

Researching a Community in Transition: Latvian Roma between Latvia and the UK

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Abstract

Since 2004, when Latvia joined the European Union, nearly half of the Latvian Roma have moved abroad, mainly to the UK. This fact has influenced the research on Latvian Roma music. The article self-reflexively explores migration as “losing” a fieldwork community and coping with the loss. A digital action for re-connecting with the Roma community was establishing a Facebook group, “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra” (“History and Culture of Latvian Roma”), in the summer of 2019. Initially, the group was defined as a one-way commitment to share historical sources with Roma and people interested in Roma history and culture. Gradually, the group shifted from being primarily a science communication tool to digital participative ethnography. A part of it was exploring Roma’s engagement with music-related content. Another chapter is based on recent fieldwork with Latvian Roma in England. The fieldwork took place among born-again Christian Roma and their established churches and reflected on the traditional Romani values and behavior in this context. The author identifies a triple mobility – physical, social and spiritual – which necessitates a redefinition of the existing framework for researching the Latvian Roma. The article concludes with a reflection on a field-centric, community-centric approach as an interdisciplinary-oriented research practice.

Latvian Romani Abstract

Pētījumus pārejaki kopienatir:

lotfika roma meždu Latvija ti Apvienotu Karalista

Kopsavilkumus

Dava isi zinātnisku rakstus, kai aprakstīta pētījumi, so kerdža Ieva Vīvere ku lotfika roma. An 2003.–2005. berš jei intervidža romen ti ierakstija romengi giļļa an Ventspīļa ti vār Latvijaki pfori. Pošli dova pētījumus gandrīz apterdijape vašdo si būt roma pārhadīnepe pu Anglija ti vār valsti. Sākot 2004. beršestir si Latvija iestājidžape an Eiropaki Savienība gandrīz pāš Latvijaki

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roma vibraucide Latvijā. An 2019. berš Ieva Vīvere viveidija Facebook grupa “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra”. Sākumustir da grupa isis iecerētu sobi daļinenpe romengi bildenca so isis lačle an visāda arhīvi. Roma nin isis aicināta daļinenpe phūre bildenca vai komentinen, ti tēmi sostir doi rakirde jačle arvienu butedir. Grupaki statistika sikāla, si vispopulāredir isi ziņi romengi mūzikatir ti lilendir. Da grupa možija pētniecake atjauninel svjazi du romenca, ko vibraucide, ti an 2023. beršesku linaj jei turpidža pētījumi an Anglija. Jek kurku jei intervija romen an Derby ti isis arī pu kristīgu konferenca so notieki saku berš. An Warrington ti Barnsely jei ierakstija giļla an khangēri. An da rakstus isi aprakstīta pārmaiņi so notikandine an lotfika romengi dzīva ti si vipārudepe vērtībi, kopš jone pārhadīnepe pu Anglija. Pārmaiņi isi saistīta gan štetuski maiņas, gan dolesa si jačle kristieši, gan si vašti dolen butin ti najān ierboežota an sabiedrība druh pengi tautiba.

Translation from Latvian to Latvian Romani by Līga Ignate

Latvian Abstract

Pētot pārejas kopienu:
latviešu romi starp Latviju un Apvienoto Karalisti

Kopsavilkums

Kopš 2004. gada, kad Latvija pievienojās Eiropas Savienībai, gandrīz puse Latvijas romu ir pārcēlušies uz ārzemēm, galvenokārt uz Apvienoto Karalisti. Tas izraisīja arī latviešu romu publiskās muzicēšanas un mūzikas pētniecības apsīkumu. Raksts ir pētnieces pašrefleksija par romu migrāciju kā lauka pētījuma kopienas “zaudēšanu” un sadzīvošanu ar zaudējumu. Lai atjaunotu saikni ar romu kopienu, 2019. gada vasarā raksta autore izveidoja Facebook grupu “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra”. Grupas sākotnējā iecere bija dalīties ar vizuālām liecībām par romu vēsturi un kultūru. Pakāpeniski grupas ievirze mainījās no pētījumu komunikācijas uz digitālu līdzdalības etnogrāfiju, ietverot arī vērojumu par romu reakcijām uz grupā publicēto mūzikas saturu. Rakstā apkopotas arī atziņas par 2023. gada lauka pētījumu Anglijā. Tas notika pie latviešu romiem, kas ir aktīvi kristieši un darbojas Apvienotajā Karalistē izveidotajās latviešu romu draudzēs. Lauka pētījuma mērķis bija izzināt romu attieksmi pret tradicionālajām vērtībām un dzīvesveidu jaunajā kontekstā. Autore konstatē trīskāršu mobilitāti – fizisko, sociālo un garīgo – kas liek pārvērtēt Latvijas romu pētniecības līdzšinējo ietvaru. Raksta noslēgumā reflektēts par starpdisciplināru pētniecības pieeju, kuras centrā ir lauks vai kopiena, nevis konkrētas zinātnes nozares specializācija.

