68 13–17, 1919–1941).

On the surface level, these records at first seemed to carry little value for my study except for some dry and meagre facts about names, occupations, and dates. However, when I decided to scrutinize all of the 52 boxes containing performance licences for the Slovenia region (Drava Banate)⁸ between the years 1919 and 1941 (with 10cm per box amounting to around 5 meters of documentation), I gradually realized these files conceal much more than meets the eye at first sight. In this vast collection of documents, I found 113 performance licences belonging to 63 Romani/Sinti individuals from north Slovenia, with additional 78 members added to the licences as music or other collaborators with licence-holders (28 of them unidentified). There is therefore a total of 141 individuals mentioned on these licenses, from ten different Romani/Sinti families that lived in, travelled through, and performed in north Slovenia in the period between WWI and WWII (i.e. Eremita, Roj, Pestner, Rak, Huber, Seger, Gartner, Müller, Rosenfeld, Held), out of which 36%–41% were women. Biographical information about Jožef Roj mentioned in Story 1 above comes from this collection of documents (Roj, 1923, 1941; see also Image 2). Today, just small fragments of data related only to three to four of the families mentioned above are vaguely registered in, and slowly disappearing from, the local historical memory. This hidden but vibrant historical presence of Romani/Sinti musicians and their families in north Slovenia between WWI and WWII that can be traced through the archived performance licences therefore belies these people's current absence (or at best, their ephemeral and fading presence – see Amit, 2000: 14) from local majority society's memory and recognition.

As a clarification, the types of documents included in the licence files range from actual issued licences and final decision letters to institutional letters from the central administrative office, local municipalities, and local gendarmerie departments (these include moral and political assessments, statements regarding the suitability of particular individuals for the granting of licences, and also records of conviction), as well as supplicant-related documentation (application letters, occasional photographs, letters of complaint), attached older licences (with stamps of visited places, and with included old application letters), and some additional appendices (e.g. occasional gendarmerie reports, birth certificates, doctor's notes, and one certificate of performance in a coffeehouse) (see Image 2). Furthermore, the type of information included in these files contains the following: biographical information about dates and places, information about family members and social and family networks, occupation, music-related information (e.g. type of music groups, music instruments), places of activity (performance circuits), literacy, potential records of conviction, material conditions, economic relations, health situation, military service information, and various notes on behaviour, appearance, or language knowledge.

⁸ The province encompassing most of Slovenia (but without the coastal region and parts of the south) in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was between 1929 and 1941 called the Drava Banate (*Dravska banovina*).

