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From Rejection to Recognition?

A Brief History of the Finnish Roma

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Introduction

Despite a presence of almost half a millennium, the Finnish *Kale* Roma population has been near-invisible in Finnish historiography until recently. Yet, their past offers unique insights into the history of Finnish society and makes clear that it has never been the monoculture it is often imagined as. While the history of the Finnish Roma highlights deep patterns of social hierarchy, exclusion, and racialisation, it also points to what has in other contexts been called ‘convivencia’ or ‘coexistence’: trajectories of social, cultural and religious interplay between distinctive yet overlapping communities.

In this chapter, we aim to give a brief overview of the history of the Roma population in Finland with a focus on interaction, whether in minority politics or in everyday life. This perspective is a part of a critical turn since the 1990s against earlier essentializing views in which the diverse groups commonly labelled as Roma were perceived as static and clearly bounded ‘traditional’ cultures detached from the rest of the society (e.g., Lucassen, Willems & Cottaar 1998).

In focussing on interaction, we do not by any means imply a lesser importance of another, parallel story: the one formed by centuries of shared traditions and experiences within the Finnish Roma families and communities. Nor is it possible to bypass a third parallel history: that of marginalisation, racialisation, and outright violence against the Roma by the crown and the church, the later nation-state, and members of the majority population at large.

However, we want to highlight that in Finland (as elsewhere), the Roma have not formed an isolated, static, or homogenous cultural ‘island’. Nor have they lacked agency in relation to the surrounding society. The fortunes of the Roma families have been intertwined with those of the local village communities and wider economic development, with each generation actively adapting to changing possibilities and constraints. There have been identifiable subgroups in different regions, with their own customs and characteristics, as well as cross-border ties and a trickle of newcomers from outside Finland. The family histories of the Finnish Roma thus reveal for example Hungarian, Danish and Russian forefathers and -mothers, as well as a broad spectrum of different occupations and social positions (cf. Tervonen 2012b).

The chapter is largely based on our respective doctoral theses (Tervonen 2010; Rekola 2018) and work done as part of the project *History of the Finnish Roma* (Suomen romanien historia, 2010–2012). For us as ‘gadje’ (non-Roma) historians, studying the past of the Finnish Roma has presented several challenges. Perhaps the most fundamental have been dilemmas of research ethics and positionality, in working on a field in which those whose cultures and histories are being studied continue to be exposed to daily racism and exclusion, while those doing the studying continue to be mostly from the majority population (e.g. Kwiek 2009).

A more practical but equally essential issue concerns the availability and nature of historical source materials. Before the 19th century, archival sources are scarce both in quantitative and qualitative sense. The history of the people labelled in contemporary documents usually as *tattare* and/or *zigenare* has to be pieced together painstakingly from a diversity of sources near-exclusively created by the majority population. There are very few possibilities to access any kind of independent Roma ‘voice’ before the 20th century. As in the case of court records or vagrancy hearings, what is available in archives is also inherently biased, presenting conflicts rather than the normal flow of everyday life, and foregrounding points of views of actors (e.g. priests, bailiffs, landowners and governors) with an institutional bias against Roma and other itinerant people. Moreover, archival materials can potentially be socially selective in ways that are difficult to ascertain. They tend to shed light only on the life of those explicitly labelled by the authorities as *tattare* or *zigenare*—which often meant people perceived as problematic in one way or another. Families and individuals who were sedentary, engaged in what were seen as ‘honourable’ occupations, or otherwise seen as ‘unproblematic’ could thus disappear from the picture (cf. Rekola 2012; Tervonen 2010).

From the late 19th century onwards the trickle of sources turns into a flood, as Finnish nation-building led to a new kind of public problematisation of the Roma, leading to parliamentary investigations, legislative initiatives and near-daily attention in the press. Yet on the local level, Roma individuals and whole families could still be missing from parish and tax registers, making them largely invisible in many of the sources commonly employed in social history. Moreover, the perspective of the Roma themselves remained elusive in most archival sources. Exceptions to this are formed by folklore collections and oral history, the first of which date back to mid-1800s, and latter have been collected in Finland since the 1960s. These materials offer possibilities still far from exhausted by historians (Blomster & Mikkola 2014; Tervonen 2016).¹ From the early 20th century onwards and particularly in the post-World War II era, the political and religious activism of the Finnish Roma began to produce sources in which Roma appear directly as actors seeking to shape their position in the society, as well as the society itself (see for example Sarita Friman-Korpela 2014; Blomster & Raluca 2022; Raluca & Blomster 2023).

1 Even these materials are not free from uneven power relations, however. Blomster and Mikkola (2014) have illustrated the inclusions and exclusions inherent in the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society; while also oral history materials can reproduce stereotypes through their framing and question patterns and offer the interviewees positionalities reducing them into representatives of culturally defined ‘other’ (Tervonen 2016).

