Intercultural Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ceji20

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Published online: 20 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Michelle Kelso (2013): ‘And Roma were victims, too.’ The Romani genocide and Holocaust education in Romania, Intercultural Education, 24:1-2, 61-78

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2013.768060

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‘And Roma were victims, too.’ The Romani genocide and Holocaust education in Romania

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While Holocaust education has been mandatory in Romanian schools for over a decade, educators do not necessarily teach about it. Distortion and obfuscation of Romanian Holocaust crimes during the communist and transition periods means that teachers, like the majority of Romanians, know little about their country’s perpetration of genocides. From 1941 to 1944, the Romanian regime transported part of its Jewish and Romani populations to death camps in Transnistria, where over 200,000 Jews and over 10,000 Roma were killed. Under communism, blame for genocides was placed solely on Nazi Germany, thereby absolving Romanian perpetrators. Post-communism, the official narrative has slowly come under scrutiny, allowing for a restructuring of World War II history to incorporate the deportations and deaths of the country’s Jews and Roma. Ignorance about the Holocaust and prejudice about the minorities affected are at the root of non-compliance in teaching. This is especially the case for the Roma, who are the largest minority in Romania and face continued marginalization and discrimination. In this paper, I focus on cognitive barriers that many history and civics teachers have regarding teaching about the victimization of the Roma minority. These barriers are intrinsically tied to acceptance of new narratives of the Holocaust and reconfigurations of ethnic identities in post-socialist Romania where pressures from the European Union and the USA, among others, have pushed for critical examination of past atrocities in order to strengthen democratic processes.

Keywords: Holocaust; education; Roma; Romania; teacher trainings

To the extent that the Holocaust itself comes in some sense to be ‘canonized,’ one may expect that (as in the case of texts) certain issues tend to be avoided, marginalized, repressed or denied.

– Dominick LaCapra (LaCapra 1994, 23)

Introduction

One December morning in 2005, I was on my way with some Romani companions to a teacher-training seminar on the Holocaust at the University of Craiova in southern Romania.1 Conference organizers invited us to screen and discuss a documentary film I created about the genocide of Romanian Roma during WWII.2 In Craiova, 40 Romanian teachers had gathered to learn about their nation’s past, so

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they could teach their students what they had not learned under communism about the Holocaust and their country’s participation in it.\(^3\) During World War II, Romania’s pro-Nazi Government persecuted hundreds of thousands of Jews and tens of thousands of Roma, who were subjected to deportations to improvised camps in Nazi-occupied areas of the Soviet Union. Romania was the second-largest perpetrator of the Holocaust after Nazi Germany (Ioanid 2009). Few Romanians know of the genocides instigated by the wartime dictator Marshal Ion Antonescu, who remains a popular anticommunist figure today in Romania, appreciated by many for his efforts in fighting the Soviet Union. We were cautiously optimistic about our first meeting with Romanian educators, whom we expected to be curious and ready to debate the subject matter.

Post-screening, instead of dialoging about the little known Holocaust history presented to them, teachers focused on social issues and stereotypes associated with the Roma minority. They asked: Why don’t Gypsy kids come to school? Why do Gypsies always steal cell phones? Why do we teachers have to teach about them at all? One teacher commented that he could fathom teaching about a rich Jewish culture, but Roma had no culture to teach.\(^4\) Another said she could not use my documentary in class because she had no Gypsy students. I countered that my film was about Romanian history since Roma were Romanian citizens who were deported by the Romanian regime to Romanian-run camps. In return, I received blank stares. For those teachers in Craiova, Roma did not seem to merit an integrated place in Romanian history, which is primarily taught as a history of ethnic Romanians; as such, it generally excludes the country’s 18 national minorities. We encountered strong resistance to discussing the Holocaust history of Roma among most teachers present, who did teach about Jewish suffering. The distinction is important because the teachers were not opposed to Holocaust education; rather, they balked at teaching about the Roma, the largest ethnic minority in the country, as victims of genocide in their classrooms.

In this article, I examine how Roma are, if at all, incorporated into learning schemata and what institutional forces, internal and external, influence this process. To understand the incentives and the obstacles to include the Romani genocide in history courses, I examined training seminars on Holocaust education offered to Romanian teachers. Regarding Roma, some important questions to answer are: Why are most teachers ignorant about the Holocaust? What attitudes and perceptions do some teachers have about Roma? Why do some teachers resist learning about Roma as former victims? Moreover, I ask whether this is an issue that is unique in the Romanian education system or, alternatively, whether it is more widespread throughout Europe. Briefly, I will delve into the historiography of the Holocaust in Romania, exploring the avenues of silences immediately following the war, through communism and the transition to democracy until today. My examination of the Romani genocide and its cognition in the field of education will contribute to a better understanding of how concepts such as identity, race and ethnicity, victimhood, as well as socioeconomic inequalities play into national consciousness of the event as well as how the national narrative adapts to it.

