

Tool 4

Using stories of the past to teach students about its complexity

Opre Roma: reflections
on the Roma movement in the 1970s



TOOLKIT FOR TEACHING ROMA AND/OR TRAVELLER HISTORY

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*Opre Roma: reflections
on the Roma movement in the 1970s*

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TOOLKIT FOR TEACHING ROMA AND/OR TRAVELLER HISTORY

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The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council
of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the
groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe
in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush,
Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari;
b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali);
c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and,
on the other hand, groups such as Travellers,
Yenish, and the populations designated under
the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well
as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.
The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition
of Roma and/or Travellers.

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1. The teaching strategy

Overview of the strategy

This teaching strategy provides teachers with a step-by-step breakdown of activities to teach the history of the Roma movement in the 1970s. Using a collection of different personal stories and reflections on the World Roma Congress, students are invited to explore the establishment of the congress and its significance for Roma communities through a variety of perspectives and narratives.

The activities presented here derive from the teaching strategy developed by Helen Snelson as part of the Sharing European Histories project, a co-operation between EuroClio – European Association of History Educators and the Evens Foundation.

The strategy centres on the compelling personal narratives of different Roma individuals who confronted negative stereotypes about Roma communities perpetuated by the majority in their societies.

The personal experiences and statements of individuals serve as crucial sources for reconstructing historical narratives. They complement information derived from other historical sources such as newspaper articles and various archival materials. They provide direct insight into the past and are fundamental resources for understanding historical contexts. Analysing different personal accounts and experiences from the same period or event encourages students to explore their complexity and how differently the same events can be interpreted and experienced by people. It helps students to identify a range of perspectives and to compare the similarities and differences between them, while critically reflecting on how personal stories about the same event can be very similar or very different.

In terms of content, the strategy delves into the enduring impact of the Roma political movement and its pioneers in 1970s Europe. The zeitgeist of this period profoundly influenced Roma activists and leaders as they adapted to the needs of their community and addressed the aspiration for self-determination, recognition and unity. They articulated their political aims to advance the role of the Roma as an indispensable part of their societies.

Exploring the theme of international Roma political activism within the framework of social memory and historical narrative, the strategy focuses on Roma activists on the European political stage in their pursuit of human rights for their communities.

By presenting a shared history of Roma reality, activism and politics to students, the strategy adds a dimension to the historical narrative of the Roma struggle for political and social rights. It offers a new perspective on the Roma community, which serves as a basis for learning and teaching about their historical role in modern society.



Figure 1: Roma flag

Aim of the strategy

The objective of this strategy is not merely to establish historical facts but also to collect data on the subjective experiences of individuals during a specific historical event or period. This includes insights into the value system of an era, social relations within larger or smaller groups, and the daily professional and private lives of individuals.

The aim is to find a link between the past, present and future, so as to shed light on the position of the Roma community and its heritage in today's multicultural society. It encourages reflection on the significance of being Roma today within the context of the continuing struggle for human rights.

The primary goal is to highlight the complexity and diversity of experiences during the Roma emancipation movement in Europe in the 1970s. Throughout that decade, the Roma activists' political objectives were to achieve political and social emancipation for the Roma people.

The strategy endeavours to portray the history of Roma activism and the rights movement as a crucial contribution to the development of democratic societies. It emphasises the Roma's desire for greater representation and rights in the continual fight against prejudice and intolerance.

It seeks to remind students of the continuing challenges facing Roma communities. Personal narratives humanise history by attaching faces to abstract historical concepts. By immersing themselves in individual stories, students can gain a deeper appreciation for the lived experiences, challenges and triumphs of those involved in the Roma movement. By humanising history and providing a platform for individual stories, this approach aims to cultivate empathy, foster critical thinking skills and promote a more nuanced understanding of historical events and their impact on diverse communities.

