

No. 4 (4), August 2018

Why study Roma migrants?

We hope you have had a great summer. In this issue of CMR Spotlight, we would like to bring to your attention the research of three of our members – dr Michał P. Garapich, dr Kamila Fiałkowska and Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz on the migration of Roma from Poland to the UK. As the authors argue, given the unwelcoming attitudes of many towards the Roma, “to explore their lives and how they deal with structural determinants is to study the society as a whole.”

The Centre of Migration Research has turned 25. We are celebrating all year, but especially this autumn, with our open Annual Conference in Tarczyn on Sept. 16-18. Other important events coming up:

- Migration and transformations PhD Summer School (Sept 3-7 in Warsaw)
- 7th KBnM PAN (Committee of Migration Research) conference (Sept. 20-21 in Opole)
- Conference „Migration routes of Polish Roma” (Oct. 4 in POLIN museum in Warsaw)
- Conference on “European migrations post-2004: causes, effects and perspectives”(Oct. 25-26 in Emigration Museum in Gdynia)



Roma Day in Southend on the Sea, UK. June 2017 ©Kamila Fiałkowska

Reminder: [COMPETITION FOR BEST MA/PHD THESIS ON MIGRATIONS TO/FROM POLAND AND POLISH DIASPORA](#) Deadline: Sept. 30, 2018



CENTRE OF
MIGRATION
RESEARCH

Same but different – another migration from Poland under scrutiny of CMR scholars

Michał P. Garapich, Kamila Fiałkowska, Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz

Not all migrants from Poland are ethnic Poles – in fact, this is one frequently held misconception in migration studies. National or ethnic minorities from a given country also migrate and their mobility patterns, settlement, transnational living may be different from the majority population – take the example of the migration of Germans from Romania in early 90s, or Jews from Poland in 1968. At the Centre of Migration Research, we have been following and studying migration from Poland of a group about which surprisingly little is known – the Roma.

This project's broader scientific objective was to fill a void in both Polish migration studies and expanding research on Roma migrations in the EU. Paradoxically, studies on Polish Roma as well as migration scholarship have avoided the subject of their international migration. It is therefore absent in the booming area of studies about the Roma in Europe, and post-enlargement migration research from Poland.

Why the Roma? Migration of the Roma is an increasingly beneficial field of research through which we are able to identify and analyze the key dilemmas of EU freedom of movement, the importance of human agency and social and cultural adaptation. The problematization of their mobility and the fact that *Roma are increasingly racialized in specific policy measures to discourage their settlement in receiving countries* (Morell, Greenfields, & Smith, 2018, p. 125) tells us that to explore their lives and how they deal with structural determinants is to study

the society as a whole. Roma migrations and their adaptations are thus a litmus test of society's acceptance and understanding of diverse ways of living in European societies.

The study and methods

Using classical anthropological tools, the project team focused on three locations in Poland and two in England, engaging two largest groups of the Roma – Polska Roma and Bergitka. Throughout intensive period of multi-sited ethnographic immersion into the lives of families of Roma, the team took part in their daily activities, interviewed, talked endless hours over their kitchen tables, took part in family rituals, christenings, funerals, events, as well as mundane transnational conversations Roma take part in. There were several broader research problems the study aimed at tackling – historical dimensions of Polish Roma international mobility since 1989, how Roma ethnic heterogeneity and nomadic or sedentary traditions influence their migration patterns and how migrations impact on various inter-group relationships, what is the effect on identity, gender, traditions and sense of being Roma and Polish. From pilot explorations, it was also clear that religious conversions the Polish Roma in England undergo, are very significant.

Needless to say, conducting a study among the Roma is not easy. Any forms of information-gathering raise suspicion among the group, since they know well that knowledge is power and that in the past knowledge about their lives was used

against them and resulted in their persecution, including slavery and acts of state sanctioned genocides. So the key aspect of the study was to actually convince the Roma that research these days takes a more egalitarian and participatory approach. The careful, ethically sensitive process of explaining to the people we talked to the purposes and benefits of the study was part of the project. This would be impossible without Ela Mirga-Wójtowicz, who is the face of a new generation of Polish Roma scholars, able to bridge the gap between Poles and Roma in the production of knowledge about this ethnic minority.



