

# The *Porrajmos*: Collective memories of a genocide

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**Abstract.** This article analyses the processes of preserving the collective memory of the genocide suffered by Roma communities during the Second World War, known as *Porrajmos*. The first part is dedicated to a reconstruction of the historical events and ideological conditions that characterized the persecution of Roma communities in Europe. The second part presents the results of an exploratory study, conducted through semi-structured interviews, which reveals the compensatory function of Roma families in relation to the official channels of commemoration. These families, constituted as primary microsocial units capable of promoting the preservation of memories and remembrance through generational transmission, can be considered as the main channel for the preservation of the history of these communities. Indeed, the study, whose data analysis was carried out using NVivo software, shows the existence of a collective memory based on family transmission, highlighting the central role of elders as mediators of memory. It also proposes a cross-gender and cross-generational analysis focusing on gender roles and the memory strategies of the new generations.

**Key words:** Memory, Razism, Porrajmos, Second World War, Cultural and Individual Memory.

**Riassunto.** L'articolo analizza il processo di conservazione della memoria collettiva del genocidio subito dalle comunità romani durante la Seconda Guerra mondiale, conosciuto con il termine di lingua romanès "*Porrajmos*". La prima parte è dedicata ad una ricostruzione degli eventi storici e delle premesse ideologiche che hanno caratterizzato la persecuzione delle comunità romani in Europa. La seconda parte presenta i risultati di una ricerca esplorativa condotta per mezzo di interviste semi-strutturate, la quale evidenzia il ruolo di compensazione esercitato dalla *familjie* romani rispetto ai canali di commemorazione ufficiale. Queste famiglie, infatti, costituendo l'unità micro-sociale primaria capace di perpetrare memorie e ricordi attraverso la trasmissione generazionale, possono essere considerate un canale privilegiato per la conservazione della storia di queste comunità. La ricerca, la cui analisi dei dati è stata condotta con l'utilizzo del software NVivo, mostra infatti la presenza di una memoria collettiva fondata sulla trasmissione familiare, evidenziando il ruolo centrale degli anziani quali mediatori della memoria. Si propone, infine, anche un'analisi di genere e intergenerazionale che si concentra sui ruoli familiari e sulle strategie di commemorazione controcorrente delle nuove generazioni.

**Parole chiave:** *Porrajmos*, razzismo, memoria delle Comunità romani, memoria individuale e culturale. Seconda guerra mondiale

## Introduction

The concept of collective memory is often considered so complex that it can sometimes be ambiguous in its theoretical conceptualizations. However, it is a concept familiar to any individual and it can be defined as "the distribution throughout society of what individuals believe, feel, and know about the past, how they judge the past from a moral standpoint, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as models of conduct and identity" (Schwartz, 2018, p. 31). In its sociological meaning, collective memory manifests itself as the result of social representations produced within a specific context in which individuals elaborate, maintain, remember, and commemorate the past. The type of collective memory that will be the subject of our analysis is that associated with the memory of the Roma genocide during the Second World War. We will analyse the relationship of this memory to individual memories, understood as "the basic units of collective memory" (*ibid.*), as well as the processes of identity construction, the persistence of memory, the channels of transmission and the different forms of commemoration practised by Roma communities today.

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*Porrajmos* is the term used in the Roma language for the genocide suffered during the Second World War. The term is derived from the noun form of the verb “porav-”, which means “to devour, to swallow” (Spinelli, 2014, p. 104). However, other terms can also be used. An example of this is the expression “Samudaripen”, which instead means “all dead”, or “Baro Romanò Meripen”, which means “The great death” (Spinelli, 2014: 104). The term “*Porrajmos*” was chosen by the linguist Ian Hancock, the first Roma member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington. According to Hancock, the word “*Porrajmos*” was first used by a Roma Kalderash in a private conversation in 1993 (Bravi et al., 2013, p. 12).

Although the number of victims is still disputed today, it is estimated that around 500,000 people, regardless of gender, age, or social status were persecuted, imprisoned, deported, and killed. As historian Karola Fings (2018, p. 74) reports, it can be argued that the data for Germany and Austria is fairly accurate due to the strict registration procedures implemented during the Third Reich, with a mortality rate of 70% in the first case and 9,500 victims out of 11,000 Roma in the second (Fings, 2018, p. 75). In contrast, the data on deaths in Southern and Eastern Europe is more uncertain.

In the case of Germany, racial policy towards the Roma was reinforced by a veritable propaganda campaign against foreign races, which was ideologically based on the pillar of the so-called racial hygiene. As with the Jews, a pseudoscientific basis was created for the “social engineering” (Bauman, 2010, p. 101) of the National Socialist regime. According to this ideological construction, the Roma were considered an impure race, afflicted with hereditary defects such as asocial behaviour, refusal to work and nomadism (Fings, 2018, p. 57). As in the case of the Holocaust, ideology itself was a central element of the persecutions and laid the foundation for an unprecedented racist policy.