Romanian historiography on past atrocities that affect Roma, such as slavery and the Holocaust, is nearly silent.\(^5\) Anthropologist Bernard Cohn argued that anthropologists and historians ‘cannot deal with history only as the reconstruction of what has happened,’ but ‘must also deal with the fact that events have consequences for those people who are our “subjects” up to and including their total
destruction’ (Sider and Smith 1997, 4). What drew me as a sociologist to this topic was not silence in history regarding Roma, because the documents and relics are available in public archives, but rather the erasure of Roma in historiography that intellectual elites produce(d), which then gets translated into classroom materials.6

Romanian Roma and the Holocaust

The persecution of Roma during the Holocaust varied in European countries, depending on Nazi control over an area and/or collaboration by local populations.7 Most researchers see Nazi persecution of Roma as an extension of prior anti-Gypsy policies.8 The Nazis used the word Zigeuner to define a category of Romani peoples in which anyone presumed to have Indic origin in the blood as well as those who lived a lifestyle designated by the Nazis and their collaborators to be Zigeuner (asocial and criminal). From 1933 to 1945, the Nazis and their allies persecuted Roma and Sinti because of biology (Burleigh and Wippermann 1991; Milton 1991, 1992). In their conceptualization, Zigeuner were ‘asocials’ and racial ‘inferiors’ who threatened German ‘purity.’ Nazi eugenics policy was part of the ‘Final Solution’ that applied to Roma as well as Jews (Milton 1991, 1992; Friedlander 1995). Between 250,000 and 500,000 Roma and Sinti were killed in German-controlled spaces and allied territories.9

In Romania, the Antonescu regime deported over 25,000 Roma to Romanian-run concentration camps in Transnistria, a region in then-occupied Ukraine.10 Allied with Nazi Germany, the Antonescu regime was encouraged to rid Romania of ‘undesirable populations,’ primarily Jews and Roma. In 1941, Antonescu ordered the ethnic cleansing of Jews in the north and eastern provinces. Jews were subjected to mass killings, forced labor, starvation, and disease. Jews residing in the rest of the country were also subjected to multiple restrictions and some to forced labor.11 In 1942, the Romanian Government expanded its ethnic cleansing policy and deported Roma to Transnistria.12 The Antonescu administration was secretive regarding the deportation of Roma deemed ‘a burden and a danger to the public order.’13 All nomadic Roma and some settled Roma were expelled as entire families were rounded up. Children constituted the largest segment of those deported.

Authorities dispersed deportees into remote areas in Transnistria for slave labor. Shortages of housing, food, petrol, medicine, and other necessities translated into abysmal living conditions. One camp’s Romanian commander detailed the miserable plight of the tigani (Gypsies). He wrote that they were like ‘shadows’ due to a lack of food, and the tigani were naked, dying from exposure and starvation.14 Typhus spread quickly among those housed in overcrowded camps and killed thousands of deportees. In 1944, the Eastern front fell and camp prisoners were liberated. Somewhere between 6000 and 14,000 Roma had survived.15 In August 1944, the Antonescu regime was toppled and the new administration switched sides, joining the Allies against Nazi Germany. In 1946, Antonescu and his three top henchmen were convicted and sentenced to death, in part for the deportation and deaths of Jews and Roma, acts that were considered crimes against humanity.16
Educational perspectives on the Holocaust in Romania

Under communism, the Holocaust was manipulated for various political purposes. The Soviet-informed narrative of the Holocaust allowed Romania, like many of its socialist neighbors, to shape its collective memory of the Holocaust so that solely Nazi Germans were perpetrators, while Romanian involvement in atrocities was virtually ignored (Cioflâncă 2004). The period was characterized by distortion of facts, or a minimalization of the significance of the Holocaust as well as a denial of the Romanian Government’s role as author of the genocides against Jews and Roma. Postwar state-issued textbooks mentioned victims of the Antonescu regime; however, their identities were labeled as communists and/or Romanians rather than as Jews or Roma. During Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime (1965–1989), fascism was depicted as an imported product promoted by German agents, and its local roots were once again ignored. Romanians, in turn, were portrayed as victims of the World War II. Nazi Germany was blamed for Romania’s political developments leading up to and during the war, thereby absolving Romania of any responsibility for wartime atrocities committed by Romanians under a Romanian command.

The post-1990 democracy did not embrace Romania’s troubled past but rather cemented the exceptionalism promoted by the previous regime. The 1990s literally ushered in an emergence of the cult of Antonescu, as foundations were established in his name, streets were named after the General, and statues of the former leader were erected in several cities. Revisionism was in full swing, with scholars and others writing that Antonescu was not the architect of the genocide of Romanian Jews, but rather he was their savior for not having deported them to Nazi Germany. Posthumously, Antonescu was billed as a hero for fighting against the Soviet Union. By the time communism fell, Romanians had had decades to despise the USSR’s control over the Eastern Bloc. Antonescu’s revival achieved two political purposes at once: it delegitimized some of the historical political parties that were becoming popular again after the revolution as being tainted for having betrayed Romania’s ‘savior’ against the much-hated Soviet Union while simultaneously denigrating ex-communist party leaders once backed by the USSR.