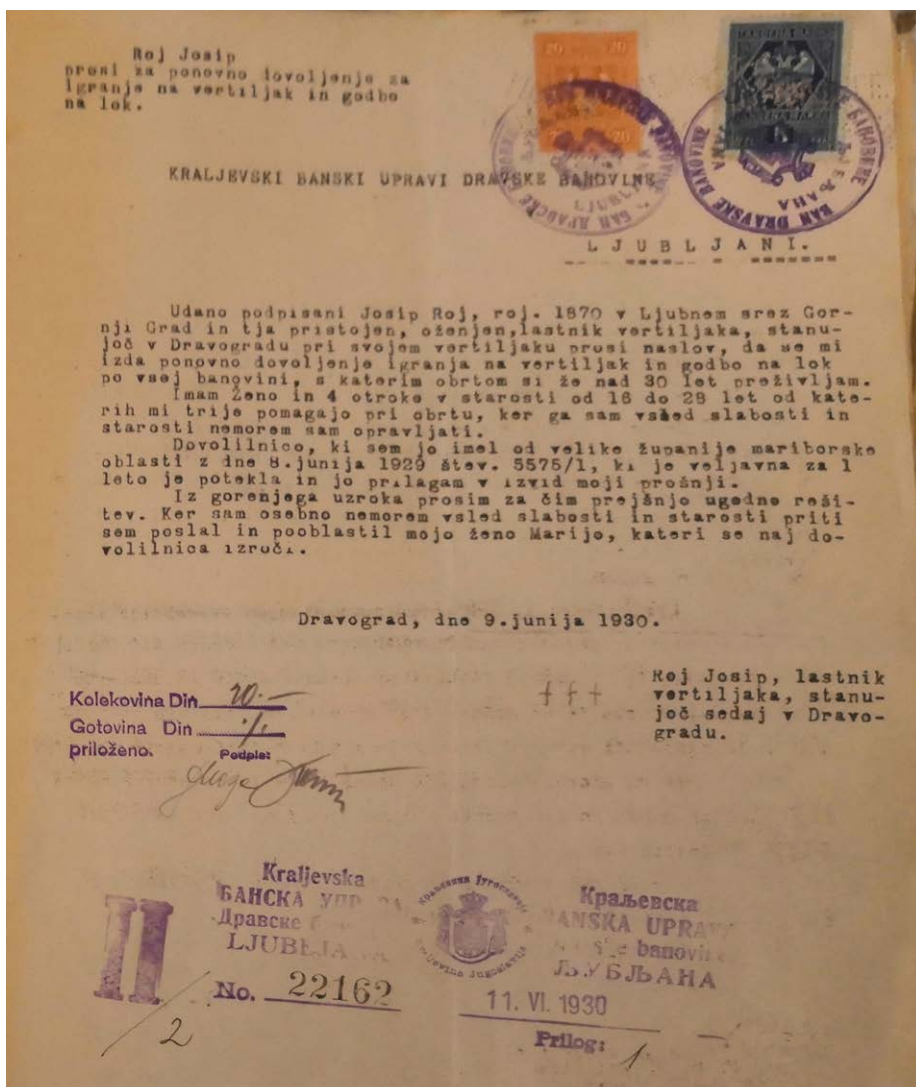


Image 2: Jožef Roj's old application letter from 1930, attached to his 1941 application for a performance licence (Roj, 1941).

Among all this relatively rich information found in the above-mentioned performance licence files, there are also two types of data that are especially valuable for my research. Firstly, in the supplicants' letters of application (or complaint) included in these files, it is possible to discern the voice of the local Romani and/or Sinti musicians. Even if these letters are mediated by scribes and governed by genre limitations pertaining to application letters, which influences the selection and reformulation of original Romani/Sinti statements and ideas that were included (Cody, 2009: 357; Holman, 2020: 42), we can nevertheless encounter in these documents valuable Romani/Sinti

thoughts and commentaries, not only revealing information about their own material conditions, family relations (e.g. details about inheritance, care for elderly parents), occupational experience and music practice, but also demonstrating their affective strategies of persuasion (“I intend to earn my needed breadcrumb with music”), and their forms of tactful resistance, for example, in the way how Romani/Sinti musicians (and/or carousel owners) in these application (or complaint) letters ask to be given permission not only for the small towns in the provinces, but also for the big cities (otherwise often excluded from licences), which they claim would allow them to gain more financial profit from their performances. In this way, they politely and implicitly but persistently (repeatedly) resist geographic exclusion and economic discrimination. By reading these bureaucratic documents “against the archival grain” (Stoler, 2008a: 47), by performing a form of “peripheral” reading, a perusal of documents “in reverse”, and against their original intentions (Ištok, 2016; King, 2016: 21; Skarpelis, 2020: 396), it is therefore possible to trace the fragments and clues of Romani and Sinti agency and voice hidden in and mediated through the long forgotten archival bureaucratic records of performance licences stored in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, Ljubljana.

Secondly, these music licences serve as evidence not only of the agency of the subaltern Romani/Sinti people, but also of the historical network of regional and national institutions of power governing their livelihoods. The attached letters from the local municipalities, local gendarmerie departments, occasionally also from the national Department of Social Affairs, as well as from the central administrative office in Ljubljana, demonstrate animated communication between different institutions of power regarding the moral, political, and socioeconomic suitability or non-suitability of particular Romani/Sinti supplicants for the granting of performance licences. These documents therefore reveal not only the formal and informal criteria for issuing the licences, and the racialized discourses full of prejudices and stereotypes underlining these debates, but also the intra- and inter-institutional tensions and contradictions regarding conflicting criteria, or conflicting institutional perspectives related to final decisions, for example, some institutions rejecting the issuing of licences while others actively supporting their approval for Romani/Sinti individuals (I am analysing these issues in my forthcoming publication). By scrutinizing different performative dimensions of these documents, it is therefore possible not only to read “against” but also “along the archival grain” (Stoler, 2008a: 49, 53; Ištok, 2016; King, 2016; Skarpelis, 2020), and to ethnographically study in this way also the complexities and contradictions inherent in the workings of the institutional network of power instrumental in shaping Romani/Sinti economic and music pursuits.