The Roma and Sinti registration program was entrusted to the Reich Criminal Police Office (RKPA) under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, which played a key role in establishing race as the basis of the policy against Roma and Sinti. A decree from 1938 defined “the racial separation of Gypsies from the German population”, “the prohibition of racial mixing” and “the regulation of the living conditions of racially impure Gypsies and half-breed Gypsies” (Fings, 2018, p. 59) as categorical imperatives. The biological-racial verification of membership of Roma groups was instead entrusted to Robert Ritter, who, with the help of his collaborator Eva Justin, compiled more than 24,000 reports based on biometric facial identifications and samples aimed at determining the percentage of Roma blood in men, women and children in order to identify the presence of the two “hereditary defects” of *asocial behaviour* and *instinct for nomadism*, thus *scientifically* legitimizing the policy of extermination (Fings, 2018, p. 59).

The first segregations saw confinement in communal labour camps in Cologne and Berlin, to be followed by those in Frankfurt, Magdeburg, and Düsseldorf between 1935 and 1937. With the aim of separating the Roma and Sinti from the rest of the population, adults were forced into poorly paid work and children were prevented from attending school, while malnourishment and the lack of medical care were already causing the spread of diseases and infections. Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, more than a third of Roma and Sinti were interned in these communal labour camps. Shortly before the *Reichskristallnacht*, between June 12 and 18, 1938, hundreds of Roma were interned as part of an operation against “idlers”, which was based on an order from Himmler to the Gestapo to act against people who were considered asocial and to take them into preventive detention. This operation can be considered one of the first forced arrests, as it led over 200 men to the Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen concentration camps (Bravi, 2002: 45). We will mention the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau only summarily. From 1942, a separate Section IIe was set up in Sector B II, known as the *Zigeunerlager*, where over 22,000 people were brutally murdered, including shootings and gas chambers. By the end of 1943, it is estimated that over 70% of the internees were dead (Fings, 2018: 71). After an attempted uprising on May 16, 1944, the men and women who survived the subsequent repression were separated and eventually murdered in the gas chambers of Birkenau between August 2 and 3 of the same year. Their number amounted to 2,897 people.

## Collective memory, oral culture, and the role of the family in Roma communities

It is surprising that *Porrajmos* has not been recognized, or only belatedly, in the overall landscape of scholarly and political discourse on the Holocaust. After all, even before the fury of the Nazis spread across Europe, the Roma were also subject to deep-seated rejection in Western societies. Since their arrival in Europe in the early 15th century, their existence was criminalized by numerous bans, edicts, and decrees, accusing them alternately of vagrancy, witchcraft, and espionage (Mannoia, 2007: 18). In the 19th century, there was already widespread scholarly interest into Roma. Positivism was instrumental in consolidating the Roma people as a “criminal race”, as “ungrateful, vile and at the same time cruel” (Mannoia, 2007: 27), thus laying the theoretical foundations for the justification of hostile and violent attitudes. During the Second World War, the idea that Roma communities posed a threat to public security due to their supposed aversion to work and their nomadic way of life was already widespread (Boursier, 1996: 26).

But even in the post-war period, the recognition of *Porrajmos* was not achieved. We know that the post-war period was a fundamental turning point for the spread of social awareness of the crimes of the great totalitarian regimes and ushered in the so-called “era of the witness” (Wieviorka, 1998). The Nuremberg trials or the Eichmann trial were all occasions when the genocide of the Jews was communicated to the whole world, and this was done through the voices of the survivors (Meghnagi, 2005).

The remarkable ability of Roma communities in storytelling has also contributed to the preservation of the collective memory of the *Porrajmos*, despite official commemorations. This has always been one of their cultural characteristics since their origins and is closely linked to their traditional oral culture. For centuries, Roma communities did not use writing, which only became widespread in the 20th century, thanks in part to intellectuals such as the Serbian Rajko Diurić, the Roma Lovari survivor Ceija Stojka and the Polish Roma playwright Elena Lacková, to name but a few. Although they have gradually introduced writing into their culture, the oral transmission of knowledge and wisdom remains a characteristic feature of Roma communities today. The ability to narrate the group's history, culture, traditions, educational models, and value systems and to pass them on from generation to generation is therefore a distinctive feature of the Roma universe. This peculiarity has made possible to preserve an authentic collective memory of the *Porrajmos*.