As democracy was consolidated in Romania and the country moved to join NATO and the European Union, Antonescu’s popularity became a political stumbling block. The alarming glorification of Antonescu worried Western officials, who made a full accounting of past atrocities a requirement for admission (Chișoanu 2003). Legislation became the operative means of stemming neo-fascism. In 2002, an ordinance was passed that forbade the promotion of fascism and Holocaust denial. Education was seen as another essential way to stem the tide of revisionism. In 1998, Holocaust education became mandatory in 7th and 11th grades. While the theory behind the mandate was clear, in practice, only Nazi Germany’s crimes were typically taught, doing little to advance the understanding of Romania’s role in the Holocaust. An essential part of the problem was that the same nationalist historians who were in power under communism still controlled the field of history, maintaining top positions at universities and at state archives (Livezeanu 2004; Paraianu 2005). By controlling research initiatives and access to archives, those socialist stalwarts thwarted the production of new works on the Holocaust. Thus, official Romanian historiography continued on much as it had before, with few changes in textbooks.
In 2003, the Romanian Government made an international gaffe by publicly denying the Holocaust that had happened in Romania. An international outcry ensued, forcing leaders to examine Romania’s role in the Holocaust. Former president Ion Iliescu created a Holocaust commission, headed by Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. A year later the Wiesel Commission presented its finding that the Romanian regime of Ion Antonescu (1940–1944) had perpetrated the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories, killing more than 200,000 Jews and 10,000 Roma.

Theoretical framework
The 2005 Craiova conference inspired me to become active in Holocaust education. As director of a Romanian non-profit, the Association for Dialog and Civic Education, I partnered with the Goldstein Goren Center for Hebrew Studies at the University of Bucharest, a main organizer of Holocaust education, to conduct teacher trainings. A year later, we offered trainings throughout Romania, which were accredited by the Romanian Ministry of Education (MER). Since 2006, we trained over 550 history and civic education teachers, becoming the largest Holocaust education trainers in the country.

I thus situate my work in a community-based, participatory action research (CBPAR) framework. Although a variety of other methods to evaluate Holocaust education exist, such as curricular development and textual analysis (Friedlander 1979), qualitative and quantitative surveys of teacher and student attitudes (Short 1991; Lange 2008), classroom observation (Schweber 2004), and ethnographies (Stevick 2007; Misco 2008), I have chosen CBPAR to better understand how teachers and their students make meaning of the Holocaust. Barbara Israel and her colleagues have defined CBPAR in the field of public health as being ‘a partnership approach to research that equitably involves, for example, community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process, in which all partners contribute expertise and share decision making and responsibilities (Israel et al. 2005).’ This definition can be equally applied to social science research, and it is well suited for education research. I am thus among the cadre of professionals producing scholarship on the Holocaust while simultaneously working with the ‘stakeholder community,’ which I define to be teachers, students, and former victims’ categories (especially Roma) to drive pedagogical change. My partners in this process are primarily Romanian academics and teachers, Israeli and Romanian teachers who have become experts on methodology, Romanian officials as well as Jewish and Romani survivors. Collectively, we planned lectures and seminars.

Methodology
The aim of this research was to better assess teachers’ knowledge about Roma and the Holocaust, and their attitudes toward Roma. To do so, I employed narrative analysis using a case-study approach (Gotham and Staples 1996). I used multiple research methods, discussed below, to triangulate information received (Denzin 1978). The main goal was to understand how teachers’ perceptions of the Romani Holocaust and the Romani peoples would determine their willingness to teach about the Roma during lessons on the Holocaust in the classroom. The data were collected from Holocaust education training seminars for over 600 Romanian history and civic education teachers held from 2005–2010.
At each of the trainings included in this study, a module was introduced to cover the plight of the Roma during the Holocaust. At all sessions, the one-hour documentary film *Hidden Sorrows: The Persecution of Romanian Gypsies During WWII*, which I produced and directed, was screened, followed by a discussion. The first 40 minutes of the film focus on the interwar and wartime history of Roma as it unfolded in Romanian-controlled territories, and the remainder of the film concentrates on Romani survivors’ lives during the late 1990s as they applied for humanitarian funds for surviving victims of the Holocaust living in eastern Europe. Survivor narratives feature prominently in the film, providing viewers with Romani accounts of their lives before deportation, during incarceration in camps, and after their return to Romania.

Discussion analysis, focus groups, and surveys were used to assess teachers’ perspectives. Post-screening discussions were audio or visually recorded, or when that was not possible, a note taker was used. Led by a facilitator, discussions were open-ended, and ranged from 30 minutes to one hour. Teachers were able to ask questions that arose from the viewing. Additionally, I conducted two semi-structured focus groups in Bacău County in 2007, each with five respondents who had been at the trainings. Questions ranged from satisfaction with modules presented to inquiries about possible follow-up topics for trainings. Finally, surveys were distributed to teachers about their knowledge about Roma and the Holocaust prior the screening as well as their overall levels of understanding and teaching about the Holocaust. Over 300 teachers completed the questionnaires.

I employed grounded theory to derive thematic categories, which I then openly coded (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Topics such as lack of knowledge about the subject, stereotyping of Roma, maintaining historically inaccurate narratives, exclusion of Roma from the body politic, lack of time to commit to teaching about the Holocaust, and lack of materials to do so arose as main themes. I explore a few of these themes below.