Introduction: Losing Community, Gaining Questions

The stimulus for this study was the *lack* of Roma music in Latvia. “Gypsy music” is appealing to the public, but the niche is almost empty, and choices are minimal, which can be confirmed by event organizers and Roma themselves. In the summer of 2023, I was asked to suggest Roma musicians for a culinary show on national television and a summer festival in a Riga neighborhood. The enthusiasm to include an “authentic Gypsy music” performance faced the limiting fact that there is only one longstanding

and active Roma music group, Ame Roma, established in Riga in 1976. Most of the other groups that were active 20 years ago do not exist anymore or perform music that does not aim to represent their ethnicity, such as popular schlager or Christian worship music.¹ Darja Kulagina, a former societal inclusion events coordinator in the municipality of Jūrmala, who worked closely with Roma there from 2016 to 2023, confirmed that even for Roma events it was not easy to provide Roma music performances. Sometimes the solution was to invite Roma performers from Lithuania or Estonia or local non-Roma musicians recognized by Roma (Darja Kulagina, chat message, September 17, 2023).

This situation overlapped with my almost-stopped Latvian Roma music fieldwork, which began in 2002. The reasons were both my moving research projects and the changes in local Roma communities. All my key research companions from Ventspils, a port city in Western Latvia, had moved to the UK or passed away. Public Roma music performances have become rare compared to the beginning of the 21st century when music groups in 10 towns were active. In 2004, Latvia joined the European Union, and a vast economic migration of the Latvian Roma started, mainly to the UK, and intensified after the Great Recession hit Latvia in 2008.

Latvian Roma in the UK are part of Latvia's "new diaspora," which formed after the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991. EU accession in 2004 gave Latvian citizens immediate access to many new labor markets. After a relatively flat initial migration wave in 1991–2003, the effective annual net emigration rate doubled within five years of joining the EU (2004–2008) and more than doubled again during the Great Recession (2009–2010). In the post-crisis years, the intensity of emigration slowed down; still, the level of emigration remained above pre-crisis levels (Hazans 2019: 46). Putting it in numbers, in the five years after EU accession, net emigration was around 76,000, and during the Great Recession around 125,000 people (Hazans 2020: 15). In the first 20 years of the 21st century, the net loss of Latvian nationals was 13.2% of the population (*ibid.*: 15–16). Currently, the total estimated size of Latvia's diaspora is around half a million (*ibid.*: 56). The largest part of it – 104,000 persons – lives in the United Kingdom (*ibid.*: 17). This includes the majority of the Latvian Roma diaspora.

At the beginning of 2023, around 6,200 Roma were registered in Latvia (OCMA 2023). A comparison of censuses from 2000 and 2023 shows that the number of Roma has declined by nearly half (OSP 2023), corresponding to the estimation among Roma themselves. The decreased number of Roma is also high compared to the total population of Latvia. Currently, the migration seems irreversible, and Latvia is at risk of losing a historical ethnic group.

¹ A new contribution to the "Gypsy music" niche in Latvia is a Gypsy folk rock band, Alum Alu, from Riga. The band was formed in 2020, and its members are non-Roma who perform traditional Roma songs and popular Balkan songs translated into Latvian, English, and Russian. Alum Alu's Bandcamp profile: <https://alumalu.bandcamp.com/album/alum-alu> (accessed September 17, 2024).

Until the summer of 2023, the research on Latvian migration and the diaspora did not include a targeted study on Latvian Roma. This also regards studies on the Latvian diaspora in the UK. Still, the research addresses issues that are relevant to Roma migrants, such as discourses and practices of identity and belonging, the status and experiences of migrants in the UK labour market structure (Kaprāns 2023), and narratives of achievement among employees in “low-skilled” jobs (Moroşanu et al. 2021). Some authors have analyzed the emigration of Latvian ethnic minorities, either as a generalized group or distinguishing the largest, such as Russian speakers (Lulle and Jurkane-Hobein 2017; Hazans 2016, 2019). Researchers should still inquire further about the specifics of Roma migrants; the first steps towards this have been the recent study on Roma migration, belonging, and homemaking by the oral historian Ieva Garda-Rozenberga (2023).

