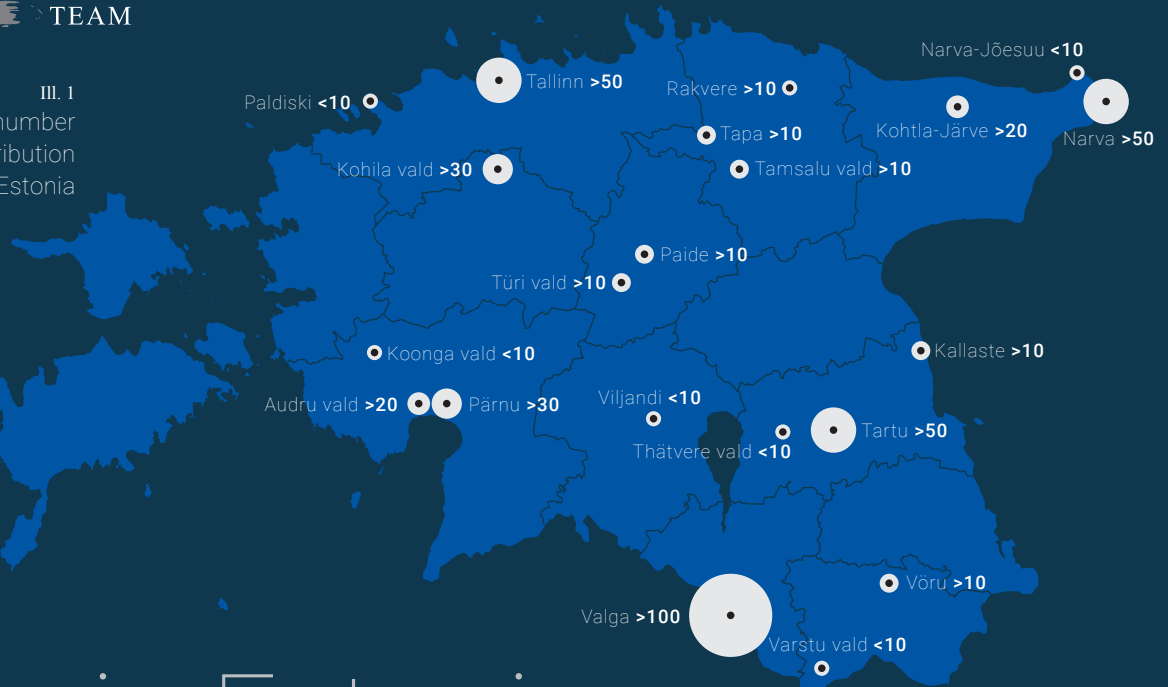




III. 1

Map showing the number and geographical distribution of the Roma in Estonia



3.7

Roma in Estonia

Source: Institute of Baltic Studies (IBS 2013)

Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz

The Roma in Estonia used to travel during summers and work as horse-traders and fortunetellers, practice leather and metal work, but also herbal medicine. Today the community, although sedentary, has kept the old traditions, but also values education of their children. The Roma in Estonia speak mostly Latvian but also Russian Romani dialect as these are the countries from where they have moved to the Estonian area. The community had a tragic fate and suffered great losses during the Second World War. The changes that have come with times, the different political, social and economic systems have affected the choice of occupations, the ways the families live, so the changing world poses constant challenges for the Roma as they have to adapt to changes while trying to keep their culture and customs based on *Romanipen* (rules, restrictions and the worldview that separates the Roma from the non-Roma; the basis of Romani identity).