**Findings: teachers’ reactions to Roma as victims of the Holocaust**

History and civic teachers across the country told me that they knew almost nothing about the Holocaust history of Roma. Romanian historiography silences the Romani genocide, a silence that is perpetuated even by the majority of Romanian scholars of the Holocaust, who reduce the tragedy of Roma into one or two lines in their studies. Absences speak volumes. The lack of references to Roma in academic and educational texts is part and parcel of institutionalized racism, which looks like but is not a victimless crime. If Roma have always been absent from texts, then the cannon of literature that researchers and authors reference in their scholarly endeavors most likely will also reproduce this absence. Texts, if they include Roma in Holocaust discussions, often write ‘and 12,000 Roma’ were killed, but do nothing to further the understanding of why Roma were deported, where, and what was their plight other than to detail the number of dead. Currently, Holocaust and genocide research expunges the plight of Roma or reduces it to an appendage. This creates an inorganic split of what was viewed by Romanian authorities after 1942 as a relatively organic policy of ethnic destruction, albeit with more focus on the fate of the Jews.

Teachers reacted similarly in most training seminar discussions across the country, demonstrating low levels of knowledge of Romani history and culture, and
exposing their own prejudicial beliefs about the Romani minority. Teachers often linked the present situation facing Roma and the socioeconomic status of Roma in Romania when discussing Roma as former victims of the Holocaust. Repeatedly, negative stereotypes were put forth depicting Roma as asocials, echoing the Nazi-era discourse about the Zigeuner (the German pejorative term for Rom or Gypsy). I have grouped the most common comments below that emerged from post-screening discussions:

- Roma do not want to integrate into society.
- Roma steal things and are violent.
- Roma are really wealthy from begging in the West.
- Roma make a bad name for Romanians abroad. Westerners think that they are Romanians.
- Roma do not want to be educated.

Few of the comments focused on the horrific deportations, the sufferings, or the deaths of thousands of Roma, which teachers in surveys said was new information for them. At several trainings, teachers who identified openly as being ethnically Roma did comment positively on the film; however, they did not engage with their colleagues regarding general stereotypes about Roma that occurred in discussions. To illustrate a few of the larger themes that surfaced through coding of post-screening transcripts, I turn to data from one seminar held in Târgu Mureș in April 2007.

Stereotyping Roma and Presentism. The majority of teachers who commented in discussions were unable to separate their present-day perceptions of Roma from the Holocaust history that confronted them on screen.27 In the excerpt below, Teacher 1 was the first person commenting after I opened the floor for questions/comments:

**Male teacher 1:** You cannot believe everything that they [Roma] say, because they exaggerate. I don’t know in this case, but in general.

**Female teacher 2:** They don’t want to integrate.

**Trainer (Kelso):** If you go into the archives, you find reports written by gendarmes, monthly reports written by Romanian gendarmes28 to Bucharest, which communicate the state of the spirit of a population that say the same things that [the survivors] say. There is cannibalism. [Roma] are dying of starvation. They are walking skeletons. If you don’t believe the survivors, go into the Romanian archives and find documents written by Romanians that confirm their stories.

**Female teacher 2:** It’s not true that they were not deported. It’s true that many of them were really deported. What is true is that today their lifestyle is one that they had even then, let’s say with a few differences. But they don’t want to integrate now either in society. They get school materials, they get computers, and they sell them. They are helped. Do you understand me? Compared to other children who aren’t …29

The excerpt above demonstrates some of the teachers’ difficulties in accepting the new Holocaust narrative as including Roma. Their first instinct is to challenge the credibility of the sources, which expose their own prejudicial and stereotypical views about Roma. As media researcher Bird (2003) states, the social status of the
The presenter of information is very influential on audience reception of information. As Roma survivors were the primary source of information in the film, it appears that teachers were unable to accept their accounts as valid. This is apparent when Teacher 1 challenges the authenticity of the Romani Holocaust experience. He does not believe the survivors’ accounts, as he stereotypically asserts that all Roma are prone to exaggeration. Thus, in his eyes, Roma are unreliable sources of information. This teacher groups all Roma together and dismisses their perspectives of suffering. Quite likely, this is due to the low socioeconomic status of Roma today and the teacher’s personal bias against Roma.

The accusation by Female teacher 2 that Roma ‘do not want to integrate,’ once again generalizes all Roma as wanting to be separate from Romanian society. There are two issues at work in this comment: ignorance of Romanian history and ignorance of Roma as a splintered and diverse minority. The history teacher is unable to link the present dire situation of Roma in Romania as a direct result of Romanian history, which includes 500 years of enslaving Roma and a lack of public policy to assist Roma after their emancipation from slavery in the early nineteenth century (Achim 2004). The marginalization of Roma occurred in the 1840–1860s, after liberation, when they had to settle on the outskirts of villages and even bury their dead on the fringes of cemeteries (Achim 2004, 119). The lack of proper policies to assist former slaves after emancipation led to future problems that are still present in Romania today (Achim 2004). Despite such obstacles to integration, Achim writes that ‘former slaves assimilated into the Romanian masses, considering themselves to be Romanians and registering as such in statistics and censuses’ (Achim 2004, 199–120). Additionally, the perception of wartime eugenicists, such as demographer Sabin Manuila, was that Roma were too integrated. In a 1942 report on Roma commissioned by Antonescu, Manuila concluded that the danger facing Romania from Roma was that they were too integrated into the population and that integration must be stopped (Kelso 1999, 98).

