

# “Our Way”: Musical commemorations of the persecution of German Sinti during WWII

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In this paper, I want to discuss the “Cologne Gypsy Wagon Festival” (Kölner Zigeunerwagenfestival) as an instance of *postmemory* making. I argue that through a close examination of the festival and its music we arrive at a better and more nuanced understanding of public memory (Keighley and Pickering, 5) at the juncture of cultural identity, imagination, nostalgia and trauma. As conceptualized by literature theorist Marianne Hirsch, *postmemory* describes a “*structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (6). In the case of the Gypsy Wagon festival, this structure is not only defined by inter- and transgenerational returns but is also set in a context of mediation between different social groups such as German Sinti and gadje (which is the common Romani term for non-minority members). Following a short description of the festival in May and June 2018, I will briefly contextualize public commemorations of Sinti victims within post-war Germany’s cultural memory politics before concluding with my analysis of the Gypsy Wagon festival within the postmemory framework.

In international contexts, “Roma” has developed into an umbrella term for all Romani speaking groups and their descendants. Different groups such as the Sinti, Lovari or Kalderash are subsumed under this term. In the wake of the civil rights movement between the 1970’s and the 1980’s which led to formation of various political, minority-led institutions, the term “Sinti and Roma” became the favoured term in German political context. The pairing of Sinti and Roma underlines the German Sinti’s historically grown distinctiveness from the Roma and challenges the perception of “Roma” as one people with different sub-groups (see Matras and Margalit, 103-108). However, the Sinti who organized the festivals in Cologne reject the umbrella term “Sinti and Roma” and instead, for various reasons, encourage the use of “Zigeuner” (gypsy) during their own events, but they also use the word Sinti when referring to themselves. Therefore, the term Sinti is used throughout this paper when referring to the members of Maro Drom and their families while gypsy is used either in direct quotes or in quotation marks when referring to an imagined “gypsy culture” across various groups.

My work with Sinti musicians and their families in Cologne began in 2017 when I did my first interview with Markus Reinhardt, musician and head of the Reinhardt family. Since then, I participated regularly in the many events organized by him and the *Maro Drom* association which largely consists of members of the Reinhardt family and their in-laws. I went to concerts of the Markus Reinhardt ensemble and took part in other activities such as video shoots, charity events or simply spending time together doing nothing in particular. Two weeks prior to the IASPM conference in Canberra, I held a group discussion with 6 family members. I shared my thoughts and the main themes of this paper with them, which gave me the chance to include their feedback and put my own interpretation of the festival’s role in postmemory making into perspective. My presentation is thus largely informed by my continuing ethnographic fieldwork with the Reinhardt family and participant observations during the festivals. The main events are the two installations of the Gypsy Wagon festival in May and June 2018 in Cologne.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 at 3 o’clock in the afternoon at the west bank of the Rhine river, began the commemoration of the 938 Cologne-based Sinti, who had been deported to the concentration camps in May 1940 (Fings and Spring, 345).



Fig. 1 shows Markus Reinhardt (violin) together with the musicians Rudi Rumstajn (guitar), Elemèr Balogh (cimbalom) and Janko Mettbach (guitar). They musically accompanied the commemoration ceremony and inaugurated the Gypsy Wagon festival, whose program ensued immediately after the commemoration. Pictures taken by the author.

For passers-by and festivalgoers who arrived later, the commemorative aspect went often unnoticed. They saw and enjoyed an open-air party with music, drinks and food. Festooned with colorful garlands and encircled by tents and food stands stood the heart piece of the festival: a polished, wooden planked circus wagon, not far from the place where nearly 70 years ago the Sinti and Roma from Cologne had been gathered and deported to the concentration camps.



Festivalgoers spoke of “Parisian flair at the banks of the Rhine”. The gypsy wagon provided its part to the nostalgia-laden atmosphere of the festival, as the commemorative aspect moved to the background just to resurface every now and then. The festival’s program made sure that inside and outside the wagon, moments of mediation and shared memory re-emerged between the Sinti families and the festivalgoers.

