

Moving beyond Memories: Exploring Romani Writing in Austria and Traveller Writing in Scotland

This paper aims to explore the common themes of memory and silence found in Ceija Stojka's autobiographical writing of her life as a Romany in Austria and in Betsy Whyte's narratives of her life as a Traveller in Scotland. I will examine the importance of these themes in their writing and explore the question of why they are so crucial in creating "acceptable" Romani and Gypsy/Traveller identities to present to the "Gadje" in Austria and Scotland. While there are remarkable parallels between Traveller writing in Scotland and Romani writing in Austria, the 'threat of Auschwitz', which pervades German-language Romani writing brings with it an insecurity in what can and should be represented through writing.

In writing a PhD thesis on German-language Romani writing at the University of Edinburgh, I am often asked about comparisons between the texts I am studying and those written by ethnic minority Travellers in Scotland. In response, I usually say that Scottish Travellers¹ consider themselves to be different from European Romanies and that there are differences between communities of ethnic minority Travellers in Scotland. Consequently, making any comparison could be seen as a contentious endeavour. However, upon further reflection, it becomes evident that certain parallels can be drawn and, in light of the fact that the discrimination which all of these communities face in the countries where they live is based on many of the same stereotypes, it is worthwhile to consider these documents of self-representation which have emerged over the last thirty years. This paper aims to explore the similarities that exist between these two small and important bodies of work, looking particularly at the broad themes of representation and memory that can be found in Romani writing in Austria, and Traveller writing in Scotland. In particular, I will narrow my focus to autobiographical writing by Ceija Stojka and Betsy Whyte. These two writers were pioneering writers of their time, bringing to the page memories of a way of life that no longer exists but which is crucial to the cultural memory of Roma and Travellers. Betsy Whyte (1919 – 1988), remembers her childhood travelling in Scotland in *The Yellow on the Broom*² and continues her memories of her adolescence in her second

1 See: www.scottishtraveller.net. Updated February 5, 2007. Viewed on August 28, 2008. 'Scottish Gypsies/Travellers clearly comprise a minority ethnic group, however they are currently not recognised as such in law (January 2007). Nevertheless, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Parliament have recommended that they be treated as if they had the status of a minority ethnic community, and with all that that implies under the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000).'

2 Betsy Whyte, *The Yellow on the Broom*, (London: Warner, 1992). First published W&R Chambers Ltd., 1979. Hereafter referred to as: *YB*.

book *Red Rowans and Wild Honey*³; Ceija Stojka (1933), in her first book, *Wir Leben in Verborgenen*⁴ (*We Live in Hiding*) remembers the horrors she and her family faced in the concentration camps of the Third Reich. Stojka lost her father, younger brother and most of her extended family in Auschwitz. In her second book *Reisende auf dieser Welt*⁵ (*Travellers of this World*), she recalls a travelling life now gone in Austria. I will explore the memories recalled in these texts and evaluate the similarities and differences in Whyte and Stojka's representations of Traveller and Romani communities.

First, it is important to address the reasons for writing these texts, as the Romani tradition of relating stories, fictional and fact, has long been oral. This is true also of Travellers in Scotland. Why then, this shift in the transmission of stories from oral to written? Ceija Stojka's first book was published in 1988 with the help of her editor, Karin Berger; her second book was published in 1992. Betsy Whyte's first book was supported by the School of Scottish Studies and first published in 1979; her second was published in 1990, after she had died. In the foreword to Betsy Whyte's *Red Rowans and Wild Honey*, the editors clarify their own involvement in the creation of the text. They write:

read aloud by one familiar with it, her narrative flowed effortlessly without pause: the natural breaks were there – but unsignalled. Formal punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, seemed necessary to help the reader to 'listen' as Betsy intended. But that was all: we call ourselves 'editors' for lack of a better term: in fact we were mainly exhorters, advisers, sounding boards...' (*RWH*,7).

Karin Berger's involvement in the creation of Ceija Stojka's text is not explicitly clarified in a similar editor's note, but Stojka emphasizes that she initially gave her original manuscript to the publishers who insisted on seeing her own writing.⁶ It can be assumed that only changes of grammar and spelling were made, as the narrative can be said to retain its unique voice; the voice of Stojka remembering. The involvement of an outside figure in the publication of these memories is important to

3 Betsy Whyte, *Red Rowans and Wild Honey* (London: Transworld Publishers, 1994). First published Canongate, 1990. Hereafter referred to as *RRW*.