Female teacher 2 is caught up in what historians call presentism, or viewing the past from the lens of the present. She fails to take into account a history of state policies, such as laws forbidding nomadic Roma from staying more than a few days in one location that historically hindered the possibility for Romani integration. The educator also demonstrates little understanding about the Romani minority, which has much internal diversity. The majority of Romanian Roma has integrated into Romanian society to varying degrees. According to one survey, some 45% of Romanian Roma considers themselves as assimilated into the Romanian culture (Open Society Institute 2007, 7). Moreover, less than 40% of Roma speak Romany, an Indic language based on Sanskrit. While Roma identify themselves according to cultural practices and the ability to speak Romani, the report found that non-Roma identify Roma based on physical traits, such as skin color, and stereotypes.

Maintaining historical inaccuracies was another theme that emerged. For many teachers, it was difficult to process this new information. For instance, one teacher suggested that the genocidal campaign against Roma was ‘debatable.’ It seems that Hidden Sorrows contradicted the knowledge and feelings most Romanians possess about their country’s history and about Roma, leading to cognitive dissonance. The greater the inconsistency, the greater the discomfort or tension that one experiences, which must be reduced by either sculpting the new information to fit into the old belief, by adding consonant cognitions (making it seem like something known), by rejecting the new information (keeping original belief in tact), or by making an
attitudinal change (Cooper 2007, 6–7). Teachers who commented in the discussion generally rejected the information that did not fit into their previously held assumptions and beliefs. For example, one teacher believed the myth of the cult of Antonescu that the former military dictator had ‘saved a large portion of the Jewish population from extermination. About this, no one says anything.'32 Another rejected the statistical information I presented on Romani poverty, commenting, ‘There was a sentence presented that really disturbs us “that they are marginalized in Romanian society.” It isn’t true.’33 To this, I responded that the information came from a study done by two Romanian sociologists.34 Another teacher came back to this idea of inaccuracies, stating: ‘In the film all the Roma are presented as if they were beggars. But a large part of them are really rich, then and now.’35 This is a pure misperception, as the majority of Roma live in poverty.36 One United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report even likened the living conditions of Roma in southeastern Europe to those of sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP 2002).

Exclusion of Roma from Romanian national identity was an additional theme that occurred across all trainings. A main contention among the seminar participants was that when Romanian Roma travel abroad, the nationals of other countries believe Roma to be ‘Romanians.’ Although the teachers did not use the term ‘ethnic’ before the word ‘Romanian,’ it is inferred, separating Roma from the general corpus of the country. In other words, Romanian national identity is constructed on the basis of Romanian ethnicity to the detriment of its 18 national minorities.37 Teachers clearly separated Roma from the body politic, even though Roma are Romanian citizens.38

In Târgu Mureş, there was a heated debate on how Roma self-identify. Some teachers claimed that Roma identify as ethnic Hungarian to receive financial gain, and another recognized that in history courses, too little attention is paid to minorities:

Female teacher 3: It’s true. We are preoccupied with teaching the history of Romanians, not the history of minorities.

Kelso: But the minorities, aren’t they Romanians?

[Silence and then a lot of talking at once. Tape is unclear.]

Male teacher 2: If they are Romanians, then they don’t need a separate history.

Female teacher 1: The Roma where I live declare themselves to be Hungarians so that they can receive assistance from Hungary. They don’t identify themselves as Gypsies. What can you tell me about this?

Kelso: It’s their right. Everyone self-declares [their ethnicity]. But everyone who lives in Romania is Romanian. You have Romanian citizenship. Regardless of ethnicity, you are Romanians.39

Female teacher 4: They are then Hungarians; they aren’t Gypsies.

Female teacher 5: If they would give them money for being Gypsies, they would declare themselves Gypsies.
Regarding self-identification of ethnicity, research undertaken by the UNDP on Roma in eastern Europe found that more affluent Roma are less likely to self-identify as Roma, while others conceal their identity to avoid ‘ghetto stigmatization’ (poverty, marginalization, etc.) because the terms for Roma are associated with negative characteristics (UNDP 2002, 23). Roma know that many people have low opinions about the Roma minority and, therefore, they do not declare themselves as Roma out of fear of stigmatization. Either passing, the act of trying to appear as a member of the majority group, or identity masking is not unusual among members of stigmatized groups (Alexander 2006). Thus, teachers’ comments also demonstrate a lack of an understanding of the deep prejudice against Roma in Romanian society. This is similar to discussions in the USA among white teachers who fail to recognize racism and the need for multicultural education (Sleeter 1994). By declaring Roma as the problem, Romanian teachers can deflect the focus from the main (and uncomfortable) issues of racism and revisionism, which are some central motives for Holocaust education. In one intercultural education study in Romania, researchers found that the majority of teachers surveyed believed minorities were a problem for their country (Chircu and Negreanu 2010). Moreover, 15% of teachers indicated that Hitler’s ideas were not all bad, and 35% agreed that criminals and thieves should be executed. These results are in line with those of the Holocaust trainings that found that Romanians teachers often hold nationalistic and ethnocentric views, displaying intolerance toward Romanian citizens from other ethnic groups.