This conceptualization of collective memory seems particularly fruitful in relation to the transmission of the memory of a genocide within a predominantly oral culture, whose historical events were known and passed on mainly through family storytelling. Indeed, collective memory itself can be seen as the result of communication between individuals. The narrative, understood here as “a narrative tending towards testimony” (Jedlowski, 2009-1, p. 25), is the discourse through which history is evoked within a narrative, which is rather the practice through which a teller and a receiver share a story (Jedlowski, 2009-2, p. 9). Even more interesting in our analysis is the prevalence of a collective memory of *Porrajmos* that has developed at family and social group level, as opposed to an institutionalized and universalized memory.

Considering the difficulties associated with the lack of official recognition of the *Porrajmos*, we can conclude that the generations who passed on the historical events related to the genocide did not have an official memory to fall back on to find confirmation or comfort. This collective memory therefore consists of a fragmented set of individuals, familial, biographical, and anecdotal memories.

The definition of collective memory that we are going to adopt comes from Maurice Halbwachs. According to the sociologist, collective memory consists of “the totality of the framework conditions that enable the preservation, development and explanation of the contents of individual memory” (Jedlowski, 2001, p. 22). The memory of an event is the result of a reactivation of the memory of a social group to which the individual belongs (Hassan, 2016; Meghnagi, 2005). This reactivation is not only a matter of preserving the memory, but rather of “reconstructing the past in the light of the present” (Jedlowski, 2001, p. 22). Indeed, each people draws on the social representation of itself that it has acquired to understand and reconstruct its own past and recomposing this representation in the present. It follows that “the collective frames of memory are not constructed retrospectively by

combining individual memories, and they are not empty forms into which memories are inserted from outside, but rather they are the very tools that collective memory uses to reconstruct an image of the past” (Halbwachs, 1975, p. XVIII).

The premise for the construction of the memories that make up collective memory is that they are based on common and shared ideas within a group. It therefore goes without saying that the more integrated the members of the group are, the more resilient the collective memory of a particular event will be. In this respect, it is precisely the tendency of Roma communities to move in groups and maintain a particularly strong sense of family unity across time and space that has made it possible to preserve a memory of the *Porrajmos*. Indeed, the sociological significance that Halbwachs (2001, p. 94) ascribes to memory lies precisely in its invaluable function of strengthening the bonds between generations. There is thus a sense of group identity that is interwoven with the historical events related to the *Porrajmos*. Even Halbwachs has said about the interface between individual memory and collective memory that: “Collective memory derives its strength and duration from the fact that it is supported by a group of people; on the other hand, it is individuals, as members of a group, who remember [...]. I would gladly say that each individual memory is a perspective on collective memory, that this perspective changes depending on the place it occupies within it, and that in turn, this place changes depending on the relationships I maintain with other social circles” (Halbwachs, 2001, p. 120).

It is therefore a constellation of individual memories but organized on a social level thanks to the social memory framework shared by the group. And the group to which the following analysis will refer is in fact the Roma family. In this case, the family is the fundamental element on which most prevailing values are based. Family relationships are at the heart of social organization and daily life, to the extent that, although each community is made up of different families, they share common and identifying characteristics. The primacy of the family is evident in various social contexts, from public ceremonies (births, baptisms, marriages, funerals) to work activities to which each family member contributes to a greater or lesser extent (Spinelli, 2014, p. 170). In these family units, the role of the elder or patriarch (called “*phure*”) is fundamental. They are considered “wise and guardians of the *Romani kriss* (Romani law), an inexhaustible source of human and moral wealth in the Roma way, as well as of life experience” (Spinelli, 2014, p. 175). These personalities enjoy recognition and respect derived from their ability to manage family and social life and from their responsibility in resolving family conflicts and disputes. In and through the family, the social cohesion of the group is expressed as “the place where values are maintained and strengthened” (Okely, 1995, p. 249).

The historical events that have shaped the history of the Roma population over the centuries can be seen as the main reason for the primacy of the family as a micro-society. Generally rejected by many societies they encountered, the Roma have cultivated the institution of the family as the main source of protection and cohesion. Only by considering the essential role that the *familje* plays in the *romanò thém* (“world of belonging”) can we understand the importance it has had in the transmission of their traditions and, specifically in our study, in the memory of the genocide during the Second World War. Maurice Halbwachs himself dealt with the role of the family in the construction of memories and collective memory and dedicated the fifth chapter of *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1975) to it. In these pages, it becomes clear how: “each family has its character, its memories that only it commemorates, and its secrets that it reveals only to its members. But these memories [...] consist not only of a series of individual images of the past. They are, at the same time, models, examples, and almost teachings. They express the general attitude of the group; they do not only reproduce its history, but also define its nature, qualities, and weaknesses” (Halbwachs, 1975, p. 35).