By exploring personal stories of the past, students will:

- ▶ position themselves as historians, including learning about primary and secondary sources;
- ▶ engage in contrast analysis of primary and secondary sources using a historical event and/or a time frame as a common point of reference;
- ▶ demonstrate an understanding of the Roma's political activism in the 1970s;
- ▶ identify specific characteristics and the political imaginary of the Roma political movement in the 1970s;
- ▶ develop critical thinking skills;
- ▶ challenge stereotypes;
- ▶ deepen their understanding of people with diverse backgrounds, values, characteristics and perspectives;
- ▶ develop attitudes and behaviours that reflect human rights values;
- ▶ recognise the importance of a society that treats others with understanding and empathy, whatever their ethnicity or socio-economic background.

2. The strategy in action

Step 1 – Preparing the materials and providing historical background information

This strategy takes a comprehensive approach by expanding on foundational knowledge and delving deeply into a specific topic. Securing your students' interest and introducing the topic, will help them to contextualise the personal stories. You can do this by providing historical background information that is relevant to the period and/or event at hand.

The strategy is flexible enough to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve the educational outcomes.

You can start the lesson by providing relevant background information and historical context. This contextualisation helps students understand the subject better and see why it is important in a broader context. For this, you can create a historical content brief such as that in the example below. It complements existing lesson plans on Roma and Traveller history, aiding in the preparation and evaluation of classroom resources. While this support material is not comprehensive, it is designed to build on foundational knowledge and to explore specific topics in more depth.

Historical content brief

A pivotal moment in the Roma movement was the first World Roma Congress held in 1971 in Orpington, near London. This congress marked a new chapter in the Roma civic emancipation movement, which transcended national boundaries to establish the international Roma political movement.

World Roma Day, celebrated on 8 April, the first day of the congress, is of great significance for the international Roma community and is acknowledged by both Roma and non-Roma alike. The official name "Roma" was declared at the congress, signifying a permanent departure from the derogatory term "Gypsy", which had marked centuries of marginalisation. The traditional colours of blue and green, which represent the fusion of earthly and spiritual values in the Roma community, were adopted as the flag of the world Roma movement.

By the conclusion of the congress, a shared flag, anthem, national day and transboundary political initiative for self-determination and collective civil rights had been established.

The motto "*Opre Roma*" (Arise, Roma) became the political credo of the Roma movement, embodying its fight for unity, social justice and equality. Following the congress, a sense of unity and strength among the Roma community helped shape its own policy on the international stage.



Figure 2: Emblem of the second World Roma Congress

These decisions endure as integral aspects of Roma identity and are still honoured today. The 1971 congress laid the foundation for political acknowledgment of the rich tapestry of Roma heritage, and it is through understanding and honouring these choices that the Roma community continues to shape their political imaginary through Romanipe, their collective identity and spirit.

The second World Roma Congress, convened in Geneva in 1978, marked a significant milestone with the establishment of the International Romani Union (IRU). This organisation has since assumed responsibility for organising subsequent world Roma congresses.

The Roma are currently the largest ethnic minority in Europe, numbering at least 10 to 12 million people, with over 6 million residing in the European Union. By preserving Roma identity, culture and traditions, the majority population is enriched through encounters and dialogue with others, which fosters respect for diversity and facilitates progress and growth for all involved in these interactions.

The Roma political imaginary emerged in the 1970s as a unifying factor of identity and the preservation of Roma's existence, serving as the primary means by which they resist assimilation and loss of identity in relation to the majority population.

More than 50 years have elapsed since the historical milestone of the first World Roma Congress, and Roma people worldwide continue to strive for full equality and safeguard their community's fundamental human rights.

If you decide to apply this strategy using a different significant event or period in the history of the Roma community, local institutions such as museums, archives, libraries and other heritage organisations may be able to provide you with resources and ready-to-use historical content briefs.

The next step is to prepare a collection of life stories. This teaching strategy contains a collection of different perspectives on the rise of the Roma movement in the 1970s. The following are a collection of eight stories, mostly excerpts from interviews or testimonies, including a short biography about each speaker.