The analysis: barriers to adding Roma into Holocaust education

The majority of teachers in this study demonstrated a lack of historical and cultural knowledge about the Roma. Furthermore, many also displayed prejudicial attitudes toward Roma. I found that teachers’ resistance to incorporating Roma into Holocaust education results from ignorance (willful or otherwise) of the events surrounding the Holocaust in Romania and deep-seated (historical and contemporary) prejudice against the Romani minority in Romania. Since these cognitive barriers are intrinsically tied to acceptance of new narratives of the Holocaust and reconfigurations of ethnic identities in post-socialist Romania, they must be addressed in tandem.

Romania’s thaw, from what Bulhak (2004) calls the ‘historical refrigerator’ concerning Holocaust education awareness began in 1998 (153). Consultation with an appointed Romanian-Israeli commission provided policy recommendations for the mandatory pre-university curricula on the Holocaust placing the subject within the purview of World War II. In 1999, legislative reforms officially declared that the Holocaust would be covered for 1–2 class periods in the 7th, 11th, and 12th grades during Romanian History. According to Waldman (2004), MER’s intentions were laudable; however, their efforts were deplorable. Two elements needed for successful instruction about the Holocaust, qualified teachers and balanced textbooks, were missing. Waldman writes that teachers were in an awkward position:

[T]hey have to teach what they know nothing about (or worse, they are misinformed about!). Under the influence of communist education and a hectic media running from far right extremism to philo-Semitism and with no expert guidance, they are ‘lost in translation’ (2004, 89).
A 2004 study of Romanian history textbooks found that while a few texts had acceptable passages and fair coverage of the topic, overall ‘there has been no coherent view on what should be taught in relation to the Holocaust and how’ (Waldman 2004, 100). The rather schizophrenic nature of the texts is unsurprising because Romanian historians have basically been divided since the 1990s into two sparring groups: those who espouse the Antonescu regime as perpetrating genocide and those who reject this viewpoint, thus reverting to the communist and simultaneously nationalist viewpoint that Germany was at fault and Antonescu did his best to assist Jews (Roma are almost never mentioned in this fight). Romanian political scientist Mihai Chioveanu (2003) in his assessment of the myth of Antonescu put it more bluntly: ‘Romanians have problems with history. They don’t know it’ (119).

Romanian history texts fail to cover the deportation and incarceration of Roma in camps (Kelso 2007). An analysis of history textbooks used in the 11th and 12th grades (for World History and Romanian History, respectively) from 1991 to 2006 reveals that the Holocaust was inadequately covered in most volumes. If Roma were mentioned at all, their fate merited a few lines at best. Even more disturbing was the trend to exclude Roma entirely from Romanian history. Few texts mention their enslavement or the emancipation process in the mid-nineteenth century. Even though the Nazi-era deportation and internment of Roma were included in the 2004 Presidential commission study on the Holocaust led by Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel and incorporated into a legal definition of the Holocaust in Romania in 2005, the general population in Romania, which includes teachers, remains uninformed.

Given that Holocaust history is traditionally taught as the persecution of the Jews and is a difficult subject for teachers to navigate, it is no surprise that the World War II genocide against the Roma, on which there are far fewer critical studies, remains a neglected topic in Romanian classrooms. Over the past 20 years, Roma increasingly have received recognition as victims of Nazi genocide through their inclusion in state institutions, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, and in research and project support from supranational structures, such as the Council of Europe. With the expansion of the European Union’s membership to include former communist states (where millions of Roma reside), there is more awareness at government levels that this gap in the Holocaust literature and educational policy needs to be addressed. However, despite some movement at the political level, research on the Roma and the Holocaust has been scant, and scholarship focusing on the plight of the Romanian Roma even scantier.

Even outside of Romania, the Nazi persecution of Roma is predominantly absent from the canonic literature of Holocaust historiography. Some scholars have begun redressing the paucity of research on the Romani genocide (Kelso 1999; Kenrick 1999; Ioanid 2000; Achim 2004; Stewart 2011; Rosenhaft 2011). According to anthropologist Stewart (2011, 140), even with these advances, the Romani genocide remains virtually silenced in academia and in national teaching curricula across Europe. Put into a wider European perspective, then, the Romanian case seems to differ little from its neighbors. While the failure to feature Roma in educational texts in Romania could be the result of mimicking mainstream Holocaust studies, which were predominately produced by Western-oriented scholars, it could also reflect the communist-era manipulation of Romanian and World History. The possibility exists, both for former Western and Eastern bloc societies, that the
exclusion of Roma from historiography and education texts is the result of majority attitudes toward the Romani minority.

In Romania, racist perceptions of Roma as ‘dangerous’ and ‘criminal’ are the norm. One World Bank study (2005, 5) found that Roma were depicted in the media as ‘troublemakers, sources of conflict and social deviation.’ Roma were also viewed as ‘contributing to an increasing deterioration of human relations and behavior’ and as jockeying for advantages at the expense of non-Roma (World Bank 2005, 5). Romanian teachers carry the same anti-Gypsy baggage that the rest of Romanian society displays. I argue that this negative perception of Roma undoubtedly impedes acceptance of Roma as a victim category of the Holocaust and can potentially affect teachers’ decisions to include Roma in Holocaust history lessons.