A final challenge which we want to mention is one posed by terminology. Besides the dilemma of using the ethnonyms 'Roma' or 'Romani people' as catch-all terms for a multitude of communities with divergent histories and cultures, there are potential pitfalls of anachronism in straightforwardly projecting these terms into the past. In which sense can we talk of 'Roma' in 17th century Finland, for example, when such term or its variations might not have been used – as far as we know – either by the authorities or (all of) those labelled as *tattare* or *zigenare*? Despite enduring ethnic differentiation, the terms *zigenare* and *tattare* could also at times be used by the authorities in a broader sense, denoting mobile people more generally, not just 'ethnic Roma' (cf. Rekola 2012, 2018; Tervonen 2010). Moreover, cultural boundaries are not set in stone: throughout centuries, there have been individuals crossing them through intermarriage, adoption, or through employment as farmhands or -maids, for example (e.g., Tervonen *ibid.*, 157–190). The question of who exactly we are talking about is thus often a necessary one to make in interpreting history, and sometimes harder to answer than it appears. As we have wanted to be transparent about terminology, we have left in many parts of this chapter the original wording of the historical records visible for the reader. As a general rule, the historical terms *tattare* and *zigenare* are thus used when referring to information derived from early modern authorities, whereas the words 'Roma' and 'Romani' are used in the modern context when the intended reference point is usually reasonably unambiguous.

Arrival and Early History

People defined as *tattare* appear in the written sources of Scandinavia from the early 16th century onwards. References to them in these early sources are extremely fragmentary and have led to speculations about their early history in Scandinavia and Finland. It should be stressed that, instead of enabling a coherent reconstruction of their past, these scant sources allow us to catch only sporadic glimpses of it.

A part of the so-called *tattare* may have arrived in Scandinavia from the British Isles where Denmark had close dynastic and commercial relations. In 1505, James IV of Scotland recommended that his uncle, Hans, the King of Denmark, receive a group of pilgrims, led by a count from Little Egypt, Antonius Gagino. In 1512, a group with the same leader appears to have stayed in Stockholm. In Sweden, the North-German terms *tattare* and *tartare* were applied to refer to these travelling people while the term *zigenare* appeared alongside them during the 17th century, becoming increasingly common during the 18th century. (Rekola 2012, 18.)

The presently known sources do not reveal how the people referred to as *tattare* first found their way to Finland, the eastern part of the Swedish Kingdom. While many presumably arrived from the western part of the kingdom, some may have arrived from the Baltic littoral. The first known references to *tattare* in Finland date back to 1559 when Johan, the duke of Finland, ordered Joen Vestgöthe, the bailiff of Kastelholm (situated in the Åland Islands), to stop *tattare* from trading inappropriately and to arrest them. Some *tattare* were held in prison in the Turku castle on the southwestern coast of Finland in the 1580s. In 1597, a group of over 100 *tattare* were said to have travelled in eastern Finland from where the bailiff of Savonlinna, Gödik Fincke, hoped to expel them to Sweden. (Rekola 2012, 18–19; Rekola 2015, 22.)

The hospitality with which the ‘pilgrims’ were received in Stockholm, in 1512, soon turned into an expulsion policy. This change took place at a time when a centrally administered monarchy was formed in Sweden. During this process the state’s administrative structures were developed in tandem with the strengthening of the army. Tighter social control was aimed at more efficient exploitation of the population through tax collection and military recruitment. In different parts of Europe, the reorganisation of poor relief led to a repressive attitude towards people regarded as vagrants: as local authorities took over the coordination of poor relief they began to differentiate between the ‘local poor’ and the ‘alien poor’, refusing relief from the latter. In consequence, work obligation and decrees against vagrancy were imposed (Lucassen 1998, 56–61; Lucassen & Willems 2003, 293–294). In Sweden, too, vagrancy control was strengthened in the period following the Reformation from the 16th century onwards. The Swedish Crown found foreign vagabonds particularly suspicious. As the Roma were regarded as a mobile and foreign group, they were specifically targeted by legislation. (Pulma 2006, 20–21; Montesino 2002, 38–39.)

The so-called ‘hanging law’, enacted in 1637, can be regarded as a culmination of the expulsion policy. In this statute (*Placat om Tartarnes fördrifwande af landet*), *tattare* and *zigenare* were ordered to leave the kingdom within three months and ten days. If found in the kingdom after this, the men were to be hanged without any legal proceedings and women and children were to be deported. The order was moderated in the beggar statute of 1642 which decreed that only those ‘*Zigeuner* or *Tattare*’ who had proven guilty of a theft or a misdeed could be punished by death without any legal proceedings, whereas others were to be expelled from the country. The principles of the beggar statute were renewed on later decrees up until 1748, when the ‘execution order’ was finally abolished. (Rekola 2012, 20–24.)

However, the statute of 1637 clashed with the Swedish legal system, according to which death sentences passed by lower courts could not be executed without the confirmation by the Court of Appeal. Perhaps due to this contradiction, the law was apparently not implemented. 17th century sources indicate that people categorised as *zigenare* or *tattare* were allowed normal court procedures when being accused of crimes. Although they could be expelled from boroughs or a province, they were only seldom deported from the kingdom which was the original intention of the legislation. Quite the opposite, several sources demonstrate that they received travelling permits and protection letters from authorities. (Etzler 1944, 70; Pulma 2006, 24–25; Rekola 2012, 24–26.)

In the 1660s, there was an attempt by Count Per Brahe to settle over a hundred *tattare* down in Salo parish and Pielisjärvi. In Pielisjärvi, located in the northeastern Finland near the Swedish–Russian border, they were expected to settle on untenanted farms and guard the border. However, crop failure and severe living conditions in the wilderness made them quite soon to leave the region and search for a better livelihood. (Rekola 2012, 26–29.)