INTRODUCTION

The Romani community in Estonia is rather small (according to the official statistics, around 456 or 593 people, but unofficially around 1000-1500 people). [III. 1] The Roma in Estonia have family ties in Latvia and also in Russia, so the community is not bound to state borders, yet self-identification as Estonian Roma (*Estoniska Roma*) exists. Linguistically the Roma in Estonia can be divided into the Lotfitka (Latvian) and Xaladytka (or also called Ruska, Russian) dialect groups similar to the case of Latvia. The larger community in Estonia speaks Lotfitka. The Roma mostly identify themselves as either Latvian, Russian or Estonian Roma. Usually it is the Latvian Roma who have lived in Estonia for several generations and started to identify themselves as Estonian Roma. Mixed marriages between Lotfitka and Xaladytka dialect speakers are also not uncommon. In Estonia, the Roma are traditionally Eastern Orthodox and Lutheran, while some of them belong to the Catholic Church. The religious belonging of

Roma in one family can vary between spouses. Starting mostly from the 1990s, Roma have also converted to Evangelical Christian churches such as Pentecostal and Baptist. In the conversions the connections with Finnish Kaale Roma missioning in Estonia have played an important role. [III. 2]

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND TRADITIONAL WAY OF LIFE

The very first records about Roma in Estonia date back to 1533, but mentioning in historical documents becomes more constant since the 17th century. In 1841 the Laiuse Roma in Estonia were ordered by the authorities to move to the Laiuse Parish and their movement was restricted. They received passports to ensure that they return from their travels to the home parish to pay taxes. This group had become also the most integrated with the Estonian population and had started to lose their language. Before the Second World War there were about 800 Roma in Estonia

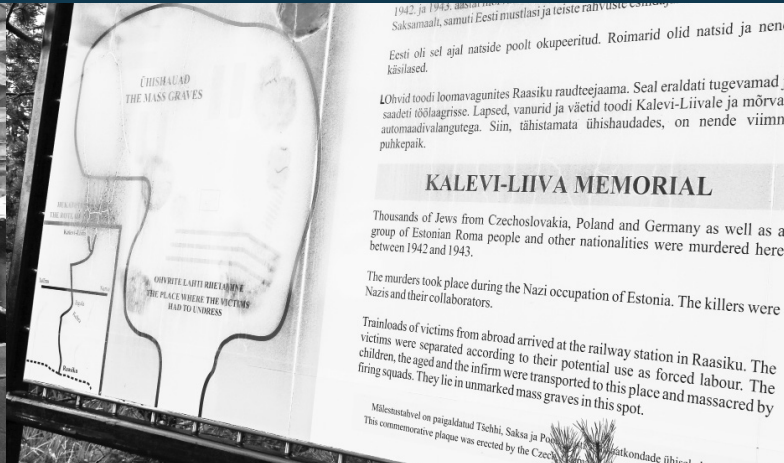
III. 2

An evangelical mission event for Roma taking place in Estonia.



III. 3

Memorial to the Romani and Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Kalevi-Liiva (Estonia).



who belonged to three groups: the Laiuse (Lajenge) Roma, who probably moved to Estonia from Sweden and Finland, the Latvian Roma and the Russian Roma. Most of the Roma in Estonia before the Second World War had moved to Estonia from Latvia. The three Romani communities were closely connected through intermarriages, travelling together and meeting at fairs.

Trading horses and doing leather and metal handicrafts connected to horses were the traditional occupations of Romani men. The women were taking care of home and children, but also fortunetelling at fairs, begging and practicing herbal medicine. Nevertheless, there have always been differences between Romani families, some being considered more cultured and respected, while others less. At the beginning of the 20th century the Roma started to become sedentary and these living conditions started to affect also the Romani community. The greatest tragedy for the Roma was the time of the Second World War. During the occupation of Estonia by Nazi Germany, almost all of the Laiuse Roma and most Latvian and Russian Roma living in Estonia were executed. In 1934 the Romani population in Estonia was counted as 766 people and after the war in 1959 the number given was 366. In 2007 the memorial stone for the Romani victims was erected in Kalevi-Liiva by the local Romani society together with Finnish partners. Every year, on 2 August, Roma gather at the memorial to pay their respects to the Roma who lost their lives. [Ills. 3, 4] After the Second World War, during the Soviet period more Roma moved to the Estonian area and married into the remaining population.