In sum, the Romani/Sinti performance licences stored in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia appear to be valuable scholarly sources in several ways: (1) they attest to the vibrant historical presence of Romani/Sinti culture in north Slovenia between both world wars, (2) they provide a rich source of historical and ethnographic information for

scholarly analysis (including for triangulation between archival and ethnographic data), (3) they enable the study of the agency and voice of the local Romani/Sinti musicians, and (4) they offer a valuable historical perspective on the functioning of the regional and national network of the institutions of power affecting the livelihoods of Romani and Sinti groups in north Slovenia (and beyond).

Autoethnographic scrutiny of the relations between Self and Other in the anthropology of/at home

The study of the subaltern minorities is also the study of their relations with the majority society (Okely, 1987: 69; Van de Port, 1998; Janko Spreizer, 2002; Ginzburg, 2013; Parvulescu, 2016), either in the form of institutional or informal everyday relations, which can be studied through archives or ethnographically (or otherwise). However, it is possible and even necessary to move closer to this matter, in the case of non-Romani scholars such as myself by examining our own personal and scholarly engagements with Romani/Sinti people as well as our own family histories in this regard. In this way, autoethnography as a method helps us understand a wider social world by using the instrument of the self (Steedman, 1987: 8; Okely, 1992; Behar, 1997: 12, 14, 34; Adams, Manning, 2015: 351, 352; Verbuč, forthcoming). Furthermore, since the fieldwork site of the Upper Savinja Valley and north Slovenia where I trace Romani/Sinti presence and absence is also my place of origin, I am in this case also engaging with the anthropology of/at home (Jackson, 1987; Peirano, 1998; Amit, 2000).

Last year, I conducted a study of my family music history (Verbuč, forthcoming), and in the interviews with my parents, I realized they remember attending many Romani/Sinti music performances during socialism, some in Celje (in Restavracija Koper, by Oto Pestner Sr. and his ensemble) and some in Velenje (in Hotel Paka, by the ensemble of brothers Racz-Pal). Moreover, my father told me that during their bachelor years, his father Gregor (on zither) and his father's brother Franc (on guitar) occasionally played music with the Roj family from Mozirje (the brothers lived at the Verbuč farmhouse, which is located in Šmihel, a mountainous village 763m above sea level, otherwise around 8 kilometres from Mozirje which lies in the valley). This was probably in the late 1920s or early 1930s. I noted this down with interest, and a few months later I learned from one of my uncles there was more to the story. It turned out my grandfather supposedly had a romantic interest in one of the Roj daughters who played violin with the Roj family, and he left home to travel with them, but then suddenly returned after one week. My uncle claims when my grandfather's mother learned about this romantic connection, "it had to end immediately – she didn't let them [the two brothers] go play with them [the Roj family] anymore" (personal communication, 16 January, 2024). Another of my uncles later told me the same story and added that in those times, to associate and travel with Romani/Sinti people (local people called them "Cigani", translated as "Gypsies") was among the local non-Romani populations considered as "shameful", and that is why the

“Berbuč” brothers (local variation of the name Verbuč) had to stop playing and travelling with the Roj family (personal communication, 7 February, 2024).

There is still some confusion in my family regarding this matter however, with my uncles stating it was my grandfather who fell in love with the Roj daughter, and my father that it was actually grandfather’s brother Franc who developed this romantic interest. Nevertheless, when the researchers from the Institute of Ethnomusicology, Ljubljana, came to interview my grandmother Elizabeta Verbuč and to record her singing on 29 May, 1999, she also told them the following: “Those Gypsies, they often came by. Those Rojs. We really liked them. They would sing in the house, and always they had their instruments with them, so they also played” (GNI, 1999). It follows from this that the Roj and Verbuč families stayed in contact after my grandfather’s marriage with Elizabeta Verbuč (née Zidarn). The researchers from the Institute of Ethnomusicology did not ask any further questions about the Romani/Sinti musicians (they initially asked about “pedlars or beggars” [*petlarji* or *berači*] coming to their house, and if they would also sing or tell stories, but my grandmother herself added a part about the Roj family to the conversation), and as my grandmother is not alive anymore (she died in 2007), we only have this short quote above testifying also to the type of close social relations that developed between the Roj and Verbuč families in the period between both world wars (some probably continued also after WWII).