In addition to the stories, you could also consider using other types of primary sources such as photographs or other types of documents.

The Roma movement in the 1970s through the eyes of contemporaries

Story 1

"The purpose of this congress is to unite and activate Roma throughout the world; to bring about emancipation according to our own intuition and our own ideals – to make progress at our own speed. A great deal needs to be discussed and worked out and we cannot say at once what methods we shall use or what direction we shall take. But whatever we do will have the stamp of our own particular personality upon it – it will be amaro Romano drom, our Romani way.

Our struggle to evolve according to our own genius, is the same struggle for liberation being waged all over the globe, which aims to prevent the continents being turned into deserts by war, expropriation and misgovernment. Our people must combine and organise to work locally, nationally and internationally. Our problems are the same everywhere: we must proceed with our own forms of education, preserve and develop our Romani culture, bring a new dynamism into our communities and forge a future in accordance with our lifestyle and beliefs. We have been passive long enough and I believe, starting today, we can succeed.

The deliberations of this congress are of historical importance to our people. It is for every one of us to bear our responsibilities with dignity and pride, and to encourage, help and counsel one another in times of need."

Slobodan Berberski, from speech at first World Roma Congress

Slobodan Berberski played a significant role as one of the key initiators and co-ordinators of the inaugural World Roma Congress in London in 1971. His notable contributions led to his election as president of the congress.

Story 2

"How stirring it was to hear the refrain "Opre Roma!" (Arise, Roma!) during and following each speech at the second World Roma Congress in Geneva in 1978.

The voices seemed to cry out with more passion than one is accustomed to hearing, full of passion, joy and sorrow.

Half-Romani, half-Swiss and Mongolian, I grew up among the Roma, first in Asia, then in my early teens in Paris. The Roma spirit has always been with me, and I have experienced the prejudices first-hand.

Roma seem to have been everywhere in the world – travelling figures with that certain walk, the bright eyes, the energetic children, the dances, the music, the extraordinary lament in songs that can turn to abandon and joy. Yet many countries still do not recognise the existence of the Gypsy. Legally, they are simply vagrants.

While naturalised citizens in their host country, the Roma wish to retain their individuality, their language, their identity and their pride.

At the Roma congress, we lifted our unified voices to demand recognition and consultative status at the United Nations. A constitution was adopted and a representative committee elected.

Last August,¹ the United Nations Human Rights Commission adopted a resolution calling on all countries to accord equal rights to the Roma people.

Now we must go one step further to be recognised as a national minority in India, where the Roma nation originated. At present, we are a stateless people with few citizenship rights in our host countries. We see northern India, or Punjab, as our homeland.



Figure 3: Second Roma Congress, 1978

The Romani (Roma originating in northern India) are not recognised as a nationality but are simply classified as an ethnic group. In many countries, the Romani are not even permitted to have their own cultural associations and publications.

While many gypsies have received an education and enjoy a higher standard of living, many more remain poor, lack regular jobs and live in substandard housing. Children may be attending schools but they are failing to progress past the lowest grades. We must better educate Roma children.

Urgent preparatory work needs to be carried out. We must improve our organisation and co-ordination. The Roma are 10 million strong worldwide, but we do not share a common language. The Romani language itself, called Romanes – historically an oral rather than written language – must be standardised. One generation of the Roma must teach the language to the next generation. And regional groupings and commissions must be organised and maintained.

In a world of upheaval, the Roma want to follow the path of peace. The equal rights we want are no more than those already enjoyed by others. Much depends on what can be done through the United Nations.

As the Roma say: "Baktalo amaro baro dive! Baktalo amaro drom!" (May this great day be fortunate! May our road be a lucky one!)."

Yul Brynner, from his testimony about the Second Roma Congress, 1978

Yul Brynner, an iconic 20th-century actor, emerged as a prominent figure in the international Roma movement, who consistently highlighted his Roma lineage and was appointed honorary president of the International Romani Union (IRU), a title he retained until his passing in 1985.