The wagon functioned as space for cultural mediation, multi-layered signifier, and served multiple other purposes, as explained by Markus Reinhardt himself during the festivals opening

We had been living in Bickendorf on the Schwarz-Weiß-Platz. And they had all been living in a wagon. Then, during the war and the Nazi regime they were all deported and brought to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. My grandfather said to the others: “Whoever makes it out, we will meet back in Cologne.” Of course, Cologne. And they did. And when they came back, their caravans were gone. For a very long time, years in fact, I have had the idea to get one wagon back, so that we would get something back. Something that the Nazis had taken from us. And we finally succeeded. We got a wagon back, but we do not want to keep it just for ourselves, we want to bring it back into society and do something with it. We are planning different projects with kids, concerts and readings, the same as we are doing now during these four days. Because this too is part of our culture, to contribute something to society. The gadje mostly hear the bad things, that gypsies steal, they are filthy, and they exploit the system. This is not true. But they don’t hear anything else, because we don’t go out into public. But we have now arrived at the point where we feel we have to go out, we have to go public to inform the gadje, the non-gypsies. And when they learn from us, we will be able to overcome these prejudices (May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, my translation)

Of the 12 members of Markus’ family who had been deported to various concentration camps, only 6 survived. Markus’ brother Ingold vividly remembers the cries of his father at night, who re-lived his time in the camps over and over again. After their return to Cologne, the Sinti were relocated several times to different camps and settlements at the city’s outskirts. As historians Fings and Sparing showed, the returned survivors were subject to continued discrimination, marginalization and criminalization (351). Former Nazis who had had their part in the deportations were now in charge of their welfare and compensation applications (von Mengersen, 67-69). Markus, however, stresses that their work with Maro Drom is not about guilt but reconciliation. When he and his siblings were talking about Nazi Germany, his parents always emphasized that they would not have survived if not for the help of “good Germans”.

To put the activism of Maro Drom into perspective: In Germany, the genocide was only formally recognized in 1982 after the tireless efforts of human rights activists and their political representatives. It took another 30 years until the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma victims of National Socialism in Berlin was finally inaugurated in 2012. Maro Drom, meaning “our way”, hence the title for this paper, is to be understood as a self-assured grass roots activism that joins the discourses on Holocaust memory and German minority politics with their own agenda. With the Gypsy Wagon festivals, the Maro Drom association wanted to raise enough money to finance a future extended tour with the wagon, which would follow the survivors’ path after their liberation from Auschwitz back to Cologne.

As the wagon served as catalyst for memory mediation between Sinti and gadje, the music served more as a catalyst for cultural mediation. The different musical acts that played during the festival were introduced by the festival organizers as representing the “variety of gypsy culture”. Snapshot of the festival’s musical acts and interviews with organizers and participants can be found on the festival’s YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ZigeunerwagenTV/videos>

A staple of Markus Reinhardt’s repertoire is an unnamed waltz by a Hungarian composer and violinist. Markus frequently plays this tune in commemorative context as well as at his concerts. He tells the story of how he met the composer on a journey to Hungary. He was a Rom and holocaust survivor and told Markus that he had written the waltz while being imprisoned in a concentration camp. Markus explains that as he was taught to play the waltz, he had to promise to play it as often as possible to keep the memory alive:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6tTkCRvhyY>

In general, the Gypsy Wagon festival featured mostly music that was understood as being more ‘traditional’ such as songs of Hungarian and Russian Roma, Flamenco music and Jazz in the style of Django Reinhardt, although often in a modernized version. However, the festival also provided a stage for other musical styles usually not preconceived as “gypsy music” such as hip hop, bossa nova or even German operettas and schlager.

In a move that is at the same time essentializing and relativistic, Markus Reinhardt said to me that “there is no such thing as gypsy music. We have always played the music of the countries we were living in and mixed it with what we already had. It is the “how the music is played” that defines it. I can always hear when it is a gypsy playing” (personal communication August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018; my translation). His niece Regina in turn brought up another aspect that is mediated through music. When I asked her about the various musical performances during the festival, she told me “of course, this is not exactly “our” music, but it has the same intensity. It is different but it has the same history. It is all linked, it fits together” (personal communication June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, my translation)

It is a strategic and often ambivalent play in which the people of Maro Drom employ music as a way to signify a belonging to a bigger, culturally rich and diverse “gypsy culture” while at the same time emphasizing the distinctiveness of their German Sinti culture. Music is deeply linked to both processes of public memory and cultural identity making of German Sinti. The postgeneration’s memory making and memory mediation as exemplified by the members of Maro Drom is furthermore defined by its imaginative investments and the presence of nostalgia. As both terms are highly problematic and contestable in the discourses on Holocaust memory, I will specify what I mean by imagination and nostalgia in the context of public memory.