Memory thus becomes a kind of “traditional armour” (Halbwachs, 1975: 35) of the family, and even when it refers to events of the past that lasted only a few moments, it “shares in the nature of those collective imaginings which have neither a definite place nor a definite time and which seem to dominate the passage of time” (Halbwachs, 1975, p. 36). The family is therefore characterized as the most important guardian of the group's tradition and can itself provide fertile ground for micro-sociological analysis. This is especially true for a group that has made the family its most important organization, the regulator of social relations and the cornerstone of its culture. As the study presented

in the following sections will show, it was precisely this pre-eminence that was the essential resource for the preservation of a collective memory of the genocide suffered by Roma during the Second World War.

## **An exploratory study on the collective memory of *Porrajmos* in Italian Rome communities: Research framework, methodology and results**

### *The research framework*

The cognitive objective we set ourselves at the beginning of this study was to find traces confirming the existence of a collective memory. It seemed interesting to find confirmation of this, especially in relation to the current situation of the Roma in Italy. In fact, in Italy the illiteracy rate among Roma is dramatically high and, more importantly, there is a high level of poverty, social marginalization, and exclusion from the housing market. We therefore wondered how the limited access to information sources and the school non-attendance - thus the lower chances of finding contexts in which to learn about history - could be related to the knowledge about what happened to one's own people decades ago. We also wanted to learn more about the possible existence of alternative memories, investigate on their transmission channels, and find out whether there are common and widely shared codes of meaning within them that allow us to speak of a collective memory.

We have decided to focus on the characteristics of the Roma family, and we have chosen to examine the two categories of gender and age. Regarding gender, we chose to investigate the figure of the *phure* who represents the *pater familias* and who, according to the reference literature (Piasere, 2008; Spinelli, 2014), is the main repository not only of knowledge, traditions, and laws, but also of the history of the family. The aim was to link this role, traditionally performed by men, with that of Roma women, whose function is also associated with passing on educational and ethical principles to their offspring. Regarding age instead, it made sense to focus on the relationship between different age groups and the transmission between generations. Examining the channels of communication and the contexts in which young Roma talk about the historical events of their people could certainly help to understand the construction of Roma identity, especially regarding interactions with contexts of secondary socialization, such as school or peer groups, and with modern communication tools such as social networks.

### *Methodology*

Seven semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted to carry out the study. The choice of this technique was dictated by the possibility of “taking the subject's perspective” (Corbetta, 1999, p. 405), while the qualitative approach was preferred because it “accepts the challenge of immersing oneself in the lived experience of the phenomenon” (Tognonato, 2020, p. 25). The decision of how the question is formulated, the order in which they are asked, the terminology used and even the possibility of not asking some of the questions is left to the interviewer's free judgement. Given the nature of the topic, a more structured and inflexible technique would not have been suitable for eliciting complex themes such as memory, testimony, and trauma. The procedure for selecting the seven interviewees does not allow us to speak of a real sample. The aim was not to achieve representativeness, but to conduct a qualitative study aimed at analyzing differences. The intention was to reach people who were willing to share with the interviewer the story of their family and the memories they had inherited from it, revealing than their unique and subjective point of view.

The interviews were analyzed using NVivo software. NVivo enables computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS), which organizes the coding of structured or semi-structured text data by querying it. It allows researchers to explore theories based on the content of a text, image, or video, but it is the researcher's task to identify sensitizing concepts (nodes), associate them with each part of the text of interest and propose an interpretation.

The analysis with NVivo was first carried out by uploading the texts of the seven interviews. Nodes were then developed and constructed. These are key concepts that represent labels that the researcher

associates with a part of the interview during the investigation. Each node was then grouped into four sensitizing concepts (family, oral narrative, genocide and *Porrajmos* and present time) according to the criterion of analogy between the previously identified sensitizing concepts. Table 1 lists the sensitizing concepts and the nodes associated with them, while the columns "Sources" and "References" indicate respectively the number of interviews in which the node occurred (a node occurring in all interviews is associated with the value 7) and the number of times the node occurred in all interviews.