Although 17th century sources concerning people categorised as *zigenare* or *tattare* are highly fragmentary, they nevertheless cast some light on their role and status in society. Court material of this period indicates that violent conflicts between *zigenare/tattare* and the majority population were rare. The material also shows that unknown *tattare* were sometimes used as scapegoats: they were blamed for crimes that someone else had committed. This indicates that the former were generally regarded as

itinerant people whose identities were not expected to be known. On the other hand, a picture of interaction emerges, as the court records include references to horse trade or sale between *zigenare/tattare* and others, demonstrating a level of trust between the parties involved. Hence, although people categorised as *zigenare* or *tattare* were in a sense considered ‘foreign’, judging from the court material, they nevertheless had a particular role and space in local communities. (Rekola 2012, 30–33.)

Towards Incorporation: Roma in Eighteenth-Century Society

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Roma were categorically rejected by the Lutheran Church. In 1560, priests were prohibited to baptise, marry or bury those considered as *tattare*. In the eyes of the Church, they were a people without religion, with no wish to learn the Christian faith. The Church was also irritated by their alleged skills in witchcraft.² However, this policy changed in the Church Act of 1686 which explicitly invited priests to baptise the children of *tattare* who requested it. (Etzler 1944, 58–60, 77–79; Pulma 2006, 21–22.)

Over the course of the 18th century, also the state policy towards the Roma started to be characterised not only by rejection but also by a pursuit of incorporation. This change took place during a labour shortage following the Great Northern War (1700–1721). Vagrants began to be considered as a resource that could be mobilised for the benefit of the Crown, and workhouses were established to exploit this workforce. In the latter part of the 18th century, vagrants were used in the construction works of the Sveaborg and Svartholm fortresses that began, in 1748, on the southern shore of Finland in order to strengthen Finland’s defences against Russia. This development was not specific to Sweden, as forced labour was increasingly used as a means of controlling vagrancy in different parts of Europe (Jütte 1994, 176–177; Pulma 1994, 29–32, 41).

During the time of this new population policy the division between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ *tattare/zigenare* became a constitutive feature of the policy towards them. According to the statute passed in 1748, the *tattare* who had lived in Sweden for some time were no longer threatened with expulsion, although they were to be punished with forced labour if found roaming. Only the ones who had recently arrived in the country were to be deported. While also other foreign categories such as ‘Jews, Savoyards, ropedancers, comedians, and other jesters’ had been ordered to be expelled in 1741, the statute of 1748 defined that only *tattare* and *zigenare* be deported. In the latter part of the 18th century, the principles of this statute became established in the policies concerning the Roma and other vagabonds. (Rekola 2012, 36–38; Rekola 2018, 63–64; Montesino 2002, 50–52.)

From 1748 onwards, hence, general vagrancy legislation applied also to ‘domestic’ *zigenare* and *tattare*—yet in practice, legislation seldom directly determined their treatment. Even before 1748, the regularly repeated expulsion orders had been rarely implemented. Nevertheless, two centuries of targeted legislation and the gradually established close connection between the categories *zigenare*, *tattare* and vagrant

2 It is nevertheless noteworthy that *tattare* were apparently not accused in witchcraft trials, neither in the Finnish nor in the Swedish part of the kingdom (Etzler 1944, 67).

influenced the way in which Roma were perceived by the authorities. Indeed, early 19th century vagrancy interrogation protocols and the prisoner lists of the Sveaborg fortress show that people categorised as *zigenare* or *tattare* were targeted by vagrancy control more intensively than the rest of the population (Rekola 2018, 94–95).

Military needs played a vital role in the process in which institutional connections were formed between Roma and the rest of society. Vagrancy legislation was influenced by a constant lack of men in the military during the era of Sweden's expansion in the 17th century. Convicted vagrants could be drafted to the military, and 17th century sources demonstrate that also people categorised as *tattare* or *zigenare* found their way to regiments. Over the course of the 18th century, military occupations became ubiquitous among the Roma men. (Hammarskjöld 1866, 51, 55, 60; Ståhlberg 1893, 5; Rekola 2012, 34, 48–52; Rekola 2023, 242–244.) The army also influenced the migration of Roma from Sweden to Finland, as the construction of the Svartholm and Sveaborg fortresses after 1748 led to a major concentration of the military in southern Finland. In the mid-18th century, most of the enlisted soldiers originated from the western part of the kingdom since the artillery was the only enlisted unit allowed to draft in the Finnish provinces until 1764 (Screen 2007, 163; Hirn 1970, 97–98, 108).

It is difficult to assess how many of the Roma soldiers were forcibly drafted on the grounds of vagrancy, and how many of them joined the troops voluntarily. It seems, however, that military career could appeal to them as an attractive alternative: it provided protection against vagrancy convictions and, at the same time, enabled the practice of itinerant occupations during army leaves that could last for months at a time. Indeed, supplementary economic activities were often a necessity for Roma soldiers, many of whom served in enlisted regiments where a pay was too low for a livelihood (cf. Magnusson 2005, 255, 293). Although military service in enlisted regiments provided legal protection, it did not guarantee a long-term secure status since former soldiers often became suspected of vagrancy. After a ban on recruiting *zigenare*, in 1805, many discharged Roma ended up in forced labour. Hence, while binding Roma to society in various ways, military policies also positioned them on the socio-economic margins and strengthened their ethnic label which was closely associated with mobility and idleness. (Rekola 2023.)