Poster advertising the June 2017 Roma day in Southend on the Sea. Designed by Marcin Tas.

As many international scholars note, at this time of history we are witnessing a growth in the number of Roma scholars who began to question and challenge the monopoly of the *gadje* (non Roma), when it comes to writing about the Roma (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2018). Hopefully this project was a step in that direction when it comes to the Polish case.

Findings

The two groups under study present quite distinct histories of mobility. The Polska Roma group we looked at located in the town of

Mława, who term themselves *Pluniaki*, maintained international connections with their kin in Germany since at least the 1950s or 60s. Through these some were able to tap into a branch of the economy which was lucrative in communist times: used car dealership. At the end of the 80s, they were a relatively wealthy and influential group in the town. At the time of the collapse of communism and subsequent economic shock therapy, this turned against them, with the local impoverished non-Roma population organizing an anti-Roma riot with huge property damage (Giza-Poleszczuk & Poleszczuk, 2001). As a result of the ease of travel to the West and international attention, many Roma in the aftermath of the anti-Roma pogrom asked for asylum in Sweden, Germany and Canada. Most importantly, the first large flow went to Germany. In mid 90s, the asylum restrictions and the system of readmissions from Germany was implemented and as a result it became increasingly difficult for the Roma to ask for asylum there. The flow in mid 90s then shifted to Great Britain, where it continued with some fluctuations until early 2000s. These more than two decades of migrations lead to huge depopulation of the Roma from Mława, and these days some local Roma say that more than half left. The 2004 EU enlargement had some impact, with the rise of temporary migration, mainly to London. Comparing to 30 years ago, the Roma community in Mława is clearly in decline. We found that many other towns across Poland have witnessed a similar massive outflow of its Roma populations. The pattern of post-1989 ethnic turbulences, hostility from Poles, asylum claims to Germany and then to Britain – seems quite widespread in Poland.

The other settlement we looked at, Czarna Góra, where Roma from the Bergitka group live, has a different story. Despite living in a region with an old and established migration culture of local non-Roma rural folk going mainly to US, the Roma were cut off from these migration networks, which points to an important ethnic closure migration networks operate in. The population is mainly rural and economically deprived, with little migratory capital. The migratory movements started in mid 90s when the news about Roma being able to move abroad reached some families who, claiming political asylum, chose Britain as the country of destination. These were isolated cases however, as the main migration move in Czarna Góra begins with the Polish accession to the EU in 2004. At some stage, locals estimate that almost one third of the settlement left for Britain. However, since at least a couple of years ago, there is a rise in returns of the Roma from Czarna Góra, mainly due to difficulties in adaptation in England, uncertainty surrounding Brexit and also favorable social welfare reforms of the current Polish government – the 500+ policy of child benefits.

There are various differences between these two cases but it would be a mistake to see two different groups of the Roma as in isolation. In fact, we observe that in many cases the Polska Roma members were the pioneers of migratory movements and then through family connections brought in members of Bergitka, a practice linked with a distinct collective nature of Roma migration. Interestingly, migrations seemed to intensify relationships between these groups, diffusing previous hierarchies but also leading to a certain re-traditionalisation of Roma identity.

In England, we carried out the study among families based in London and Southend on Sea. Usually, the Roma families tend to cluster in one area, pointing to an important aspect of Roma migration - their family, group-oriented nature.