1. August 1978

Story 3

"I can say that this was a very useful and well-attended meeting, and its decisions will continue to attract the attention of the world to the position of the Roma. The resolution adopted by the delegates makes it clear that it is time to end discrimination, that it is time for the countries where Roma live to improve their lives, to give them the rights they deserve. We have decided to submit all our documents from this congress to the United Nations and ask them to discuss the position of the Roma, so that all countries of the world recognise the Roma as a nation. At the congress, we also discussed the need to create a literary language for the Roma. With the help of our mother, India, and its linguists, we will work on creating a unique literary language of the Roma."

Grattan Puxon at the second World Roma Congress, 1978

A distinguished writer and activist, Grattan Puxon played a pivotal role in orchestrating the first World Roma Congress and was subsequently elected as its general secretary.

Story 4

"I join Žarko Jovanović and the Yugoslavs on the back seat. I want to explain. Zharko has taken up his balalaika. His strumming frequently stops, as if interrupted by the pitching of the vehicle. He is writing in a notebook. "Shun!" he says. "Listen to this!" Standing up in the gangway, he sings his fresh lyrics. He wants us to sing along. By the time the bus reaches Balsall Heath, "Đelem, đelem", sung to a traditional melody, is ready to be adopted as the Roma national anthem."

Grattan Puxon on the creation of the Roma anthem

Story 5

Žarko (Zharko) Jovanović, writer of the song "Đelem, đelem," which was selected as the Roma national anthem at the first World Roma Congress.

"The anthem is entitled "Opre Roma," which translates as "Rise up, Roma". People ask me: "How do the Roma 'rise up'?" "Does that mean a call to rise up for a revolution?" And I tell them: "Oh no ... to get up from the centuries-old dream of primitivism, to join contemporary social trends, to live a life worthy of a human being. I made it in 1949 together with a friend of mine from Radio Belgrade."



Figure 4: The Roma national anthem

I will never forget the beginning of the second World Roma Congress in Geneva in 1978. It was, I remember well, on 4 August. It is customary that, when the hymns are sung, everyone stands still. It is not like that with us Roma. Everyone sings and no one stands still – they are free! And when it was all over, the then president Dr Jan Cibalo spoke, who said that I was the author of the anthem, which was accepted at the first congress in London. A little later, our president brought earth and water that from India. He received the first Roma flag – blue sky, green grass – from my hands. This flag has been in New Delhi for a long time, in the museum for human rights. ...

You cannot understand that, that passion, our love for music. And she is everything to us; we celebrate our joys with her; we water our sorrows. Roma breathe with music.

The only thing I ask is that they see us as people – give us human rights. As long as I live, I will play my balalaika but also work for the good of my Roma, so that they may forever be freed from the legacy of the past and ignorance, which caused generations and generations to live in mud and misery. But I want the Roma to preserve themselves, their being, and our song – the Roma sounds that make us happy – will help them a lot in that."

Žarko Jovanović, excerpt from the testimony concerning the Roma anthem

The anthem is titled "Opre Roma!", which means "Rise up Roma!" I wrote the words, and I used the popular song "Đelem, đelem" for the melody. At the 1971 Roma congress in London, it was accepted as the Roma anthem.

Story 6

"The Romani flag has become ubiquitous and the conviction that the London Congress marked a vital stage in the emergence of the Roma nation rests unshakable. People must have their symbols and their heroes. A rule perhaps the more indelible for a nation without claim to homeland. [...]"

From the back of the hall, a woman's voice is raised. She understands the symbolism of sky and earth but wants a flame added. A fire signifying a new start.