These stories told by my family members reveal something important. On the one hand, they demonstrate that close and positive social relations (not only romantic but also musical and friendly inter-family and inter-ethnic relations) were possible between Romani/Sinti and non-Romani families in north Slovenia in the early to mid-20th century (Story 2 from the introduction similarly corroborates this claim; I have collected more similar evidence that I am exploring further in my forthcoming article). However, at the same time, these family narratives also attest to the type of social relations fraught with stereotyping and social stigma (especially as it pertains to interethnic love relations) that must have affected the social interactions between the Roj and Verbuč families (and more so the Roj family itself). All of these perspectives point to the complexities and contradictions of the situation irreducible to binary interpretations regarding the interactions between Romani/Sinti and non-Romani/non-Sinti populations in a sense that not all social relations between both populations were always negative, but neither were they harmonious (cf. Tervonen, 2016; Tauber, 2019: 71). The above narratives of my family members also indicate we often only hear the non-Romani/non-Sinti side of the story, while the other, Romani/Sinti side remains silent (except for the comment about playing in the countryside made by Jožef Roj in his application for a performance licence stored in the Archive of the Republic of Slovenia, see Story 1 from the Introduction; this kind of triangulation of data shows a less exciting perspective by Jožef Roj on his encounters with the local “countryside” people than what these locals, including my grandmother, had to say about their interactions with the Roj family).

I should add that I could not find any descendants of the Roj family to interview for my research, which means they were not among those Romani/Sinti people mentioned in one of the previous sections who decided to remain silent in response to my interview requests. In this case their silence is the consequence of the Roj family's current absence in the region, which in itself probably results from a combination of factors: death, displacement, WWII (the only material albeit muffled and mute witnesses of their presence in the region are the performance licences discussed above, and Jožef Roj's gravestone in the Mozirje cemetery – see Image 1).

Engaging with autoethnography and doing anthropology of/at home has both its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, reliance on pre-established kinship and other types of social relations of familiarity and personal connection that I have built in the Upper Savinja Valley and the wider region of north Slovenia prior to this research were certainly helpful in finding those rare local interlocutors with some knowledge of local Romani/Sinti people who used to live in the area. Moreover, my close personal and kinship connections in the field were also beneficial in gaining more intimate information related to social interaction between specific Romani/Sinti and non-Romani populations (e.g. the Roj and Verbuč families) that can be simultaneously indicative of larger social issues as well as further illuminating publicly less visible (or invisible) complexities and contradictions intrinsic to the social interaction between these groups (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1987: 183, 184; Adams and Manning, 2015). On the other hand, closeness to the field can also affect greater personal and emotional involvement with the people under study, resulting in scholarly partiality, while socially pre-established personal and social positions that we develop at home prior to our research can potentially interfere with the newly acquired positions and goals of the researcher (Hastrup, 1987: 99; Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1987; Okely, 1987: 61, 70; Strathern, 1987: 31; Amit, 2000: 6, 7). There is probably some of each in my research as well.

Furthermore, when doing anthropology of/at home, one does not only study the Self or the local Other (either as a social difference or as a discursive construct; see Van de Port, 1998; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018), but also the interethnic relations between various heterogeneous groups of majority and minority populations constituting “home” (Peirano, 1998). However, there are limits to this kind of research, undergirded by unequal power relations between majority and minority positions reflected in social relations of research, in the imbalance between voice and silence, presence and absence, and therefore of who speaks for whom and how, and who remains silent or absent from research (Guha, 1983; Spivak, 1988; Matache, 2016, 2017; Dunajeva, 2018; Silverman, 2018).

It is therefore necessary to be self-reflective and acknowledge and challenge power imbalances constituting the field (Dunajeva, 2018; Silverman, 2018), and to deconstruct any forms of distortion and misrepresentation resulting from these kinds of interactions of knowledge production (Guha, 1983; Blee, Billings, 1986), as well as

to be transparent about the incompleteness of findings and the inconsistencies in the data (as in the example of the Roj/Verbuč story above, I point out many imbalances, silences, gaps, and contradictions in my research). All of these impediments of power imbalance, distortion, incompleteness, and inconsistency in the data should therefore also be turned around into productive impediment-based methodologies.

While it is imperative to aspire to collaborative research that would ideally include Romani/Sinti people themselves and in this way challenge historical power imbalances in Romani/Sinti studies (Bogdán et al., 2015; Dunajeva, 2018; Silverman, 2018), my research experiences show this goal is not always feasible. However, even in the case of the absence of Romani/Sinti people and their voices, we still carry a responsibility to study our own societies in all of their dimensions, including their majority and minority populations (and their interactions), past and present times, informal and institutional contexts, and problematic and encouraging aspects of our societies, and in this way to both shed light on the social injustices pertaining to various local populations (past and present) as well as to identify the affective interethnic social relations coexisting with them. With this approach, we are consequently able to confront reductive interpretations of the past and present lives by elucidating complexities and contradictions inherent to them.