The complexities of current relations between Roma and non-Roma in Romania affect how the majority view Roma historically. Are Roma a people without a rich cultural history, as suggested by one teacher, or are they a people with a rich cultural history that have been expunged from Romanian history due to their lack of cultural and social capital? The ingrained stereotypes that led to the Nazi genocide against Roma still lie at the root of discrimination toward them today.

Conclusions

In Romania, drawing attention to the state-sponsored deportation, internment, and killing of thousands of Roma goes against the grain of recent conceptualizations of Romanian victimhood during World War II. Indeed, the investigation of the crimes committed by the Romanian state against the Roma deported to Transnistria inverts the perpetrator–victim relationship that dominated the Romanian World War II narrative under communism and among nationalists by recognizing Roma as the unjustly persecuted victim of racist policy partially inspired by the Nazi regime and molded into a Romanianized version of ethnic cleansing by Ion Antonescu and his cronies.

Given decades of denial of Romania’s role in the Holocaust, the low socioeconomic status of Roma today, and the widespread negative attitudes of the general Romanian public toward this ethnic group, as reflected in the excerpts from the teacher trainings in this study, many Romanians have trouble reconciling their views of Roma with this new information about Romani suffering during the war. For the most part, Romanian audiences, facing psychological discomfort, make sense of this history by appealing to the present and thus seek justification for Antonescu’s policies by pointing out today’s tensions involving the Romani minority and by blaming Roma for ‘failing’ to integrate into society and for other social problems such as crime and school abandonment (Kelso 2007). *Hidden Sorrows* challenges many Romanians to confront an unknown and unpleasant portion of their country’s history. Instead of reinforcing the victim role of Romania during the war, the film depicts the Romanian regime as a perpetrator in the Holocaust. Instead of reinforcing negative stereotypes about Roma as victimizers of Romanians, the film presents Roma as a group of people who were brutally victimized by the Romanian authorities.

The marginalized status of Roma and predominant attitudes of Romanians toward Roma make reconstructing Holocaust history and then teaching it complex. The present dominates discussions of the Holocaust, and this fact colors how educators and their students receive information regarding Holocaust history. With the
formation of moral, democratic youth as a base that many educators hold as their motivating principle for Holocaust education, it then becomes a ‘dilemma,’ whether recognized or not, when dealing with the Roma as former victims. Without continual reinforcement of civic or multicultural education, and without changing the way in which the rest of Romanian history is taught, Holocaust education cannot act as a buttress against antiracist attitudes precisely because it rarely addresses underlying social tensions present today.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank Doyle Stevick and Deborah Michaels for reading and providing feedback for this paper. I would also like to thank my colleagues in Holocaust education.

Notes
1. My co-presenters were Dumitru Trancă, a Roma survivor of the Holocaust, and Marioara Trancă, his daughter-in-law who has worked for various Holocaust compensation programs.
2. Hidden Sorrows: The Persecution of Romanian Gypsies 1942–44 (2005) is a one-hour documentary focusing on Roma who were deported to Romanian camps in part of the occupied Ukraine. The Romanian Ministry of Education distributes it widely, alongside an accompanying teachers’ guide I co-authored, to Romanian history and civics teachers.
3. I use an inclusive definition of the Holocaust that encompasses those victims of racially/bigotry-driven persecutions and mass killings, which includes Jews, Roma, the disabled, etc. For more on the reformulation of the definition of the Holocaust to include Roma, see Milton 1991; Friedlander 1995.
4. Petre Petcuț, then a Romani doctoral student of history and a speaker at the conference, countered that if the teachers had the time, he would be happy to expand upon 4000 years of the history of India to prove that Roma did come from a rich cultural heritage.
5. Historian Shannon Woodcock writes that some 75% of Romanian respondents in an internet poll did not know that, and some 45% said that they did not believe that Roma were enslaved in Romania. See Woodcock 2008.
8. For more on this, see (Margalit 1999; Zimmerman 2001; Stewart 2007).
9. Sinti are a subgroup of Romani peoples who live primarily in Germany and Austria.
10. Ion Antonescu (1940–1944) was a military leader who came to power after King Carol II abdicated in 1940. Antonescu had a brief alliance with the fascist party The Iron Guard, a xenophobic and anti-Semitic group that espoused Romanianization of the country. After a failed coup d’état by Guardists, Antonescu took control of the country and allied with Nazi Germany for the invasion of the USSR on 22 June 1941. For more on the Antonescu regime, see Deletant (2006).
11. On the deportation to and murder of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews in Transnistria, see, for example, (Deletant 2004; Golbert 2004; Ancel 2005; Solonari 2007).
12. For more on the deportation and internment of Roma in Romania, see (Ioanid, Kelso, and Cioaba 2009), Editura Polirom. For more on Roma and the Romanian eugenics movement, see (Thorne 2011).
15. The official statistic sanctioned by the Romanian Government states that 11,000 Roma died. It was compiled by a commission investigating the Romanian Holocaust, and I believe it discounts the numbers of deaths. My estimates are based on a census carried out by gendarmes in 1944, which found that some 6000 Roma had returned to Romania after the deportation. However, these data were incomplete and most likely the true figure falls somewhere in between the two estimates.