They are looking for a symbol which will link Roma with India. Berberski argues their case. He is sure of his ground. Yugoslavia and India are allied in the non-aligned bloc. Roma need the protection of their ancient motherland. Rishi proposes the congress embellish the Roma flag with an ashoka chakra, the wheel of fortune featured on the Indian flag. He says politicians will recognise the intention immediately. There is a wave of approval. Hands are raised. Whether a vote has been taken, no one knows. Fajk is on his feet. He proposes a red wheel. The fitness of this is instantly comprehended. All hands are again in the air. No one needs to count. Something exalted is happening, almost metaphysical. The magic of the moment grips all. A profound collective faith is being placed in this flag. A standard raised to rally millions. It will fly now in the vanguard. Around it the Roma nation will muster."

Grattan Puxon on the creation of the Roma flag

Story 7

"On this day, one year ago, the first World Roma Congress was held in London, and it was decided that 8 April, the day the congress began, would be declared World Roma Day. It is the birthday of our people. On that day, we stepped onto the historical stage from which no one will be able to expel us anymore.

A birthday is the beginning of an intensive journey, a social and human liberation, undoubtedly a path towards freedom. We have become aware of ourselves, our position in society, our possibilities for self-affirmation, for finding our human place under the sun. No one welcomed us with open arms, and therefore our journey into the future can only be a self-sacrificing struggle, decisive and organised. In order to bear fruit, it must be precisely defined, depending on the possibilities of the environment in which it operates. The majority of Roma, finding themselves in a position of centuries-long persecution, undoubtedly occupy the lowest rung of social status and cultural elevation. Hence, the path of Roma emancipation, integration into mainstream society, achieving human social, and national equality with others, is long and arduous. Some common elements of Roma emancipation worldwide include adult literacy and qualification, education for youth, employment, opportunities to affirm existing values of national culture and create possibilities for its further development."

Slobodan Berberski on 8 April as World Roma Day

Story 8

"Those who came together for the first World Roma Congress can be said to have had the collective desire to enable a then emerging Roma nation to break from the separation imposed by the existence at that time of two hostile blocs in Europe. Otherwise, there was no agenda that had been circulated before we got around the table. But of course we had a clean sheet with the adoption of the Roma flag embossed with the red ashoka chakra, the Roma anthem with words by Žarko Jovanović and designating 8 April as Roma nation day."

Grattan Puxon on the Roma national movement in the 1970s

If you choose another topic of Roma history, you can make use of ready-to-use story collections or put together a story collection yourself using resources that are available. You can also explore source collections in libraries and museums.

Step 2 – Using the materials in the classrooms

Activity 1 – Introducing the topic to your students

Depending on your students' level of knowledge about Roma history, you can use the historical content brief about the event or time period you have selected as a reference. If you are looking for more historical information about the Roma community in Europe, you may want to use these additional historical content briefs. Using the historical information you have gathered, you may decide to give a short presentation followed by a plenary session covering what students already know about the topic and what they would like to know. This will also help you to better outline the needs and interests of your students. It is important to have clear learning goals in terms of knowledge and skills, and to plan a coherent learning sequence to help students achieve them. Learning activities should relate to one another, promote historical thinking and lead to the achievement of learning goals in a cohesive manner.

To gain your students' interest, you may choose to use a more active learning method. You can start by dividing the class into pairs and give each pair a life story from the collection or another related life story. Give your students the time to read and reflect on the place and time in which the protagonist of their story lives. This can also serve as a starting point to go deeper into the historical context of the event.

In this strategy the central question for students to consider when analysing the personal narratives is: "How does an individual's experience of Roma activists from the 1970s help us better understand the Roma community and their political imaginary today?" You can also use this question in the final discussion round (see below) as a reflection or evaluation exercise.

Provide students with choices as to how they access the stories, that is, consider whether they should read them alone, read them with a peer or read along while the teacher reads them aloud.

Activity 2 – Analysing the life stories

Analysing personal narratives (individual stories or testimonies) in the classroom can be very powerful because it allows students to understand historical events from an individual's perspective. At the same time, care should be taken to ensure that students know the historical context of the events that the oral source talks about.

If you divided the class into pairs in the previous step, you could continue by inviting each pair to compare and contrast their source with that of another pair. If you haven't assigned the students to pairs yet, you can group them now into twos or threes, depending on the size of your group, and give each group a story from the stories provided in "The Roma movement in the 1970s through the eyes of contemporaries". Give each of them time to analyse their source.