Military needs influenced the use of Roma labour not only as enlisted soldiers and workforce at the fortress construction sites but also as saltpetre boilers. Saltpetre was used in the production of gunpowder, and it formed, in Finland, mainly in the soil underlying cowsheds and stables. The forming of saltpetre was aided by softening the soil and mixing to it rotting refuse and, eventually, saltpetre was separated from the soil by leaching the soil and boiling the obtained solution. The status of saltpetre boilers was comparable to that of enlisted soldiers. (Rekola 2012, 56–57.)

Although the military played a vital role in the lives of many Roma, legal status could be acquired also through channels not connected to the military sphere. In the latter part of the 18th and the early 19th centuries, some Roma worked as travelling glassware sellers, as did many *resande* (Travellers) on the western side of the kingdom (Heymowski 1969, 40–47; Minken 2009, 272; Svensson 1993, 84). Glass factories found itinerant Roma suited for the job, perhaps in part due to the fact that Roma often had horses, which were needed on trade trips. Not unlike the military career, this activity provided Roma an official status which enabled the practise of other itinerant activities, such as horse trade or handicrafts. Nevertheless, the travelling of Roma

glassware sellers remained a problematised issue throughout the period. (Rekola 2012, 54–55; Rekola 2018, 146–151.)

In eighteenth-century sources, Roma were often described as itinerant people who were not interested in or capable of doing agricultural work. Yet on closer examination, these administrative sources reveal that several Roma served as maids or farmhands or had a status as a tenant farmer. Roma tenant farmers did not always live fully sedentary lives; on the contrary, this status could enable the practise of itinerant occupations by providing legal protection and a shelter. Although the combination of itinerancy and sedentarism varied case by case, the mere fact that Roma were taken as tenant farmers points to relatively deep local ties and the demand for their skills in local communities. (Rekola 2012, 58–59; Rekola 2018, 157–167.)

In the western part of the kingdom, some people categorised as *zigenare* or *tattare* had attained legal status by acquiring burgher rights in small towns as early as the 17th century. In complaints concerning them, they had been increasingly referred to by trade names, such as clasp smith (*häktmakare*) and wiredrawer (*tråddragare*). (Etzler 1944, 74, 85; Minken 2009, 289–296; Wilstadius 2010, 13–15.) While the discovered references to Roma burghers are rare in Finland, an individual case has been found from the latter part of the 18th century when the family of burgher Carl Palm resided in Naantali, a small town on the southwestern coast of Finland. The history of this family indicates that ethnic status was fairly persistent even in the event of upward social mobility. Many descendants of Carl Palm made their livelihood as soldiers, farriers, and glassware sellers, and the travelling of this family was constantly problematised. (Rekola 2012, 62–68; Rekola 2018, 211–240.)

Combining various economic activities was often a necessity for the Roma, given that most of these activities alone did not guarantee them a livelihood for the entire year. Glassware was sold in winter and saltpetre boiled in summer while enlisted soldiers were poorly paid and had long unpaid leaves. Indeed, several other activities that lacked official status, such as horse trade, shoeing or gelding horses, or making or repairing reeds, were often indispensable for the subsistence of the Roma. This variety of occupations points to frequent interaction between the Roma and the sedentary population, despite the regularly repeated complaints concerning the travelling of the former. Court cases from the late 18th and early 19th centuries also contain multiple indications of functional relations between Roma and non-Roma and demonstrate the rarity of inter-ethnic violence during the period. It is nevertheless paradoxical that, while Roma labour was used in different spheres, their work was constantly made less visible in discourses which strongly focused on their itinerancy and associated it with work-shyness. (Rekola 2018.)

Change of Rule

As a result of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), Russia acquired from Sweden the areas of Inghria, Estonia and Livonia as well as the southern part of the Käkisalme province and the western part of the Karelian Isthmus. After the Russo–Swedish War of 1741–1743, Sweden had to cede yet another part of south-eastern Finland to Russia. During the 18th century, the Roma population appears to have increased significantly in the ‘Finnish’ areas under Russian rule, which became called Old Finland after 1809

when Russia had taken over the whole of Finland (Rekola 2012, 74; Rekola 2018, 14–15). The area of Old Finland was incorporated into the grand duchy of Finland in 1812.

The changing of the ruler from the King of Sweden to the Emperor of Russia had probably even greater consequences for the Finnish Roma than for the peasantry in general. The tenure army was abolished and the number of enlisted regiments was considerably reduced, entailing a change for the economic patterns of the Roma. While no longer threatened with forced recruitment, they could no more turn towards the army in search of a 'legal protection' either—at least to the same extent than before. Convicted vagrants were still subjected to forced labour in the Sveaborg workhouse and the spinning houses of Turku and Lappeenranta. Moreover, the Russian Army became a temporary threat for the Roma, in 1842, as the emperor ordered that the sons of detained Roma women be sent to the so-called cantonist battalions in Russia, where Jewish youngsters were also forced. To prevent their sons from being taken, Roma sometimes dressed them up as girls. The order was repealed in 1861. (Pulma 2006, 48–50; Rekola 2012, 76–77.)