During the Soviet rule the Roma faced official restrictions on travelling, but during the summers many families still continued travelling and returning to their homes for winter, so that children could start school. The previous generations are remembered not to have owned houses and travelled also during winters, staying at farmers' homes etc. Families used to meet at certain areas fit for camping which were always located next to water. Then they erected their tents there and cooked food on campfire. The nice and big pillows and blankets that could be used in the tents were important possessions for the Roma. The Roma have become more and more sedentary during the 20th century and nowadays travelling is not practiced.

During Soviet times Roma started working in different fields fitting their education levels. When Roma still owned horses they used them to help out when farmers needed them or some worked as collectors of discarded clothes, paper etc. and bringing these to the collection points. Trading became an important source of earning a living, also for women. The goods that were later sold were brought from other Soviet Socialist Republics. This kind of travelling for business was common. During the Soviet times trading was regarded as "speculation" and therefore it was illegal, but the Roma still found ways to escape from or come to agreements with the militsiya (police forces in the Soviet Union) and were able to practice it. One way of trading was travelling in the countryside and offering the goods to farmers. In the 1990s, with the change to capitalism many Roma, along with majority people, started working at markets. In some cases the Roma were not aware of the social security system that requires payment of social taxes, they lost these working years on the markets as a way to earn pensions afterwards. The change of the societal and economical system has not been easy to accommodate for all Roma and usually the Soviet time is remembered by the Roma as providing more social and financial security.

CONTEMPORARY SITUATION

Nowadays the Roma in Estonia live in different towns around the country and are not a homogeneous community. The Roma do not all live in similar conditions and are involved in very different occupations, while business and trading and more independent work through self-employment are often preferred. From one side this is due to the wish for greater flexibility, so that family matters can be attended and staying connected with the extended family is possible. Many prefer vocational education, e.g. becoming chefs. From another side, the education level is an obstacle for many Roma when trying to get jobs with greater qualifications. During summers berry picking in forests and selling them to collectors is also a way to make some extra money. The Roma talk about negative experiences while applying for work and how discrimination has affected them. Younger Roma also look for possibilities to work in countries with higher

III. 4

Romani women commemorating the victims of Holocaust on the 2nd of August 2017 at the memorial stone to Romani victims in Kalevi-Liiva (Estonia).



III. 5

The preparation of the dough for *mariklya* during an evangelical mission event for Roma in Latvia.



wages and better social systems. Finland and Great Britain have been popular choices for migration but the migrating Roma remain closely connected to their families in Estonia. The Romani NGOs wish for better education options and possibilities for those Romani children who come from families with lesser possibilities and where parents do not have the qualifications nor finances to support their children's educational path. For instance, due to the pressure from Romani NGOs the issue of Romani children being placed in schools for children with special needs for no other reason than lower language skills, was solved. The Roma in Estonia often speak several languages from an early age on which, although in general this is an advantage, may cause problems when starting school.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

For the Roma in Estonia, marriages inside the community are still preferred, yet mixed marriages with the majority population, once strictly prohibited, are getting more common. Nevertheless, the Roma follow a lifestyle where family bonds play an important role. Although the Roma live in different towns all over the country, they communicate with relatives on regular basis and often with those family members who live separately from them. There are larger get-togethers from time to time which bind the community and offer possibilities for children and youth to get to know each other and for marriage matching.

Yes, sure. Yes we meet with each other, it's not like we go to visit each other every day but we have those gatherings. Yes-yes, we meet very often, sometimes we just go to visit someone in every three months. Or we call each other and ask where they are and what they are doing. Yes, we keep in touch. (Woman, born 1957)

The control over acceptance into family by marriage lies in the hand of the parents and older members of the family. The Roma usually marry early, which allows them to start fully taking part of the adult world earning their own money and starting a family life. The Roma stress that the importance of a girl's virginity upon marriage is one of the customs that is still strictly followed

today. This is seen as a rule which has not changed over time. Youngsters eloping and marrying afterwards are also common. Divorces and remarrying have become nowadays more tolerated. Although the marriage age has risen and women often work, it is still considered a woman's job and responsibility to take care of the home and children, to cook and to keep the house clean and tidy, and to be "the hostess and warmth of home".