Dr Kamila Fiałkowska and Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz presenting the research results at 7th Ethnography and Qualitative Research Conference, University of Bergamo

Roma migrate rarely as individuals, their goal is to keep the larger kin group together. This provides both shelter, security, sense of belonging and continuity of cultural reproduction, but also ensures means of social control over individuals, in particular younger members of the family. For some returning families, in particular those from smaller and poorer rural settlements like Czarna Góra, living in England was a traumatic experience and they expressed happiness and relief to be back in Poland. They associated England with an alien, urban, unfriendly environment they did not belong to. Crucially, they also associated it with the fact that their Roma relatives stopped meeting their group obligations, hence their Roma values were being weakened. This was a common theme running through our interviews – the fear that economic prosperity, isolation, new urban environment will lead to the break up

of traditional kinship bonds imposing norms of reciprocity and solidarity. Commenting on one relative, one of our Roma interviewees said: “who needs family if you have money?”.

The collective, family-based nature of Roma migration means that individuals with aspirations of educational advancement or work need to challenge or negotiate norms of the traditional Roma family, which are also engendered. Some Roma women we talked to were clear about the need to stop doing things “the Roma way”, like marrying early, accepting the patriarchal relations of the family and so on, if one wants to earn a living and fulfill their educational aspirations. This had an important gender aspect, as we observed a lot of young Roma women being torn between gender roles and their willingness to use opportunities to study and work in Britain.

On the other hand, we observe a specific re-traditionalisation process. Members of the Bergitka group, who previously in Poland were indifferent or relaxed about certain rules of Roma culture, began to accept and endorse them in England. This is mainly due to the increased interactions with more conservative and traditional Polska Roma, intergroup marriages but also contact with members of other Roma groups from other countries. This process is not only the result of migration, since it also takes place in Poland. But it is clear that the previous relative isolation of two groups is over and the increased number of intermarriages happening abroad leads to tensions and negotiations of Roma identity of the two groups. The status of the Sero Rom – the traditional authority of the Polska Roma, which is

not accepted by Bergitka – is the best example of this process.

A shift in sense of being Roma stems also from finding oneself in a different, more diverse environment. The shock of seeing and experiencing diversity is common among non-Roma Polish migrants, but in this case what the Roma experience is the end of their sense of standing out of the crowd due to skin colour, dress or style. In the ethnically and racially diverse setting of London, many Roma experience an unknown sense of being socially invisible, not marked and not stigmatized. This in turn makes them more assertive and aware of who they are, cherishing British multiculturalism to some extent. On the other hand, it makes them more sensitive to cases of racial discrimination and stigmatization they experience in Poland – during their visits or upon return.

The migration process the Roma are engaged in since the 90s lead to an important cultural shift in Polish Roma culture – an increasing number of people who convert to evangelical Christianity in the form of the Jehovah Witness Church. The process is clearly related to migration and living in England and Germany, since most of Roma Jehovah Witnesses are based in these countries. The appeal of certain dogma, religious practice, social context and the conversion being able to both contest and accept certain aspects of Roma culture is behind this phenomenon. First, the Roma are attracted to the Old Testament style message of traditional family, patriarchy, puritanism, piety and relationship with the outside world. Roma also see participation in the Jehovah Witness movement as a form of social mobility, due to its emphasis on practices of

intense studying, reading, questioning and debating during Bible reading sessions. Some aspects of Jehovah Witness ideas related to negation of nationalism, prohibition of work for the police, army, civil service, the institution of exclusion from the Church which is similar to *magerdo* exclusion practiced among the Polska Roma, the blood taboo – also are relatable to the Roma who convert. Crucially however, the strict moral obligations to the Church and its dogma also give some members an opportunity to contest traditional Roma obligations, in particular among women. Polish Roma participate in the Polish speaking Kingdom Halls, interacting with other Polish migrants who are very keen to accept their presence there, offering a very distinct social space where ethnic boundaries are lifted and contested. These are two most excluded and disliked groups in Polish society, hence it seems they both find certain community of experience in common interaction. However, in Poland we do not find similar phenomena, which points to the fact that it was the common experience of migration, living in Britain in a hugely diverse setting and need of finding a supportive structure that led to the rise of the numbers of Jehovah Witness among the Polish Roma.