4 Ceija Stojka. *Wir Leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (Vienna: Picus, 1988).

5 Ceija Stojka. *Reisende auf dieser Welt: aus dem Leben einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (Vienna: Picus, 1994).

6 Ceija Stojka. Personal Interview. July 8, 2007.

acknowledge because it provides an insight into the intended readership of these texts and why writing these narratives was important.

Both of these authors look back to their pasts, remembering a way of life that because of many factors of modernization, no longer existed in the same way. Whyte records her memories of travelling in Scotland in the thirties, ending her recollections with the end of the Second World War. Stojka's second book starts at the end of the Second World War, telling of her life on the road after the end of the war and how she, her siblings and her mother had to start life again after surviving the horrors of the concentration camps.

Romanies in Europe and Gypsies and Travellers in Britain have long been viewed by others either as romantic wanderers epitomizing a splendid naturalness untouched by the industrial revolution or as asocial criminals. Deborah Epstein Nord, captures the dichotomy of these stereotypes in her book *Gypsies and the British Imagination*, when she observes that 'the Gypsy was associated with a rhetoric of primitive desires, lawlessness, mystery, cunning, sexual excess, godlessness and savagery – with freedom from the repressions, both constraining and culture building, of Western civilization'.⁷ Over the years, such stereotypes have been developed and accepted as fact in a number of books and stories that use Romanies to portray Gypsy characters⁸. A need to reply to these stereotypes through the language and cultural medium (writing) of the *Gadje* became apparent; a need to challenge these printed words with printed words.

In Austria (Germany also), Romanies began writing to record their memories of their own victimization in the Holocaust in order to provide a written record and documentation of their experiences. In the words of Albert Camus, 'the writer's function is not without its arduous duties. By definition, he cannot serve today those who make history; he must serve those who are subject to it'.⁹ The Holocaust has required a written response from those who were victimized. Ceija Stojka was the first in Austria to publish her memories of the cruelties her family endured in the concentration camps. Her two brothers, Karl and Mongo Stojka followed with their

7 Deborah Epstein Nord, *Gypsies and the British Imagination., 1807-1930* (Columbia UP: NY, 2006), p. 3.

8 See for example, Jane Austen's *Emma*, George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss* and George Borrow's *Lavengro*.

9 Quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge: NY, 1992), p. vii.

own autobiographical accounts of their survival.¹⁰ Mongo Stojka also published a book of fairy tales called *Legends of the Lowara*. The importance of putting these memories on the page for non-Romani readers is present in all of these narratives. The fact that these works are written in German speaks for their intended readership as well as the German translations that Stojka includes for the few passages of dialogue where she quotes her family speaking in Romanes. The delay of official recognition of the Romanies as victims in the Holocaust sparked an urgency to tell what happened and to document these memories so it would not be lost in history.¹¹

In the same way, Travellers in Scotland also document their experiences for the purpose of representing themselves in a positive way to non-Travellers. In Donald Braid's study on Traveller storytelling in Scotland, *Scottish Traveller Tales*, he terms this sort of story an 'interaction story' because, as he says 'they narrate interactions between Travellers and non-Travellers.'¹² He goes on to explain that 'by focusing on observable events in the 'real world', these stories engage identity and worldview in pragmatic terms – as they are actually expressed through the words and actions of individuals, not as they are conceptualized in some abstract or ideal world' (203). Betsty Whyte's narrative can be said to adhere to this framework of pragmatic interaction. In both of her books, she tells of interactions with non-Travellers, giving the reader insight to both positive and negative experiences. For example, in *Yellow on the Broom*, Whyte writes of a farming family who regularly invite her family to stay on their land to work through the summer. Her memories of the happy times the two families shared are related to the reader vividly, and with affection, particularly when she remembers how the man gave her her beloved collie, Ricky (*YB*, 78). She also recalls with sympathy the desperation that some non-Travellers faced during those times. Whyte remembers a young woman who was pregnant and starving, without help from her family or from the council, and how her mother and aunt went to help the young woman apply for benefits from the council; they also supplied her with food before they went on their way (*YB*, 116). These interactions in her text are very important in that they make the reader feel included. Whyte's insights to the

10 Karl Stojka, *Auf der Ganzen Welt Zuhause: das Leben und Wandern des Zigeuners Karl Stojka* (Vienna: Picus, 1994). See also: Mongo Stojka, *Papierene Kinder: Glück, Zerstörung und Neubeginn einer Roma-Familie in Österreich* (Vienna: Molden, 2000).