Although military service ceased to be an option for the Roma, military experience could open up new occupational possibilities in the civilian society. Especially in the latter part of the 19th century, many Roma served as municipal whippers, and Roma may have familiarised themselves with tasks related to corporal punishments while serving in the army. This would resemble the development in Denmark, Norway, and German regions where some Roma or Travellers held positions connected to police work in which military experience was valued (Minken 2009, 288). In this way, hence, the influence of military service on the lives of the Roma may have reached far into the 19th century.

Nation-Building and the Rise of 'Gypsy Question'

As a grand duchy of the Russian empire, Finland retained the 18th century Swedish legislation equating all 'zigenare' ('Gypsies') with vagrants. Administrative acts passed in 1852 and 1865 reaffirmed the status of the Roma as a targeted category, to be treated more severely than others.³ The Roma were thus in principle seen and treated as an illegitimate population, in a way that was a direct continuation to centuries of earlier exclusion. As of the 1860s, the Roma also started to attract new kind of public interest. Development of Finnish language press and the reconvening of the Diet in 1863 created national-level political forums. As nationalists sought to turn the grand duchy into a nation, matters of identity became politicized. 'The Gypsy question' – alongside with the so-called 'language question', 'Jewish question' and 'Sami question' – was repeatedly discussed in the Diet from 1863 onwards. The clergy demanded more efficient measures to subjugate mobile Roma to religious teaching and 'orderly' life; while the representatives of the peasant estate – in practice, the wealthiest section

3 In 1852, a statute on legal protection tightened the regulations concerning work obligation and vagrancy. The statute reinstated the automatic treatment of all zigenare as vagrants; but unlike with other vagrancy detainees, denied them of the possibility to find themselves an employer so as to avoid the sentence being put into force. (Pulma 2006, 49, 74.)

of non-aristocratic landowners – made complaints about the alleged disorder caused by travelling Roma parties.

In 1864–1865, local priests were ordered to compile information on the ‘*zigenare*’ in their parishes, producing information of varying accuracy on some 750 persons, including 230 children and 39 non-Roma spouses. Even as the real size of the population was estimated to be roughly twice this figure, the Roma clearly constituted a minuscule population – less than a per mill of the Finnish population – making the constant attention paid to them all the more striking (especially in times of recurrent famine and crisis; Tervonen 2012a, 139–147).

In the 1880s and 1890s, easing of the old Swedish vagrancy law and liberalisation of the social and economic regulations affected also the position of the Roma. The concept of legal protection was removed from legislation, absolving the necessity of either owning or renting a homestead, or working for those who did. Regulations targeting the Roma were removed from the Vagrant Act in 1883, and the concept of vagrancy was limited to ‘ill-mannered lifestyle’. The degrees left considerable discretionary power to the local authorities, however. In practice, the bailiffs generally continued their efforts to expel mobile Roma and other unwanted people from their jurisdictions. At the Diet, meanwhile, the peasantry continued to press for targeted laws restricting the mobility of the ‘Gypsies’. While the majority of the Diet rejected these proposals, the Senate founded a special committee to consider ways to address the ‘Gypsy Issue’ (Pulma 2006; Tervonen 2010 & 2012a; Virolainen 1994).

The so-called Walle committee convened in 1895–1900 and used as its key expert the renowned Finnish ‘Gypsologist’ Arthur Thesleff (1871–1920). It saw the presence of a distinctive Roma culture as a problem in itself and proposed the rooting out of the Romani language as a remedy. It recommended the establishing of state boarding schools in which Roma children would not only be taught religion and civic virtues but would also be prevented from speaking their own language. This was seen as eventually leading to the desired eradication of the Romani culture. The committee proposed the establishment of a special Gypsy office to overtake mandatory registering and the founding of boarding schools, tasked with ‘disciplining [the Roma children] before the innate racial type has become an individual character’.

However, the Committee’s proposals amounting to full-scale forced assimilation were deemed as too expensive and politically untenable. This was especially so in the context of Finland’s struggle at the time to maintain autonomy in the face of imperial attempts at ‘russify’ its Grand Duchy. When the Russian empire collapsed and Finland gained independence in 1917, there was consequently no national level Romani policy. The poor, agricultural country went through a devastating civil war in 1918 which left it a deeply divided, and the Roma were too small a group to become again a national level political issue. While racial theories increasingly set the tone of official language and conceptualization of the Roma minority, this did not produce concrete eugenic policies during the inter-war period.

Instead, the Roma became a target group for Christian domestic missionary work. The Gypsy Mission (*Mustalaislähetys*, known since 1996 as the *Romano Missio*) was established in 1905 by Oskari Jalkio (1882–1952). With small resources and meagre number of volunteers, it tried to reach out to the Roma population and founded the *Kiertolainen* journal. It strove to sedentarise and assimilate them, reflecting a model in use in Norway. Despite Jalkio’s paternalist goal to sedentarise and assimilate the Roma,

he also worked from the start with Kale activists such as Aleksander Åkerlund (1893–1944), Antti Palm (1874–1939) and Sofia Schwartz (1887–1932), who did not always share his goals. Indeed, a small grassroots Roma movement formed in Karelia, with the singer, speaker and Poet Ida Blomerus (1890–1953) acting as a central organizer in attempts to improve the conditions of the Roma (Roman and Blomster 2023).