The study has so far been disseminated through conferences and seminars and journal articles. The final report from the study will be presented at the POLIN Museum on 4th of October 2018. But we believe the most important dissemination is among the Polish Roma themselves, who are increasingly aware of the need to express their voice in contemporary Polish society. They already do this in the form of arts, music, important cases of local and national

activism, in particular when it comes to commemoration of the Roma genocide by the Nazis. But this project engages the Polish Roma on the level of social science and we hope was able to convince them of the need to engage with researchers, who are also Roma. The project task was thus to present the Polish Roma not as an exotic Other, but as Polish nationals whose local, personal history is an important – although neglected and silenced – part of Polish history.

Literature

Giza-Poleszczuk, A., & Poleszczuk, J. (2001). *Cyganie i Polacy w Mławie. Konflikt etniczny czy społeczny*. In A. Jasińska-Kania (Ed.), *Trudne sąsiedztwa. Z socjologii konfliktów narodowościowych*. Warszawa (pp. 221-247).

Mirga-Kruszelnicka, A. (2018). *Challenging Anti-gypsyism in Academia: The Role of Romani Scholars*. *Critical Romani Studies*, 1(1), 8-28.

Morell, I. A., Greenfields, M., & Smith, D. M. (2018). *Governing underprivileged Roma migrations within the EU: Receiving country responses and Roma resilience*. *Local Economy*, 33(2), 123-126.



NARODOWE CENTRUM NAUKI

Funding source: National Science Centre, Poland, grant POLONEZ "Continuity or change – Anthropological analysis of Polish Roma migration paths to Great Britain", grant no. 2015/19/P/HS6/04125. The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 665778



Kamila Fiałkowska PhD

Researcher at the Centre of Migration Research, University of Warsaw. Her research interests revolve around gender relations in migratory settings, masculinity studies and family relations, construction of national and gender identities. She defended her PhD in 2018 at the Faculty of Political Studies and International Relations at the University of Warsaw, completed MA in Political Science at the University of Wrocław (2008) and MA in Migration Studies at the University of Sussex (2009).



Michał P. Garapich PhD

Social anthropologist, specializing in the issues of migration, ethnicity, nationalism, multiculturalism, social resistance, homelessness and migration from Poland. His PhD (Jagiellonian University, Kraków) focused on the political and symbolic dimensions of the relationship between different waves and groups of Polish migrants in the UK and Italy, the practices of de-territorialized nation state, power relations within diasporic/ethnic associations and negotiations of ethnicity. Since 2005 Michał conducted numerous research projects using both quantitative as well as ethnographic methods exploring various aspects of life of migrants from Accession States (EU10) in the UK, as well as migrants from Africa. He has also undertaken ethnographic fieldwork in Cusco, Peru looking at land invasions and urban squatting. At the moment his work focuses on migration of Polish Roma.



Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz MA

PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Science at the Pedagogical University in Kraków. Completed two MA at the Jagiellonian University: Culture Animation (2002) and Ethnic Relations and International Migration (2004). Trainee at the European Commission (2005). Completed Roma Access Program at the CEU (2006). Since 2007 lecturer at the Pedagogical University in Kraków at the annual postgraduate course about Roma minority. Participant of the International Leadership Visitor Program offered by USA. Since 2007 working in Malopolska Voivodeship in Krakow in field of national and ethnic minorities. Plenipotentiary for the Governor of Malopolska for National and Ethnic Minorities (2008-2014). At the moment her work focuses on ethnic mobilization and migration of Polish Roma.

Keywords:

Polish emigration / Polish Roma / Romani studies / anthropology of migration

Suggested citation: Garapich M.P., Fiałkowska K. Mirga-Wójtowicz E. 2018. Same but different – another migration from Poland under scrutiny of CMR scholars. CMR Spotlight, 4(4).

Editors of CMR Spotlight: Michał Nowosielski, Dominika Pszczółkowska

© 2018 Centre of Migration Research



CENTRE OF
MIGRATION
RESEARCH

Pasteura street 7
02-093 Warsaw
Tel/fax +48 22 55 46 770
e-mail: migration.cmr@uw.edu.pl
<http://migracje.uw.edu.pl/en/>



ANNIVERSARY
CENTRE OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

