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## Gender and Traumatic Memories in Autobiographies by Ceija, Karl, and Mongo Stojka: Comparisons and Their Consequences

Austrians Ceija, Karl, and Mongo Stojka are siblings who survived the Nazi persecution of Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust. Since 1988, all three have published autobiographies. Ceija Stojka's *Wir leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* appeared first in 1988, followed by her *Reisende auf dieser Welt: Aus dem Leben einer Rom-Zigeunerin* in 1992. Karl Stojka published his *Auf der ganzen Welt zu Hause* in 1994. In 2000 Mongo Stojka published his *Papierene Kinder: Glück, Zerstörung und Neubeginn einer Roma-Familie in Österreich*. Certainly, these three writers, artists, and performers share family, national, and ethnic histories. In brief, they all lived in Austria together as a family before they were transported to concentration camps, and they all survived the atrocities of those camps. After the Holocaust they all went on to create nationally and internationally recognized works of art, music, performance, and literature.

The idea that this sister and two brothers share “histories” and “stories,” tempts me as a feminist scholar to compare their autobiographies using gender as the main variable. In such a comparison, I would look at the possible differences in the circumstances under which they wrote and then published their works. I would also examine the differences in writing styles, in the metaphors and tropes they create, in their selection of stories to portray, and in lived experiences. Indeed, in the first part of my paper I wish to undertake such a comparison, if mostly as an exercise in close readings of fascinating texts. The barriers that Ceija Stojka encountered as a woman when she decided to publish her autobiography, for example, distinguish her process of writing from that of her brothers. A study of the stories that the siblings decide to tell separately, and those they are required by historical circumstance to tell separately will reveal ways in which these male and female authors compare and contrast in their reconstruction of traumatic memory.

In the second part of the paper, however, I want to examine the consequences of such a comparison. Several studies on the experiences of female Holocaust victims and survivors often point to the survival tactics that women interned in concentration camps devised. In many cases, those tactics have been deemed more effective than ones used men. Scholars who interview women survivors and examine their works often point to their desire for solidarity with other women in the camps, their willingness to help each other, and their transferal of certain “maternal instincts” into building communities under duress. These features are seen as different from men’s experiences, which are often portrayed as more solitary and autonomous. What such studies may often lead to, however, is a certain valorization of women above men in their abilities to survive monstrosities. That valorization becomes chilling in light of the oppression and atrocities that were wrought against all Roma and Sinti. Thus, to draw general conclusions about

the interaction between gender, autobiography, and traumatic memory when I compare men's and women's works becomes increasingly difficult. Instead, I find myself asking whether I am, as scholar Joan Ringelheim suggests in her work on Jewish women and the Holocaust, "valorizing oppression?"<sup>1</sup> Am I implying that suffering makes women better than men in their abilities to devise coping mechanisms and survival tactics? Am I leaving out sides of the story that have not been told, ones that may paint a different picture? Am I letting "gender pride" or the apparent need for 'gender pride' get in the way of truth, another question that Ringelheim raises, and that others interested in the relationship between gender and violence have periodically asked themselves.<sup>2</sup>

In combining both an analysis of the Stojka siblings' works and a critique of that analysis, I wish to pose ways in which gender can indeed be a category when analyzing traumatic memories, but also warn against the inherent dangers in this kind of analysis. There are times when victimization is gender specific, and yet in cases of ethnic persecution we must not ignore the possible consequences of such victimization for both genders.

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," in *Different Voices: Women in the Holocaust*, ed. By Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, New York: Paragon House, 1993, 373-420.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the essays in *Different Voices* (footnote 1) and in *Gender & Catastrophe*, ed. by Ronit Lentin, London & New York: Zed Books, 1997.