From House to House: Everyday Life and Interaction

In the latter half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, there were roughly 2500–3000 Roma living in extended family groups that were spread across the Finnish countryside. More dense populations existed in Karelia, near the Russian border, and in the Ostrobothnia region. Majority of the Roma were itinerant for most of the year. The scarcity of rural retailing and the need for seasonal labour and specialized services created a demand for peddling, mobile labour and services. Particularly important were horse-related livelihoods (gelding, horseshoeing, and -trading) that also provided possibilities for a legal protection as parish gelder or shoer. Some Roma men acquired similarly a protected local status through working as ‘parish whippers’. There were numerous other occupations, including farmhands, tenant farmers and also a small number of independent farmers.⁴

Despite this occupational diversity, it is clear that most Finnish Roma families led itinerant lives on the margins of the society, moving from house to house, and making ends meet as best they could. A basic structuring fact in the lives of most was dependency on daily exchange with the land-holding peasants for food and shelter. Like the Swedish *Resande* (‘Travellers’), the Finnish Roma did not live in habitable caravan wagons, and only used tents and campsites occasionally during the summertime. For greater part of the year, most Roma were thus completely dependent on accommodation provided by the sedentary rural inhabitants, particularly during the winter, when even a single night spent outside could be deadly.

To meet this need, the Roma relied on regular exchange with the peasants along well-established routes. Despite images of random ‘wandering’, a Roma family’s mobility was thus typically concentrated over an area of two to three parishes. Within this area, the Roma were no strangers, nor even ‘customary strangers’ (a phrase used by Bernard & Rao 2004). The ties between the Roma and their hosts/customers could be strong, and even ‘inherited’, as particular Roma families visited same peasant houses from one generation to the next. The basis of these networks was in economic activities of the Roma such as lacemaking, household work, horse-trade and horseshoeing, castrating animals, fortune-telling, etc. They were flexibly combined with a multitude of others – as well as with the telling of news and gossip – and practiced in a way that helped to establish steady relationships with the indispensable peasant houses (Tervonen 2010, 136–141).

For the most, this ‘makeshift economy’ worked: through the 19th and early 20th centuries, itinerant Roma were as a rule able to find shelter in ‘their’ peasant houses. The daily necessity of finding accommodation also produced risks, and the

4 In contrast with other Nordic Roma and Traveller groups, there were apparently no tinkers among the Finnish Roma (Pulma 2006, 69–73; Tervonen 2010, 91–127).

co-existence with sedentary rural inhabitants demanded goodwill from both sides. There were rare but highly publicised cases in which this goodwill broke down, such as the lethal fight between peasants and itinerant Roma in Alajärvi in 1888, described by Toivo Nygård (2001). Cases such as this attracted wide attention and coloured later understanding of relations between Roma and non-Roma. However, an analysis of late 19th century and early 20th century court records suggests that inter-ethnic violence between the Roma and non-Roma was in fact exceedingly rare. In light of the position of itinerant Roma families' position in local communities, this makes sense. The Roma needed to take care of their reputation, balance of trade and good relationship with their network of friendly houses, as, for the Roma, this could be literally a question of life and death (Tervonen 2010, 148–155).

World War II and the 'Great Change'

The closing of the Russian border in 1918 severed the traditional cross-border ties of the Roma in eastern Finland, and the depression of the 1930s undoubtedly made life very hard for many. Still, in the Roma's oral narratives, the 1920s and 30s are often remembered as a 'golden era', with livelihood presented as better than in the following period of war and structural change.

World War II did indeed affect the lives of many Finnish Roma families fundamentally. Hundreds of Roma men fought in the Finnish forces both in The Winter war (1939–1940) and the Continuation war (1941–1944), experiencing comradeship and sharing of faith with their fellow non-Roma soldiers. This experience was not reflected in life outside the military or in postwar experiences, however. As the wars ended with Soviet victories, Finland had to cede vast territories to the Soviet Union. In the eastern province of Karelia, about 410,000 persons, or c.12 per cent of Finland's population had to be evacuated. Significantly, among the evacuees were nearly half of Finland's Roma population. Their resettlement in new areas was a failure, leading to social misery which continued for years, if not decades, after the war (Pulma 2006, 161–163).

While the wars were still being fought out, the control of vagrancy was harsh, and every citizen was obliged to participate in the war efforts. Disregarding the contribution of the Roma men fighting on the front lines, a law was passed in the parliament in 1943 which again automatically identified all Roma as illegitimate vagrants. Alongside special work camps for those seen as 'work-shy', special 'gypsy work camps' were also planned. Between 1942 and 1944, there were short-lived attempts to gather itinerant Roma into special work camps at Kihniö, Padasjoki, Vieremä and Lappajärvi. These camps were not resourced for their task, however, and only a small number of individuals were forced into them for short periods of time. The largest of the camps, Lappajärvi, held 24 persons in forced labour in the first half of 1943. At that point, the turning of the war against Germany changed the political outlook, and the Finnish authorities decided to scrap the plans for Roma work camps altogether. While majority of the Finnish Roma thus avoided internment into specifically *ethnicity*-based camps, many were nevertheless forced to 'normal' work camps on the basis on the 1936 and 1943 Vagrancy Acts (Pulma 2012, 160–161).

A major problem for the Roma was confiscating of horses for the army. At the same time, many became refugees and were cut off from their former established routes and familiar houses. In conditions of wartime rationing, access to food and other basic supplies was tied to one's place of residence and to the files of relief authorities. Many Roma consequently had difficulties in obtaining their rationing cards. Yet the authorities routinely treated them as suspects of rationing card misuse (Pulma 2012, 157–158; Tanner & Lind 2009, 129–135).