<b>List of sensitizing concepts and related nodes</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>References</b>
<b>First sensitizing concept: FAMILY</b>		
Pater familias as a mediator of memory	5	28
Family moments in which episodes of <i>Porrajmos</i> have been told	5	11
Women as non-mediators of memory	5	6
Exclusion of women from family narratives about the <i>Porrajmos</i>	5	12
Family as channel for discovery of the <i>Porrajmos</i>	5	23
Intergenerational transmission	6	26
<b>Second sensitizing concept: ORAL STORYTELLING</b>		
Episodes recounted by elderly family members	4	17
Oral storytelling of the <i>Porrajmos</i> aimed at teaching	4	9
Oral transmission as an element of Roma culture	5	24
<b>Third sensitizing concept: GENOCIDE</b>		
Understanding the <i>Porrajmos</i> as a tool to know one's individual and group identity	5	14
Acquisition of knowledge about the <i>Porrajmos</i> through school	3	4
Knowledge of the <i>Porrajmos</i> through personal information	4	10
Awareness of the marginalization of the <i>Porrajmos</i> in public discourse on the Holocaust	3	4
Importance of teaching the <i>Porrajmos</i> to new generations	6	18
Connection between Racism and the <i>Porrajmos</i>	7	32
Feelings of fear	6	18
Feelings of anger	1	2
Commemoration strategies	4	14
Totalitarianism	6	16
Trauma	6	16
<b>Fourth sensitizing concept: PORRAJMOS AND PRESENT TIME</b>		
<i>Dikh he na bister</i>	2	2
Perception of the futility of recounting the <i>Porrajmos</i> in the present	4	5
Perception of the importance of recounting the <i>Porrajmos</i> in the present	3	10
Racism experienced by Roma communities in contemporary times	7	27

**Table 1. List of sensitizing concepts and related nodes**

The software also allows the insertion of socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. In this case, all relevant information is entered and then linked to all uploaded text documents. In our case, we chose to include the characteristics (or variables) of gender, age, nationality, and level of education. The subjects were classified as shown in Table 2.

<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Level of Education</b>
Interviewee No. 1	Male	66	Romania	Middle school
Interviewee No. 2	Male	58	Romania	Middle school
Interviewee No. 3	Female	45	Romania	Middle school
Interviewee No. 4	Female	60	Romania	Middle school
Interviewee No. 5	Male	32	Kosovo	High school
Interviewee No. 6	Female	56	Romania	Middle school
Interviewee No. 7	Female	29	Italy	High school

**Table 2. Classification of interviewees’ characteristics**

In our case, the most interesting function offered by the software are queries. Essentially, this is a series of functions with which the texts of the interviews can be queried, and information extracted from them. The first query performed was word frequency, which was used to create a list of the most frequently occurring words in the interviews. In Table 3 we give the word frequency for all nodes, together with the “Count” column indicating how often the words occurred in all constructed nodes.

<b>Words</b>	<b>Count</b>
Gypsies	79
Roma	60
Family	57
“They said...”	55
Grandfather	53
“They told...”	44
Fear	43
Romania	33
House	30
War	27
“He/She was speaking...”	26
Memory	22
Folk	21

**Table 3. Words frequency on all nodes**

The second query that was performed is the matrix coding. This function allows for cross-referencing nodes and attributes, the latter being the characteristics assigned to the interviewees and associated to each interview. The intersection of these two elements has made it possible to deepen the interview and propose interpretations that are useful for answering the research objectives originally set. All this is subject of the next paragraph.

### *The results*

As Table 2 shows, the sociodemographic characteristics of the interviewees were partly homogeneous. One group of respondents was between 45 and 66 years old, came from Romania and had the same level of education. Each of them lives in a reception centre in the city of Naples and has lived in nomadic camps in the past. The other group, composed of younger respondents, were relatively the same age (32 and 29 years), had the same level of education. One was from Kosovo but

had moved to Italy at a very young age, while the other had been born and raised in Italy. An initial analysis therefore focused on the differences resulting from this first differentiation between the subjects, always considering that the first subgroup consisted of five individuals, while the second comprised only two.

In the first subgroup, a greater prevalence of the family as the main source of knowledge about the history of *Porrajmos* was initially noted. Indeed, in their case, the family was immediately associated with the memory of the *Porrajmos* and repeatedly mentioned as the main source of discovery and transmission of oral stories from the Second World War period. We here present Table 4 and Table 5, which show respectively the relationship between the sensitizing concepts "family" and "oral storytelling" and the respondents' gender and age variables. The values associated with each node correspond to the number of times it appears in the interviews.

**First sensitizing concept: FAMILY**

<b>Gender and age of the interviewees</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>
	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>66</b>
Pater familias as a mediator of memory	0	0	5	7	2	8	6
Family moments in which episodes of <i>Porrajmos</i> have been told	0	0	2	2	1	5	1
Women as non-mediators of memory	0	0	2	1	1	1	1
Exclusion of women from family narratives about the <i>Porrajmos</i>	0	0	3	3	1	1	4
Family as channel for discovery the <i>Porrajmos</i>	0	0	7	1	3	8	4
Intergenerational transmission	0	0	6	4	1	10	4