Marianne Hirsch states that

“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.” (5)

Similar to Hirsch’s conception of postmemory, cultural theorist Mieke Bal understands nostalgia as a relational structure, which is “not false or inauthentic in essence” (xi). But in contrast to imagination, nostalgia often bears negative connotations. Bal states that “this mood [nostalgia] has often been criticized as unproductive, escapist and sentimental. It is considered regressive, romanticizing, the temporal equivalent of tourism and the search for the picturesque. It has been conceived as longing for an idyllic past that never was” (ibid.).

During the gypsy wagon festival, the nostalgia expressed by the Sinti through the wagon and the music seems especially prone to romanticism and even cliché. At the same time, it feeds the imaginations of “Gypsies” as free nomads, as the European Other (Piotrowska) and triggers Sinti’s memories of communal living.

Turning to academia, one finds that a significant part of current literature focusses on the issues of romanticism and the perpetuation of gypsy stereotypes (see for instance Malvinni; Marković; Piotrowska). With few exceptions, these studies look from a majority culture’s perspective at cliché-laden tropes such as the Gypsy Wagon rather dismissively. But, as my example shows, nostalgia can also be empowering and made productive. It can be historically informed and even critical. For instance, Markus’ sister Nina Reinhardt told me, that this nostalgia must always be understood in the context of the hardships they had to endure. The fond memories of strong community and the feeling of security within the safe-space family are also a result of necessity and the struggle for survival. (personal communication June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, my translation). The ambivalent nostalgia is also expressed through music, when for instance the Markus Reinhardt Quintett played old German operettas and schlager because “our elders loved this music. They played it for the gadje but they also played it for themselves” (personal communication, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, my translation).

The Sinti of Maro Drom are mostly children or grandchildren of holocaust survivors. The survivors themselves, with one exception, were not present at the festival. It is the postgeneration which represents their elders and contributes their perspectives to the cultural memory of the holocaust.

But the question emerges: Who actually is this postgeneration? Do all Germans belong to the same postgeneration? Or are there boundaries between the Sinti who mediate their family memories and the gadje who experience their mediation as testimonies of what musicologist Amy Lynn Włodarski has called “musical witnesses” (4-5) which implying multiple levels of removal from the actual first-hand experiences?

A common expression among Sinti is “Our elders were our books. They burnt our libraries.” The void that they left in cultural memory and knowledge about traditions, customs and language had to be filled by imaginative extrapolation. In addition, the Reinhardt family worked together with historians, cultural scientists and other gadje to enrich their own cultural memory. This process has to be understood as a dialogical memory making between the Sinti minority and the German majority population as the Sinti in turn share their familial memories with others. Maro Drom held several open discussions in-between concerts in which Sinti, Roma and gadje exchanged their memories, questions and opinions. In this example, the sphere of the postgeneration is probably

best understood as an inclusive thirdspace (Soja) in which the mediations and imaginations of different social groups influence and interact with each other.

## Concluding thoughts

I argue that it is no coincidence, that the gypsy wagon festival as well as other similar commemorative events are featuring a wide variety of musical styles to sound their memories. Rather than focusing on music that is iconic for their distinct Sinti tradition, they included many other musical styles to showcase the variety of cultures across the various minority groups. Rather than providing a window into the past, the festival aimed to provide a window into contemporary “gypsy culture”. This move from a diachronic to a synchronic perspective can be understood as the traces of cultural trauma caused by the genocide during WWII. The function of public memory, as memory studies scholars emphasize, always lies in its application in the present. In this, music played a key role in creating a shared space for memory mediation on an affective level. I want to close this paper with another quote from my interviews with Markus Reinhardt, who contends that “the old ways of interaction and communication are vanishing, so we have to create something new, also something new for ourselves. And I feel that this is best achieved through music“ (personal communication August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018; my translation).

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