In the immediate post-war period, the Finnish economy retained its largely agricultural character, enabling many Roma families to continue making a mobile livelihood at the countryside. Slowly, however, the pattern established in earlier centuries began to fall apart. Besides the loss of Finnish Karelia in the war, economic modernization rendered many of the Roma's previous economic 'niches' obsolete. The rise of industrial mass product-based retailing, professionalization and formalization of services (for example, the appearance of licensed veterinarians), and the mechanization of agriculture made horse-based occupations slowly redundant and affected the possibilities for mobile livelihood. Despite chronic shortage of housing and interference of local authorities, many Roma families were thus scrambling to find homes in which to settle down (a development that had begun partly already before the war). This became increasingly a necessity, as the diminishing need for the Roma's traditional services meant a worsening access to the peasant houses (Tervonen 2012c, 166–185).

Finding apartment was exceedingly difficult for many, however. The situation was worst in the Helsinki metropolitan area with acute shortage of housing, where visible Roma slums with make-shift housing rose. In 1954, only a fifth of the Roma were estimated to live in 'somewhat satisfactory' housing conditions. Matters were often made worse by municipal authorities and neighborhoods seeking to prevent homeless Roma from settling into 'their' area. In worst cases, Roma families were evicted in violent Pogrom-style attacks, which took place in Kemijärvi in 1951, in Vehmersalmi and Huittis in 1955, and in Pankakoski in 1956 (Lång 2010; Tervonen 2013, 171).

During the 1970s and 1980s the Finnish Roma population was strongly urbanising. For an increasing number of families, there was a shift from local exchange networks to anonymous money-based economy. While offering new possibilities of work and education, the dependency on urban labour- and housing-markets also exposed the Roma to new forms of daily discrimination. In 1969, 90% of the Roma in Vantaa were thus found to be sheltering in conditions seen as 'unfit for living' by the municipal authorities (Siltanen 2015, 5). Perhaps even worse, the Roma also experienced frequent police harassment and outright violence (Grönfors 1979).

In this situation, many families began looking for opportunities for a better life outside Finland. In 1954, the Nordic countries created a common labour market and a regime of passport-free border crossings, and as a result Finnish Roma started emigrating to Sweden in growing numbers. By the early 1980s, there were an estimated 3,100 Finnish Roma living in Sweden. A strikingly high proportion of the Finnish Roma thus sought to escape poverty by moving to Sweden. The move proved challenging for many due to lacking language skills and scarcity of available housing around cities such as Stockholm. Still, it frequently paid off: many of the migrants quickly found work on the booming Swedish labour markets, and often experienced

an unprecedented move from improvised housing or buildings scheduled for demolition in Finland into modern spacious apartments in the newly built Swedish housing estates (Tervonen & Jeskanen 2012).

From Assimilation policy to Recognition

The Finnish state's Romani policy became more active in the post-war decades, partly as a reaction to the visible slums that had formed on the outskirts of the biggest cities as a result of the failed resettling of Karelian Roma. In 1953, the Government instituted a Gypsy Affairs Committee to study the situation of the Roma and propose measures to improve it. Yet the framing of the problem remained racist and focussed on the goal of assimilation. The Roma were seen as a problem because of their lifestyle and 'childlike' character, and were to be settled, enrolled in the population registers and to take up paid work. With financial backing from the Finnish state and City of Helsinki, the Gypsy Missio reactivated and established new children's homes for the Roma. A policy of taking children into public custody became an important part of the state and municipal Romani policies and could in practice act as a substitute for 'normal' welfare policies vis-à-vis the Roma living in improvised housing. The children's homes, meanwhile, were (for the time being) hostile towards the Romani culture, and no Romani language was allowed to be spoken (Pulma 2006, 163–166).

Reacting to the economic plight and forced assimilation, Roma activists began to organise and make demands for improved circumstances. Ferdinand Nikkinen (1894–1971), a pioneer of the Finnish Roma activism, had organized already in 1946 a letter to the Finnish government, signed by 364 Roma, which criticised heavily the monopoly position of the Gypsy Missio in the Finnish Roma politics, and demanded similar welfare services as the rest of the population was enjoying. Nikkinen, who was a professed atheist, pacifist and socialist, was also involved in the founding of the *Romanengo Staggos*, or the Romani Union (Romanien liitto) in 1953. It sought to improve the societal position of the Finnish Roma through education, rooting out of prejudice, and cultural and vocational activities, rather than through Christian missionary activities. (Friman-Korpela 2014, 75–79.)

The Finnish state remained all but indifferent to the Roma activists during the 1950s. Romanengo Staggos was heard but did not get representation in the 1953 'Gypsy committee'. The ambitious assimilatory recommendations of the committee also met the same political indifference as earlier proposals of the Walle committee. The Finnish Romani policy remained in the hands of the Gypsy Missio and the municipal authorities. A State Advisory Board for Romani Affairs was set up in 1956, with heavy representation of the Missio, and was charged with the task of coordinating the Romani issues between different authorities.