In examining a written source, a group can identify its origin, delve into the content, assess the historical context, discern the perspective conveyed, analyse the apparent purpose or motive for its creation, and consider the intended audience of the document. Ask the groups to gather the following information about their source:

- ▶ the individual's name, role and the date and location of the testimony or interview, and its subject matter;
- ▶ individuals, locations and dates referenced in the narrative;
- ▶ issues or challenges articulated by the speaker;
- ▶ emotional and personal aspects of the speaker's discourse;
- ▶ the role of the protagonist in the events recounted;
- ▶ the impact of the events on the speaker.

Discussion 1 – Similarities and differences between personal narratives

Once each group has had the time to collect this information from their source, match them with another group so that they can compare and contrast their sources to see whether there are any similarities or differences. They can use the following guiding questions.

- ▶ How similar and different are the people you have read about in terms of age, gender, level of education, where they were born, where they lived in during these years?
- ▶ How would you summarise your person's story?
- ▶ Overall, does your story give a sense of how easy or difficult times were in these years? Share examples from your stories.
- ▶ How much did life for your person change during the period? How does that compare to the experience of the other person?
- ▶ To what extent were the people you read about involved with events that affected them personally?
- ▶ How far were they concerned with wider events and changes in society?

After discussing in paired groups, students can continue the discussion about similarities and differences between the personal stories at the plenary and discuss the findings of all teams. Following up on the discussion about similarities and differences, you can continue the plenary discussion, going more deeply into what the life stories can tell us about the Roma political movement. You can use the following guiding questions.

- ▶ What is the role of the witness/narrator within the Roma political movement of the 1970s?
- ▶ What was the impact of the Roma political movement on the narrator?
- ▶ To what extent did the testimony of the witness/narrator align with the objectives of the Roma political movement in the 1970s?
- ▶ How can we reflect on the impact of these life stories and experiences on the Roma community in the present day?

Discussion 2 – History and memory

The second discussion focuses more on the limitations of life stories in studying the history of the event. Life stories or testimonies are valid in their own way and are very personal interpretations of events based on one's memory. Together with your students, reflect on the following points in plenary.

- ▶ What may be the problems of relying on memory for finding out about this topic?
- ▶ What do the memories reveal about this period that may be useful to a historian?
- ▶ What else do we need to know to make sense of this whole period and to understand where this person's memory fits into the wider context?
- ▶ What questions would we like to ask the person if we could ask them more about their memories?

After the plenary discussion, students can return to their teams of students (two groups of four to six students altogether) to take another critical look at their sources and reflect on the following questions.

- ▶ What insights have been acquired from this source that were not previously known?
- ▶ Does the source present a singular perspective exclusively?
- ▶ To what extent can the source be relied on as historical evidence?

Discussion 3 – Reflection

The final discussion can serve as a concluding exercise in which you invite students to reflect on the life stories and their own knowledge about the topic. You can guide the discussion using the following questions.

- ▶ What kinds of actions are described in the personal narratives?
- ▶ Why do you think these Roma individuals decided to take these actions?
- ▶ Do you think these actions had an impact? If so, how? If not, why not?
- ▶ What challenges did the individual(s) face?
- ▶ Were they able to overcome these challenges? If so, how? If not, why not?
- ▶ What did you learn about the Roma community from the stories?
- ▶ What surprised you in the stories?
- ▶ What part of their story would you like to know more about?
- ▶ Thinking about motivation, what do you think the quote "*Amaro Romano drom*" (Our Roma way) means?

This can be done in groups of four to six students, with each group writing down their answers to these questions on a poster that they can present in plenary afterwards.

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Dunja Jakopović holds a degree in History from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, with a specialisation in Modern and Contemporary History (19th-20th century). She also completed the Pedagogical, Didactic and Teaching Methodology Programme at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek.

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