Therefore, while my research affirms the marginal Other to be “radically inaccessible” to the hegemonic centre (Costache, 2018: 35), I suggest that we, the scholars from the majority population, focus not necessarily on the Other itself, but on the “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991; Piotrowska, 2022), and therefore study the interactions between the majority and minority populations, which are more accessible and visible to us (while still inherently incomplete). There are some important studies that already established the groundwork for this kind of approach (Pettan, 1996; Stewart, 1997; Janko Spreizer, 2002: chapter 5; Tervonen, 2016; Tauber, 2018, 2019; Savić, 2023), but more could be done in this regard. Moreover, I recommend we approach this field via autoethnography and anthropology of/at home (Okely, 1983: 38), since these methods bring us closer to the social relations in the contact zone (even if not all scholars’ families from majority populations have/had contact with Romani/Sinti people and groups, researchers can still engage with other aspects of their family history through which they can analyse “contact zones” with various other minority/marginalized “home” populations). Since interethnic encounters of the “contact zone” are inherently heterogeneous and often comprise different levels of conflict, negotiation, agency, and dialogue, they are therefore also challenging dominant narratives that tend to project homogenizing and one-dimensional representations of the Other (as a passive and silent figure of racialized imagination), as well of the minority-majority interchange (either as only negative, or as only positive and therefore romanticized) (ibid.: 37–40). We can in this way contribute to the reconstitutive remembering and to the formation of counter-histories emerging from the margins (Costache, 2018: 40; Brooks, 2020), which can challenge erasure

and forgetting of vital forms of historical or present-day social heterogeneity and interethnic communication, and thereby also destabilize hegemonic historical narratives (ibid.). Finally, we should also never stop searching for new clues about, voices of, and social and scholarly connections with local Romani/Sinti (or other minoritarian/marginalized) individuals and groups.

Conclusions

In ethnographic scholarship, we usually assume it as normal (even normative) to conduct interviews with people in the centre of our research and include their native points of view (emic perspectives); or when including historical research, to analyse ego-documents (letters, diaries) as another method of gaining access to people's ideas, thoughts, and emotions. We also strive toward establishing some sort of reciprocity and collaboration with the people we study (even if this is often impossible to achieve to the full extent, depending on specific historical and social power imbalances). Moreover, we tend to rely on our scholarly forerunners, aiming to inherit some of their knowledge and writing on the topics of our study and to mould their ideas and theories further in our research. However, it can happen that none of these "standard" methodological approaches are available to us, and we are therefore compelled to search for improbable alternatives, drawing on scant sources in pursuit of our earnest goals. Our determination, competence, and ingenuity might as well be put to the test on this path.

I therefore contend in this article that various methodological impediments, imbalances, absences, silences, and distortions that I encountered during my fieldwork can be in multiple ways successfully turned into a non-standard but fruitful scholarly endeavour that is in itself built upon and around the impediment-, absence-, and silence-based methodology. This includes employment of silence as a form of method, the archival scrutiny of forgotten social and musical Romani/Sinti presences (and voices) hidden in the "dry" and "dead" bureaucratic records revealing rich historical traces of vibrant social lives of the local Romani/Sinti groups in the face of their absence from the contemporary local social sites and discourses, and the autoethnographic scrutiny of complicated music, socio-cultural, and scholarly relations between Self and Other that is in itself partial, problematic, and incomplete.

All of these approaches should be coupled with critical self-reflection and a continued search for connection with Romani/Sinti people and communities. Methodologically and theoretically, a combination of various methods and disciplines, and an employment of methodological approaches such as autoethnography and anthropology at/of home, as well as conceptual procedures such as the study of contact zones and counter-histories, can prove to be indispensable in challenging the situations such as the one I experienced during my research of Romani/Sinti musicians in north Slovenia. We should

add to this list an interpretive and analytical approach of openness and transparency in writing about the aspects of fieldwork and scholarship that are otherwise incomplete, partial, and contradictory. Finally, I recommend that we also start using all of these non-standard, anomalous methods not as something exceptional and secondary but as a part of our central set of methodological approaches, and in this way to complement and enrich it, as well as to open with this kind of unconventional methodological orientation new avenues of research that can otherwise be hidden, forgotten or marginalized but that can offer significant and illuminating new ways of understanding our social and cultural worlds.