**Table 4. Relationship between the sensitizing concepts “Family” and gender/age of the interviewees**

**Second sensitizing concept: ORAL STORYTELLING**

<b>Gender and age of the interviewees</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>
	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>66</b>
Episodes recounted by elderly family members	0	0	3	4	0	4	6
Oral storytelling of the <i>Porrajmos</i> aimed at teaching	0	0	3	2	2	2	0
Oral transmission as an element of Roma culture	1	0	6	1	1	14	1

**Table 5. Relationship between the sensitizing concepts “Oral storytelling” and gender/age of the interviewees**

As Table 4 shows, all nodes related to the sensitizing concept of family yielded a result of zero for the two youngest subjects. When interpreting this data, one aspect must be considered. The respondents who belong to the older group are all people who have lived in nomadic camps, where the extended family is a cornerstone of the social structure. Nonetheless, the preeminence of the extended family persists even in the reception centre where they were living at the time of the interview. We can therefore infer that there is a correlation between the way respondents live and the ability to hold the extended family together. From this link it would follow at least two consequences. The first is more time spent together and, therefore, an increase in the occasions when stories from the past can reemerge. The second is that, thanks to this way of living their family life, the more

traditionalist elements of it persist, as evidenced by the prevalence of the figure of the *pater familias* as mediators of the memory of the *Porrajmos*.

However, age is also a decisive factor that must be considered when interpreting the data. This is because the older individuals had the opportunity to hear the stories of *Porrajmos* directly from their grandparents, hence from people for whom the memory was more vivid. The passage of time naturally reduces the intensity with which memories can be recalled, as well as the frequency with which they reappear in family conversations. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the respondents for whom the nodes “Family moments in which episodes of the *Porrajmos* were recounted” and “Intergenerational transmission” yielded greater results were also those who had the opportunity to hear the stories about the genocide directly from their grandparents, as in the case of respondents no. 1, 3, 4 and 6.

Another interesting aspect is the gender of the memory mediators. As it can be seen from Table 4, the existence of *pater familias* as the main mediator of memory can be confirmed, as shown by the frequency of the word “grandfather”, which occurs 53 times (Table 3). All interviewees confirmed the predominance of a male figure who, during common moments such as work activities or shared meals, was able to immerse himself in the narrative about the situation of the Roma during the Second World War, recounting hunger, poverty, indiscriminate arrests, and survival strategies in the search for food and water. From the content of the interviews, an attitude of appreciation and respect for this figure emerges, rarely interrupted, or questioned and sometimes even heroized.

As far as the role of women in the narratives of the earlier generations is concerned however, we observe their substantial marginalization. All respondents belonging to the older group explicitly stated that their grandmothers or mothers never narrated episodes related to the *Porrajmos*, which confirms not only their absence as mediators of memory (as seen in the node “Women as non-mediators of memory” in Table 4), but also their specific exclusion as listeners (as seen in the node “Exclusion of women from family narratives about the *Porrajmos*”). For example, interviewee no. 6 reported that the stories about the war that his maternal grandfather told him were never told in the presence of his sisters or his mother, and that his grandmother had never recounted an episode about it. When asked why, he replied that the lessons derived from the story were directed at him as a man and that it was not something that could affect women.

It is interesting to note however, that the two women in the older group proved to be excellent listeners and the best mediators of memories. Although the men interviewed stated that women were not involved in the stories of *Porrajmos* in their original families, the women interviewed recounted several episodes from the Second World War period that they had heard from their grandparents or parents. Although they confirmed the presence of a male narrative in their original families, they have achieved similar scores to the male respondents in the “Episodes told by older people” node that provided richer testimonies in terms of content and emotion. One female interviewee for example talked about her grandfather who, in the evening, would start talking about the persecution of the Romanian Roma, then suddenly stop and start crying, remembering that he had lost everything.

The node “Oral storytelling of the *Porrajmos* aimed at teaching” is equally interesting if the gender variable is considered. Indeed, all respondents belonging to older group reported that the stories told by their elders often had an educational purpose and were linked to the transmission of teachings such as the concept of right and wrong, the value of human life, solidarity, and distrust of those who behave cruelly. This link between storytelling and teachings is, on average, more pronounced in women than in men.

Let us now proceed with the analysis of the third sensitizing concept, “Genocide”, by linking all the nodes of this concept to the attributes of gender and age (Table 6).