During the 1960s, political pressure began to mount against the old assimilation policies. International developments such as civil rights and anti-apartheid movements began influencing also Finnish debates. Yet only the ethno-political organising of the Roma and their allies forced a real change of direction. A decisive turning point was the founding of the *Suomen Mustalaisyhdistys ry* (Finnish Romani Association) in 1967. The association's activists included radically reform-minded and often internationally networked Roma and their majority population allies, with

prominent members including for example Voitto Ahlgren (1944–1994), Reima Nikkinen (1944–2018), Anneli Sari (b.1947) and the journalist and associations first chair, Kari Huttunen (1939–2004) (Söderman 2006, 11). The association was highly successful in gaining public attention and wrenching the political initiative from the Gypsy Missio. The Romani Association was fiercely critical of the passive Advisory Board and the Missio's children's homes. The public confrontation resulted in the dismissal of the old Advisory Board and the establishing of a new body in 1968. The new Board included representatives of the Roma and quickly prompted a series of legislative reforms. Among the most important were the banning of discrimination of the Roma in 1970, and two targeted housing laws (1970, 1976) that subsidised municipalities for improving the housing conditions of the Roma and obliged the municipalities to improve the housing conditions of the Roma to a satisfactory level (Pulma 2006; Siltanen 2015).

Developments in Finland and Sweden began to be linked on many levels (Pulma 2006, 185–189). In 1969, the Nordic Council obliged the Finnish and Swedish Governments to take joint action to solve the acute social problems of the Roma. This led to intergovernmental cooperation involving representatives of the Romani organisations. In 1972, the *Finnish Gypsy Association* was founded in Stockholm, and quickly became one of the most active Romani organisations in Sweden. In the following year, Finnish Roma took initiative in the founding the Nordic Romani Council that involved also Swedish, Norwegian and a few Danish delegates. Active pressuring led the Swedish *Riksdag* to implemented in 1976 a policy reform that gave the Finnish Roma the same rights that Swedish and foreign refugee Roma had concerning, for example, mother tongue teaching and curators' services (Pulma 2006, 185–189; Friman-Korpela 2014).

From early 1970s onwards, the targeted housing laws, better access to work, education and social security, as well as migration to Sweden began to have a positive effect on the situation of many Roma families (e.g., Siltanen 2015). As material conditions improved, the focus of Romani activism begun to shift to issues of culture and education. The word 'romani' was taken into public use at the end of 1980s; according to Paavo Lounela (1940–2022), the priest, secretary general of the Advisory Board, it was adopted from the pioneering Roma activists who had used it in the *Kiertolainen* magazine in the beginning of 20th century (Lounela 2006, 40–41). The government agencies began to regularly employ Roma experts, who gradually started to take a leading role in matters concerning them. One milestone was the selecting of the long-time Roma activist, pastor Väinö Lindberg (1938–2022) as the head of the Gypsy Missio in 1991 (with the organisation subsequently changing its name into *Romano Missio* in 1996). Another was the appointment of the teacher and activist Miranda Vuolasranta (b.1959) as the Secretary General of the Advisory Board on Romani Affairs in 1998. While the expert officials with Roma background started to become the main channel of national Romani policy, the role of the Romani organisations grew in some respects relatively weaker (Friman-Korpela 2014).

The joining of Finland into the European Council set in motion what Friman-Korpela (2014, 131–132) has called a 'human rights boom' in Finnish Roma politics. In the 1990s the Roma were officially defined as an ethnic minority, with the ensuing special rights, which was also in line with Finland's international commitments. Finland ratified the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1994

and declared that it undertook to apply the general principles listed in Chapter 2 to the Romani language as well as other non-territorial languages in Finland. At the same time, a Roma Education Unit was set up by the National Board of Education to develop and implement a nationwide schooling programme for the Roma community and to promote the Roma language and culture. Since 1996, The Research Institute for the Languages of Finland (KOTUS) has conducted research on the Romani language. In 1995 Finland became a member of the European Union and has actively worked for European Romani policies. In 1998, Finland ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention on the Protection of Minorities, and affirmed the position of the Roma as one of Finland's historical minorities.

From the 2000s onwards, Finnish Romani politics has faced many old and some completely new questions and challenges. The development of the factual social position of the Roma population in Finland has been lagging behind the legally defined minority rights. New generation of Roma activists and non-Roma allies have sought to challenge discrimination in public spaces, schooling, and labour markets, and to expose painful problems such as continuing ethnic profiling by the police (e.g., Weiste-Paakkanen, Lämsä & Kuusio 2018; Keskinen et al. 2018). There has also been an arrival of completely new groups of Roma into Finland from Eastern and Central European countries. From late 1990s onwards, small groups of Slovak, Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian Roma sought asylum in Finland, but were – with exception of a small number of Kosovar Roma – rejected. Later, the expansion of the EU in 2007 enabled Romanian and Bulgarian Roma to engage in circular migration into Finland and other Nordic countries. As elsewhere in Nordic and European countries, the public and policy reception of the newcomers, labelled 'Roma beggars' in the media, has been largely negative (e.g., Tervonen 2021). Yet in 2020s, it is apparent that the Roma migrants are turning from temporary visitors into a permanent (if transnational) part of the Finnish society. While they have little previous connection with the *Kale* Roma who have been living in Finland for nearly half a millennium, they are thus forming a new chapter in the history of Roma communities in Finland. Unfortunately, it also looks likely that this new history will be overshadowed by similar exclusion and racialisation that the Finnish Roma have struggled for centuries to overcome.

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