11 See Sybil Milton, 'Persecuting the Survivors: The Continuity of Anti-Gypsyism' in *Postwar Germany and Austria in Sinti and Roma: Gypsies in German-Speaking Society and Literature*, ed. by Susan Tebbutt, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998), pp.36-47, (p.38).

12 Donald Braid, *Scottish Traveller Tales* (Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 2002), p. 202.

interactions between Traveller families, who would gather and tell stories with the other Travellers they met at camp-sites along the way, offer another sort of interaction. She invites the reader to see a new perspective on Traveller life in Scotland, confidently painting images of the life that she and her family led with her words.

When asked what kind of stories might be told around the fire, Duncan Williamson, a Traveller who began recording memories of his life in 1980 and had them published as *The Horsieman: Memories of Traveller* in 1994¹³, replied: 'All kinds of stories, all kinds of stories, family tales, Burker stories, there were stories for every occasion. You know what I mean? Anyone had a story to tell. There are stories of experiences with bad farmers, good farmers, greedy farmers, miserable farmers'.¹⁴ As evidenced in Donald Braid's study, stories could be told around a fire to tell of what experiences might await other Travellers on the road ahead or stories about other Traveller families. Stories can also serve to remember and connect with people who are no longer alive. Betsy Whyte points out the importance of telling stories in order to feel connected to the person who originally told the story. She says: 'Well, ye're almost hearin yir mother tell it tae ye again, the whole thing. [...] instead o you tellin your bairns the story, you're sittin there listenin tae yir mother tellin you the story, but the words are comin oot o your mouth' (Braid, 156). The generational element in storytelling, the connection to the past and memories of the past are very important to Whyte. In relation to this, it is interesting to consider the generational silence of Romani oral tradition in Austria after the Second World War, when many stories had been silenced in the concentration camps.

The profound trauma of loss experienced by Stojka when many of her family members never returned from the concentration camps, can be distinctly felt in her work. Stojka has recorded stories and songs and written poems beyond her autobiographical writing, but these stories also draw attention to the many that are missing and could no longer be transmitted further. Her evokes the memory of those who would never return and suggests that preserving stories through writing is a worthwhile idea. Through organizations such as the Romano Centro in Vienna, which publishes its own magazine for Romani writers to contribute to as well as

13 Duncan Williamson, *The Horsieman: Memories of a Traveller 1928-58* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1994).

14 Quoted in Donald Braid, *Scottish Traveller Tales* (Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 2002), p. 67.

publishers who encourage Romani writing, more writers are emerging to preserve their stories on paper.

Stojka exemplifies another major step in this progress of education for Romanies. She took advantage of her fascination with words and letters, taking on the challenge of learning to write the German language while she mostly spoke Romanes with her family. Although she only attended a year of school and faced discrimination from her classmates, she describes herself as having always wanted to write and to experiment with letters. She remembers how she practiced spelling the words *house* and *mouse*, scratching the letters in the dirt of Bergen Belsen with a stick. In conversation with me, Stojka described how she used to look at the glowing neon lights that appeared on the new department stores in Vienna after the end of the war, trying to piece together the sounds the letters would make and figure out what the words were.¹⁵ She expressed deep regret at not having had the chance to go to school, repeatedly saying 'ohne Schreiben ist nichts möglich', 'without writing, nothing is possible'.

Betsy Whyte also describes this deep desire to befriend words in her constant look-out for books in the farmers houses they visited. She writes,

this headmaster was the best thing that ever happened to me. He taught me how much one can learn from books, and I became very interested in them. I would lie down and read to my mother and father at night. (...) One day I found an old book in a dump. *Three Men in a Boat* it was called. (Of course there were libraries, but we never thought that they could be for the likes of us and we wouldn't dare to go into one (YB, 18).

Betsy Whyte's own fascination with reading and letters was sparked in school. However, because of the behaviour of her schoolmates who treated her with contempt for being a Traveller, she did not want to pursue going to school any longer than she had to. Like Stojka, Whyte pursued her fascination with letters on her own, seizing whatever time she could get alone to take out any book she might have come across and read. Later, she used any opportunity to sit down and write.