### Third sensitizing concept: GENOCIDE

Gender and age of the interviewees	M	F	F	M	M	F	M
	29	32	45	56	58	60	66
Understanding the <i>Porrajmos</i> as a tool to know one's individual and group identity	5	4	0	1	1	3	0
Acquisition of knowledge about the <i>Porrajmos</i> through school	1	1	1	0	0	2	0
Knowledge of the <i>Porrajmos</i> through personal information	2	3	2	3	0	0	0
Awareness of the marginalization of the <i>Porrajmos</i> in public discourse on the Holocaust	1	2	1	0	0	0	0
Importance of teaching the <i>Porrajmos</i> to the new generations	2	1	5	3	3	4	0
Connection between Racism and the <i>Porrajmos</i>	4	2	3	14	3	5	1
Feelings of fear	0	2	3	2	1	5	5
Feelings of anger	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Commemoration strategies	5	4	5	0	0	4	0
Totalitarianism	1	1	3	6	2	0	3
Trauma	3	0	1	2	1	8	1

**Table 6. Relationship between the sensitizing concepts “Genocide” and gender/age of the interviewees**

As shown in Table 6, most of the nodes appear in all interviews. One example is the node “Connection between racism and the *Porrajmos*”, which appeared in one case as many as 14 times. In fact, all interviewees, regardless of the channel through which they learned about the genocide, linked it to racism. All but one case also referred to the concept of totalitarianism, which includes terms such as “dictatorship”, “National Socialism” or “Fascism”. These data are very interesting because they indicate that, despite the historiographical representation of the Roma Holocaust, which tends to establish a link between persecution and public order rather than persecution and racism, respondents are well aware that the persecution policies of the Second World War contained the ideological premise of racism. Emblematic of this are the words of interviewee no. 3, who stated: “They arrested the Gypsies according to their race, they wanted to destroy our jobs and our tradition”. With these words, the interviewee from Romania is referring specifically to the persecution policy of Ion Antonescu, whose government led to the deaths of over 5,000 Roma.

Many interviewees expressed feelings of fear in relation to the memories of the genocide passed down by their own families. Indeed, as highlighted in Table 6, the feeling of fear was mentioned several times, with a higher percentage among older respondents, who are also those who learned about the *Porrajmos* through direct reports from their relatives. In fact, the fear they report is associated by the interviewees with the emotions of the narrator. They recall feelings of anguish, mainly caused by the presence of armed forces in the vicinity of their homes, together with the fear of being caught without valid identification documents. The feeling of anger was instead less present since it appeared in only one interview. In this case, the interviewee explicitly used the word “anger” and described it as a cathartic feeling. Finally, the word “trauma” appeared five times. In these cases, the reference was both to a collective trauma and an individual trauma, never overcome even years later, by the narrators of their families.

The last node we want to analyse is related to “commemorative strategies”. This node was most common among younger individuals (Table 6). These strategies were proactive and aimed at creating

discourse about the *Porrajmos* not only within their own community, where respondents themselves recognise there is little knowledge about the topic, but also outside of it. Social networks and podcasts were mentioned as tools for networking with other members of their community. A telling case is that of interviewee no. 5, who also campaigns for the rights of Roma and Sinti communities in Italy. The young man said he visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp as part of the *Dikh he na bister* initiative<sup>3</sup> on August 2, the day of remembrance of the victims of the Holocaust against the Roma and Sinti. This experience, which he described as painful but that at the same time gave him a sense of closeness to other members of the communities present there, offered him the opportunity to connect more deeply with his own heritage and soon became a strong motivation to carry on with his activism. On the same occasion, however, he personally noted how the *Porrajmos* is only marginally considered in the context of the Holocaust. He noted that access to sector BIIE, that is the family's gypsy camp, is not included in the canonical route proposed to visitors, and that if you want to visit it, you must explicitly ask the guide for it.

Equally interesting is the case of the young interviewee no. 7. She stated that she has planned to visit the same concentration camp next year. She is also the author of several poems and fiction, which she has often used as a channel to express her relationship with her community's painful past and to reconstruct its roots. Moreover, the idea of writing about the genocide represents a break with the traditional oral culture shared by the older interviewees and highlights the opportunities that she has seized in embracing the possibility to contaminate the traditional oral storytelling with tools of transmission of the memory that are accessible to a wider audience. It should of course be considered that the remembrance strategies of the two younger interviewees are strongly influenced by the living conditions of better integration into the majority society and a higher level of education.

In the case of the older interviewees, however, commemoration strategies were only identified in one instance. Interviewee number 4, as previously mentioned, stated that she often talks to her children about the *Porrajmos* because she wants them to be aware of what happened. For the other interviewees, a generally disillusioned attitude towards the function of passing on the memory of the *Porrajmos* today emerged. This latter aspect was more prominently highlighted in the sensitizing concept of “*Porrajmos* and present time” which we report in Table 7.