16. This was a minor part of the overall sentencing, as war crimes featured predominately.

17. Many former communist countries experienced similar distortions. For more on this, see: ‘Distortion, Negationism, and Minimalization of the Holocaust in Post-war Romania,’ in The Final Report, Chapter 13, 1–2.

18. Ibid, 8.

19. For more on Romanian fascism, see (Ioanid 1990; Turda 2005).


21. None of the discussions included Roma. For more on the savior/killer debate, see ‘Distortion, Negationism, and Minimalization of the Holocaust in Post-war Romania,’ in The Final Report, supra note 19, Chapter 13, 23–34.

22. Emergency Ordinance 31/2002 ‘refers to the prohibition of the fascist, racist or xenophobic organizations or symbols and to the promotion of the cult of persons who are guilty of crimes against peace and humanity.’ For more on the law, see Monitorul Oficial http://www.monitoruloficial.ro.

23. Sometimes this type of research is also called action research, participatory action research, or community-based research. While the terminology changes, the ideas behind them are similar: to pursue research alongside instead of from above members of groups, communities, and peoples who are not typically stakeholders in research agendas that contributes to a positive development for communities. For more information, see: (Heron and Reason 2001; Jason et al. 2003, 1 edition; Israel et al. 2005).

24. At trainings, discussants varied. I led or co-led the majority of them; however, the film’s executive producer Alexandru Alexe or Dr. Mihai Chioveanu (lecturer at trainings, University of Bucharest faculty member) also led discussions. Whenever possible, a Romani survivor was a co-discussant. At two trainings, Dr. Viorel Achim, a specialist on Roma and the Holocaust in Romania, gave a post-screening lecture in addition to the film screening (for more on his work, see Viorel Achim 2004).

25. The film covers the application and distribution campaigns of two humanitarian funds: The Swiss Fund for the Needy Victims of the Holocaust/Shoah, which distributed over US $180 million to survivors living primarily in eastern Europe, and the German Humanitarian Fund for Former Victims of Nazi Persecution. Two other programs emerged after the bulk of the filming of the documentary occurred in the late 1990s, which awarded nearly US$ 7 billion to some 1.5 million beneficiaries in the German Forced Labor Compensation Program and the Holocaust Victims Assets Litigation, also known as the Swiss Banks Settlement. For more on this, see (Kelso 2008).

26. The first group was entirely comprised of men, and the second group had four women and one man. I did not find gender differences in attitudes towards either the Holocaust or Roma.

27. Of course other teachers may have had different views; however, they did not speak out in the session. Surveys did have more positive comments about learning about Roma and the Holocaust.

28. The Romanian gendarmerie was partially in charge of the deportation of Roma from Romania and oversaw the incarceration of both Jews and Roma in concentration camps in Transnistria (this was pointed out in the documentary). Also, two reports from authorities were presented in the documentary, which describe the miserable conditions of Roma deportees. In the discussion, I referred teachers to monthly reports written by gendarmes stationed in Transnistria and sent to headquarters in Bucharest.


30. For more on the eugenics movement in Romania, see (Bucur 2002).

32. Teachers often bring up the myth of Antonescu as ‘savior’ of the Jews. Many Romanians incorrectly believe that Antonescu protected Jews, which is a direct result of historical revisionism by ultra-nationalists. See (Chioveanu 2003).

33. The phrase from the film was: ‘They live on the fringes of Romanian society.’

34. Statistics from the film came from a study done by Zamfir and Zamfir (1993).

35. The present socioeconomic situation of survivors was reviewed in the film.


37. For a discussion on Romanian ethno-nationalism, see (Neumann 2004).

38. In the Târgu Mureș discussion, I was not able to ascertain the ethnicity of the speakers. I do not know if the teachers commenting were of ethnic Hungarian or Romanian origins. It would be interesting to discover if the two groups had similar perceptions of Romanian nationality.

39. I recognize my liberal, American bias on inclusive citizenship here. Often in discussions teachers told me either I did not understand how bad the Roma were because I did not ‘live’ it, or that as an American, I should instead study and teach the mistreatment and genocide of Native Americans. My answers were simple. On the first point, I answered that it was because of my American nationality and my study as a sociologist of race and ethnic relations that I understood the effects of racism on a society. Further, I got what was happening in Romania since I had married a Romanian and lived in the country for nine years. On the second point, I stated that academics are free to study our passions, and mine was with the topic at hand. Moreover, I told them I would be happy to come back and do lessons on genocides and to discuss the white persecution of Native Americans. However, as it was not the subject of our trainings, I was not going to be side-tracked from discussing Roma and the Holocaust.

40. Waldman and Chioveanu, forthcoming. The debate has slowly fizzled out since the Wiesel report was published in 2004, and legislation was passed in 2005, making it a crime to deny the Holocaust in Romania.

41. I surveyed the Romanian Ministry of Education’s approved texts.

42. The Final Report, Supranote 19.

43. The International Taskforce for Holocaust Education, the US State Department, the Council of Europe, and other government institutions have supported efforts to include Roma by funding Holocaust education projects.

44. For a better understanding of Romanian consciousness about the Holocaust, see (Achim and Iordache 2004).

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