Of course in drawing these parallels and exploring similarities, it is important not to forget the uniqueness of these texts. Whyte's incorporation of Scots and Traveller Cant within the dialogue of her narrative offers a special glimpse into the

15 Ceija Stojka. Personal Interview. July 8, 2007.

unique lives of Scottish Travellers. Her knowledge of Scotland and her love of its natural beauty contribute to the originality of her texts. Similarly, Stojka's work also includes Austrian dialect and the narrative voice is distinctly her own with her use of the Austrian words and the traditional diminutive -i for the names of her siblings, Karli, Ossi, etc. She establishes her identity as an Austrian Romani woman within the text, speaking of her love of the landscape of Austria and the streets of Vienna. Aleida Assmann writes of the importance of cultural memory and its strong connection to landscape and history, emphasising that for minority cultures it is important to inscribe one's own stories into the history and location of where they live, establishing cultural memory and cultural identity¹⁶. Through their uses of language and imagery, which bind their narratives to the countries they come from, Whyte and Stojka can be said to be inscribing their stories into the history and culture of the landscapes that they call home.

While the didactic quality of wanting to present a positive representation of Travellers and Romanies to 'outsiders' can be observed in both Scottish Traveller and Austrian Romani texts, the heavy weight of the Holocaust and the impulse to document what happened to Romanies in the Third Reich is found in the pages of most German-language Romani texts. In an interview relating to her own literary representation of the racist attack against four Austrian Roma in Burgenland, Austria in 1995, Elfriede Jelinek remarked that 'one can, however, write texts in which the presence of Auschwitz hangs over everything like a threat'.¹⁷ I would argue that this 'threat of Auschwitz' is present in Stojka's text in her cautious approach to representing her experiences. She is careful to emphasize that she feels at home in Austria, but she also consistently voices the fear that 'Auschwitz might just be sleeping'.¹⁸

In contrast, Betsy Whyte's silence over the Holocaust in her text is remarkable. She makes one reference to it at the end of *Red Rowans and Wild Honey*, where she speaks of daydreaming on the way home from working, saying: 'What future would there be for us if Hitler's crazy puppets should invade, and conquer these pleasant

16 Aleida Assmann. *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1999), p. 293.

17 Bethman, Brenda L. 'My Characters live only insofar as They Speak.' Interview with Elfriede Jelinek. Trans. Brenda Bethman. *Woman in German Yearbook* 16 (2000), pp. 61-72, (p. 63).

18 Tebbutt, Susan. 'Germany and Austria: The 'Mauer im Kopf' or virtual wall', in *Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Will Guy. (Hatfield: U of Hertfordshire P, 2001), pp. 268-284, (p. 278).

islands? Already they were mercilessly slaughtering every gypsy that they came across. Not to mention, the Jews, and they would certainly class us as types of gypsies'. Apart from this passage, it is interesting to note that no other identification with the hundreds of thousands killed in the concentration camps is included in her memories. In the 1980's the truth over the victimization of Romanies in the Holocaust was coming to light and it would be an interesting point for discussion why this was not included more within Whyte's memories of the Second World War. Her editors note that she intended to write a third book, but she died before she was able to complete this goal. Also, her confidence in telling her own story is much more apparent than in Stojka's work.

Although Whyte's editors recall her questioning the value of her writing, asking 'will people really want to read about that?' (*RRW*, 7), she expresses much more confidence in what she commits to the page. Stojka could be said to be much more cautious, her writing revealing not too much that could be used against them, focussing instead on the acts of kindness by Austrians. Betsy Whyte more confidently tells of the ill treatment she received by some Scottish farmers and other non-Travellers, and is more critical of her own people. Ceija Stojka maintains an idealized picture of Roma in Austria in her book, alerting the reader to a certain insecurity she may feel regarding her readership.

One important similarity remains that these two women, pioneering in their writing memories of a life 'shrouded in mystery' to outsiders, committed a bold act in putting their memories down on the page. Although some might criticize that both of these narratives show an idealized remembering of life on the road, which could be seen to corroborate stereotypes of Gypsies as romantic wanderers, it is important to note that these authors are able to subvert this idea by presenting themselves as writers. A new image of Romanies and of Travellers as authors and storytellers is provided simply through their act of writing. As Susan Tebbutt points out, 'education does not only mean educating the Romanies. There is also a pressing need to educate the non-Romanies about their Romani neighbors' (Tebbutt, 277). The narratives of Whyte and Stojka can be seen as valuable resources in this education and so the love of words that Stojka and Whyte write of in their narratives should be encouraged and not withheld or discouraged; Romanies and Travellers should have the opportunity to freely pursue these interests without threat, bringing further engaging and more and more confident self-representations to the page.

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