**Fourth sensitizing concept:**

**PORRAJMOS AND PRESENT TIME**

<b>Gender and age of the interviewees</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>M</b>
	<b>29</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>Dikh he na bister</i>	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
The futility of recounting the <i>Porrajmos</i> in the present time	0	0	0	1	1	2	1
The usefulness of recounting the <i>Porrajmos</i> in the present	5	4	1	0	0	0	0
Racism in contemporary times	8	9	2	4	4	5	1

**Table 7. Relationship between the sensitizing concepts “*Porrajmos* and present times” and gender/age of the interviewees.**

<sup>3</sup> Starting from 2010, the initiative *Dikh he na bister* (which, in Romanes language, means “look and don't forget”) promotes the remembrance of the *Porrajmos* through the organization of "memory trips" involving hundreds of Roma from various European countries to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Krakow every year. Regarding the initiative, initiated by the ternYpe International Roma Youth Network, co-organized with the Council of Europe, it is recommended to visit the website [www.2august.eu](http://www.2august.eu).

Common to all interviewees was a tendency to address the discourse on the *Porrajmos* to the present time. Some used the past to explain the present, in the sense that they identified in it the origins of systemic racism towards their community today. Others used the genocide to draw parallels with the present and wondered whether they still face a stigma that exposes them to risks and discrimination as they did back then. Still others even expressed fears that those times could return and that the threat of indiscriminate violence and persecution could reappear. In the words of the interviewees, the tendency was therefore observed to remember by bringing the group's memory up to date (Jedlowski, 2001: 31). The act of remembering by the interviewees proved to be fully an action closely linked to the present. Recourse to memories of past persecutions, passed down from generation to generation, proved to be an act aimed at understanding the present and strongly dependent on the present. Racism has been shown to be “the cognitive bridge that connects the past to the present” (Schwartz, 2018: 36), i.e. the element that makes the past experienced by one's people important to one's current existence. If the memory of *Porrajmos* were not useful for the needs of the interviewees' present, we believe it would not have emerged with such richness in details and emotions.

## Conclusions

The preservation of the memory of *Porrajmos* appears as a dynamic phenomenon that changes over time according to the needs of the group living in a particular historical moment. It is therefore not surprising that the activation of the memory in every conversation inevitably led to the current conditions of the Roma. This is, in fact, one of the most interesting aspects that emerges from the interviews. To summarise, the interviewees showed that they fully participate in the collective memory of the *Porrajmos*. Some do it rather quietly, within the confines of their homes, others do it loudly, using youthful and accessible means of communication. The difference between the two groups lies in how much they trust in the usefulness of continuing to tell the story of the *Porrajmos* in present days. While the young respondents showed great confidence in remembering and telling the story today, this confidence diminishes among the older subjects, who tend to resign themselves to the non-Roma's lack of interest in their history.

On the one hand, there is a certain homogeneity among the interviewees in terms of collective memory. For each of them, the *Porrajmos* represents the culmination of racist feelings towards the Roma and is brought into the present to explain the racism that still exists today. On the other hand, a fundamental difference emerges if we instead look at individual memories, which, although they are to be understood as “the fundamental units of collective memory” (Schwartz, 2018: 31), they have a different function for the two subgroups and are animated by very different feelings.

This consideration points to a division between young and old and illustrates the possibility of intergenerational development of Roma social identity. However, it also shows how social integration can improve a group's ability to advocate for its own interests, access to communication channels and assert its place in public discourse. The lack of commemorative symbolism for the *Porrajmos* combined with the social marginality of the elderly certainly had a negative impact on their ability to openly speak about it or even care about it, as they experience first-hand much more pressing needs in terms of their own survival and that of their families. Similarly, young respondents are engaged in building a new symbolism, characterized by concrete actions such as promoting remembrance in the world of associations or commemorative publications.

There is a collective memory among the interviewees that is equally known and shared, preserved through underground and private forms of commemoration, and that represents a remarkable resistance to the general obscurantism towards the *Porrajmos*. Finally, the evolution of the channels of transmission and the strategies of communication and promotion of remembrance that can be observed in the two subgroups, confronts us with the question of the transformation that these tactics for preserving memory may undergo. Should we expect future generations to use the communication channels of mainstream society, or they will keep using the same old family storytelling as a privileged channel? More questions arise if we consider that the two young people who took part in the interviews live in more socially privileged circumstances than the older interviewees. Consequently, they have better opportunities to gain access to wider channels of communication and to claim their right to express themselves and create historical and social knowledge. On the other hand, it should be noted that when selecting the interviewees at the reception centre, none of the young people who were asked to be interviewed knew the history of *Porrajmos*. It is therefore possible that we are facing the risk that young people who belong to more marginalised groups, who do not follow the path of oral tradition that their ancestors did, do not have access to alternative channels of knowledge. This raises fears that with the generational change, the knowledge about the *Porrajmos* that families have passed on to this day through storytelling will also be lost.

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