Mostly only men work. They earn money. They used to sell horses, because women were housewives and they have children. If the woman found work, then she worked but seldom she could find and that is why Gypsies¹ didn't work. If they can, they work hard. Nowadays many Gypsies work. All the Gypsies who find work in Finland go to work there, very many left. (Woman, born 1957)

The family and solidarity inside the community is part of the Romani culture in Estonia. Taking care of relatives and their children is considered important. Respect for elders plays an important role among the Roma too. Getting along with one's in-laws and showing respect towards one's mother-in-law has been especially important for the new brides. Women do not cut their hair short and still wear longer skirts continuing to live according to the customs and ritual purity rules (according to which the body from waist down is considered unclean).

And the young women weren't allowed to pass the street where the horse was. Who is already married and already an older woman, can't go. And it's the same now as well when someone has a horse. I can't go near the horse, it's not allowed. I can look at the horse from distance, but I can't go where the horse eats, it's not allowed. (Woman, born 1959)

Nevertheless, nowadays mostly nuclear families live together instead of extended families and the rules have become less strict, but still the youth feels the need to act according to the sets of rules in the presence of elders.

1 The term 'Gypsies' corresponds to the Estonian term *mustlased* which is based on the word *must* 'black'.

When she is polite and so on, the whole family will respect and love her and after some time she will become the lady of the house herself. Now it's so and so, who wants to, can, who doesn't, won't. Because they live more separately from the parents now. They don't live with the in-laws, they live separately and do what they want. But in the past, it was a very strong tradition and it was a must. [...] but young people don't want to follow the traditions and they already forget. (Woman, born 1959)

VALUES AND PRACTICES OF THE COMMUNITY

Disputes among the community used to be solved by the Romani court (*Romano sondo*). This custom and oath taking are still practiced. Respected elders with a strong say in matters can also be women. Hospitality and solidarity among the Roma are also important values. If Roma have arrived in town then one is supposed to invite them to one's house and offer food, tea or coffee. The obligation to host and to show hospitality is stated as normal way of life, coming from upbringing. One shows respect to others by being hospitable and in return this keeps one a respected member of the group.

And we had nothing. Only tea, without sugar. Tea is the most important. Hospitality is so important. Always you have to bring to the table something. I do it always, it's just so from the upbringing. (Woman, born 1986)

Funerals, for instance, are the greatest gatherings among the Roma and can last for several days and involve hundreds of guests. Weddings, on the contrary, are nowadays not celebrated elaborately. In case a party is made, then it takes place among

the family and close friends or even in secrecy to avoid unwanted guests, or out of fear of "the evil/black eye". Organizing the funeral and reception is regarded to be a matter of honor and attending the funeral means showing one's respect towards the deceased. Organizing a great funeral may even bring about the need for the family to take a loan. Mutual help in funding is also still present. Traditionally the coffin was taken to the graveyard by a horse wagon with a funeral procession passing through the town. Dancing at funerals is regarded controversially. Some find it appropriate if it is not immediate family of the deceased dancing, others do not approve of it at all. Dancing in Romani style is normally practiced at gatherings and parties and is passed on from older generations, but nowadays also learned with the help of videos on the internet. At gatherings it is custom that men and women sit at separate tables. The food offered at festivities or celebrations should be abundant and nicely served. The table should not look half empty. What can be considered traditional food is the kind of things that could be made on open fire outside during summer time, e.g. chicken soup or *mariklya* (flat-cakes cooked in boiling water). [III. 5]

CONCLUSION

The Romani community has managed to preserve their language, culture and customs although they have become sedentary and are not practicing jobs related to horses anymore. Trading and fortune-telling still exist as means to earn a living, although the younger generation has more freedom to choose different occupations. Nevertheless, topics of gaining higher education levels and better work possibilities without losing one's culture remain a current issue as pointed out by Romani activists.

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