

Rutgers Scholar of Romani (Gypsy) Descent Studies History and Legacy of her Ancestors

The Roma people, persecuted during the Holocaust, still face discrimination today

By Judith D. Schwartz



Credit: Nick Romanenko

Ethel Brooks is turning greater attention to the treatment of Romani people around the world.

Ethel Brooks, associate professor of sociology and women's and gender studies, is accustomed to research taking her to surprising places.

She has analyzed workers' rights movements in South Asia, Central America, and the United States; through her investigative and intellectual travels she's picked up several languages, including Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Romani, Spanish, and French. (Some Russian, Italian, Turkish, and Arabic too.)

But perhaps no topic has been as personally jarring as the suffering of the Romanis, a nomadic people also known as Gypsies, during the Holocaust. In January, Brooks took part in the Jack and Anita Hess Seminar for Faculty at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which this year focused on the use of eyewitness testimony. As she admitted to fellow scholars, "I have been avoiding talking about, much less studying, the Holocaust all my life."

Brooks is of Romani background and grew up among British Romanis (Romanichals) in New Hampshire. She spoke both English and Angloromani (an English dialect) as a child. While she has long studied how marginalized populations negotiate power – notably the protests of garment workers under globalization – she has recently turned greater attention to the treatment of Romani people around the world.

More than 70 percent of Europe's Roma were killed during the World War II period, shot on sight or perishing in concentration camps alongside Jews. But there's been an absence of Roma in discussions of the Holocaust. – Ethel Brooks

Looking at the experience of Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust “both disrupts and expands our current understanding” of genocide, Brooks says. Between 70 and 80 percent of Europe’s Roma were killed during the World War II period, shot on sight or perishing in concentration camps alongside Jews. But, she says, there’s been “an absence of Roma in discussions of the Holocaust.”

Part of this she believes reflects “a cultural taboo of talking about death among Roma, but also that Roma don’t have access to the kinds of education, institutions, power that it takes to make our history visible.”

Through School of Arts and Sciences Executive Dean Douglas Greenberg, the [Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History Archive](#), which includes 4,000 recorded Romani testimonies, is available to Rutgers. Brooks has been working with Romani women’s testimonies, focusing on how these narratives tell the stories of the daily lives of these often-overlooked victims of the Holocaust. Truths about what they suffered are emerging and evolving over time through extensive interviews and analysis of historical resources, the kind of material participants grappled with at the Holocaust Museum Seminar.



Ethel Brooks, whose family is Romani, grew up in in a mobile home in New Hampshire. She studied political science at Williams College.

As an example of the complexity of Romani position in historical memory, Brooks cites the statements of two women, Holocaust survivors, who were interviewed by seminar participants. When asked what happened to Gypsies during the war, Margit Meissner said: “I come from a German-speaking background, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, I was a good bourgeois girl and Gypsies were trash.” The second, Helen (Zippi) Tichauer, said,

[I]t was a big tragedy. They were put into barracks where the whole family could live together. .. And then after a certain time, overnight, they were taken away from their barrack, driven into the gas chamber and killed. That was a very, very, nasty, ugly time, and I hardly recovered from that til this day. [pause] It is very hard to talk about.

About a million Romanies live in the U.S. (probably nine to 14 million worldwide), she says. There are but a handful of Romani scholars in the world, with research generally done by non-

Roma. Rather than being an esoteric historic subject, Brooks notes the current relevance as Romani are facing discrimination across Europe. In the UK's *Guardian*, she wrote of the French government dismantling Romani camps and carrying out mass deportations. She points out that in the Czech Republic there have been forced sterilizations of Romani women, as well as in Hungary, Italy, and throughout Europe, widespread anti-Gypsy violence. In their discussions of Romani Holocaust testimony, "I told [Dean] Greenberg I was interested in looking at what Romani Studies would look like at Rutgers," she says.

Brooks, who in 2007 won the [School of Arts and Sciences](#) teaching award, grew up in Rochester, New Hampshire, a small working-class town, where she and her parents lived in a mobile home. She earned a full scholarship to Williams College, where she studied political science. The "huge culture shock" of life at an elite New England college prompted her to analyze the dynamics of power, privilege, and displacement, themes that run through her teaching and scholarship.

Another theme that underlies her work is war. This is in part, she says, because her father, a WWII veteran and "vehement pacifist", would not talk about his war experience. She was in Nicaragua during the late 1980s, when the nation was at war and under U.S. embargo, and saw how this altered all aspects of daily life. In her study of garment laborers, she saw how the legacy of war suffused the work and labor organizing culture. For example, Bangladeshi workers sing liberation songs from the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan, while Salvadoran garment workers' experience of workplace discipline was a legacy of government anti-insurgency practices during the civil war of the 1980s and 1990s. Brooks now teaches a [Signature Course](#) called War: Critical Perspectives, which encourages students to question conventional narratives about war.

<http://news.rutgers.edu/focus/issue.2011-01-31.9590880435/article.2011-02-22.8870333517>