Research data statement

The author states that the article is based on ethnographic research materials that are not classified as research data. All additional information concerning the ethnographic research materials are available on reasonable request with the author. In addition, the author states that the article is also partly based on archival sources, which are cited in the list of references below.

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Ovire, odsotnost in tišina kot metodološki temelji raziskovanja romskih in sintskih glasbenikov in glasbenic v severni Sloveniji

V članku avtor obravnava metodološke izzive in rešitve pri preučevanju romskih in sintskih glasbenikov in glasbenic v severni Sloveniji, zlasti v Zgornji Savinjski dolini in njeni okolici, v obdobju pred in po drugi svetovni vojni. Omenjeno območje običajno ni obravnavano v romski in sintski znanstveni literaturi in ni prepoznano kot območje družbene prisotnosti romskega ali sintskega prebivalstva. Kljub temu ta epistemološka praznina zakriva živahno zgodovinsko, družbeno in glasbeno prisotnost Romov in Sintov na tem območju, zato je cilj članka dvojen.

Prvi del članka avtor nameni metodološkim izzivom, kot so preminuli romski in sintski posamezniki in posameznice, njihova odsotnost v arhivih in znanstveni literaturi, molk med njihovimi potomci ter anekdotična narava podatkov, povezanih s preučevanjem romskih in sintskih glasbenih družin in

posameznikov iz Zgornje Savinjske doline in njene okolice. V drugem delu pa odpira razpravo o znanstvenih pristopih, katerih namen je osvetliti problematičen metodološki položaj, opisan v prvem delu članka, in ga preoblikovati v produktivna znanstvena prizadevanja.

Avtor trdi, da je mogoče različne metodološke ovire in neravnovesja, tišine, molčanja, odsotnosti in popačenja, na katere je naletel med terenskim delom, uspešno preoblikovati v nestandardna, a plodna znanstvena prizadevanja, izhajajoča iz metodologij, ki temeljijo na ovirah, molku in odsotnosti. Ta pristop vključuje, prvič, obravnavo molka kot obliko metode, ki se ukvarja z interpretacijo in sprejemanjem molka med potomci romskih in sintskih glasbenikov in glasbenic. Drugič, arhivsko preučevanje pozabljene družbene in glasbene romske/sintske prisotnosti, ki se skriva v »suhoparnih« in »mrtvih« birokratskih dokumentih glasbenih dovolilnic iz Arhiva Republike Slovenije – dovolilnice razkrivajo bogate zgodovinske sledi živahnega družbenega življenja lokalnih romskih/sintskih skupin ob njihovi hkratni odsotnosti iz lokalnih sodobnih družbenih prostorov in diskurzov. Tretjič, avtoetnografsko preučevanje zapletenih glasbenih, družbeno-kulturnih in raziskovalnih odnosov med večinsko in manjšinsko populacijo, ki so sami po sebi pogostoma pristranski, problematični in nepopolni.

Avtor poudarja, da je treba te pristope združiti še s kritično samorefleksijo in nenehnim iskanjem povezave z romskimi in sintskimi skupnostmi. Z metodološkega in teoretskega vidika se lahko skupek disciplinarnih in metodoloških pristopov, kot sta avtoetnografija in antropologija domačih terenov, pa tudi uporaba konceptualnih modelov, kot je preučevanje »kontaktnih območij« (ang. *contact zones*) in »proti-zgodovin« (ang. *counter-histories*), izkažejo za nepogrešljive pri položajih, s kakršnim se je avtor soočil pri raziskovanju romskih in sintskih glasbenikov in glasbenic v severni Sloveniji. Tem metodam avtor dodaja interpretativni in analitični pristop odprtosti in preglednosti pri pisanju o vidikih raziskovanja in terenskega dela, ki so mnogokrat nepopolni in/ali protislovni. Nazadnje članek spodbuja k uporabi navedenih nestandardnih metod, in sicer ne kot metodološko izjemnih in sekundarnih, temveč kot dela osrednjega nabora metodoloških pristopov. Ta nabor lahko metode, ki temeljijo na ovirah, molku in odsotnosti, dopolnjujejo in bogatijo. Avtor še zatrjuje, da lahko tovrstna metodološka usmeritev, ki temelji na omenjenih nekonvencionalnih metodah, hkrati odpira nove raziskovalne smeri, ki drugače pogosto ostanejo skrite, pozabljene ali marginalizirane, a lahko vendarle odprejo pomembne nove pristope k razumevanju družbenih in kulturnih svetov.