The case of Latvian Roma asks us to consider the conceptual framing of their mobility. The anxious voice of Latvian national policies and popular media speaking about the economic and demographic consequences of out-migration does not seem to include this economically inferior and socially not-so-welcome minority group. Analyzing the social and material relations affected by out-migration in the Latvian countryside, the social anthropologist Dace Dzenovska (2018, 2020) has introduced the concepts of *emptying* and *emptiness*, which has a broader context of substantial population decline in post-socialist Eastern and Central European countries (Ubarevičienė, van Ham, and Burneika 2016). The perception of emptying in Latvia takes various environmental and social forms: “When conveying the sense of emptiness that they experienced, people in the country and the city talked about empty streets and homes, weeds overtaking abandoned buildings, lack of work, disintegrating social relations, crumbling infrastructure, closure of rural schools, and, more generally, extinction” (Dzenovska 2018: 19). This description reminds me of the remarks of Roma, such as “nobody is here/there anymore,” and their less visible presence in the streets of towns with the densest Roma populations.

This article self-reflexively explores migration as “losing” a historical group and fieldwork companions and coping with the loss. The feeling of “losing” a community can be seen as a new stage in the long-lasting nostalgic motivations of ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and anthropologists studying the “dying out” customs and performative practices (Berliner 2014). For the last 10 years, mobility and migration issues have been raised in heritage studies (Colomer 2017; Colomer and Catalani 2020; Giglito, Ciolfi, and Bosswick 2022). The discourse of loss, when it appears at all, refers to the loss, dying, or absence of the heritage caused by peoples’ migration (Amescua 2013; Catalani 2020). Following the invitation of heritage scholars to “move the focal point to people” (Colomer 2017: 914), this study addresses the feeling of loss of people themselves from the perspective of a *stayer*.

After the most active fieldwork phase in 2003–2005, my communication with Roma slowed down and experienced interruptions. The research branched out into smaller episodes, and the field of study diversified. Besides a doctoral thesis on authenticities in Latvian Roma music, a subsequent study on the ethnicity and sustainability of Roma

public music-making (Tihovska 2021), and a recording session of multipart singing in Ventspils, I have become involved in studying the history of Roma activism (Tihovska 2022), collecting historical photos and practicing the photo-elicitation method (see Harper 2002) to contextualize these historical sources, organizing a workshop of traditional Latvian Roma dance, and initiating and moderating a Facebook group called “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra” (“History and Culture of Latvian Roma”). A reflection on the isolation from the half-emigrated research community accompanied this process. Many questions appeared: Has my Roma music research come to an end? What should I do with my field recordings? What is the current life of my former fieldwork companions like? How can I reach them? Has the music changed? What is my role as a researcher in this situation, and how can I reciprocate? Moreover, what is my particular role as a music researcher?

This article will follow my “de-isolation” attempts by describing the two stages towards resuming the interrupted fieldwork. The first stage was a digital action that helped me find my previous research companions and led to the recent fieldwork in the UK. It also meant creating a virtual fieldwork site and exploring its possibilities, limitations, and musical contents. The second stage was my trip to the UK. My fieldwork companions there appeared to be born-again Christians, and the entire fieldwork was a study of their new life: not only in physical and social but also in spiritual terms. Music was always in my field of vision, though sometimes I left it on the periphery to explore the social contexts and preconditions of music-making and its research.

Digital Action: From Science Communication to Digital Ethnography

Reciprocity and sharing data and knowledge are permanent considerations for contemporary fieldworkers and archivists. Besides the discussion on ownership and “giving back” archival resources to the communities, this issue relates to science communication practices and skills. Online social media are easily accessible and highly populated venues for the digital presence of scholars and their institutions and messages. The use of the Internet’s social media for communication between formal institutions and their target groups has been academically discussed. The education scientists Begoña Vigo-Arrazola and Belén Dieste-Gracia have analyzed different informative and interactive uses of digital spaces in the school-family relationship. They point to the problems of one-way communication and possible unequal access, which results in the digital divide being an obstacle to successful interaction (Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste-Gracia 2019). However, these and other ethical, social, and cultural considerations can only urge us to master these communication tools. Science communication and reciprocity interlink with other broad domains of contemporary academia: community engagement and citizen science.

The issues of archiving and sharing cultural resources and academic knowledge in the *postdigital age* – “a blended landscape of the digital and the offline” (Bluteau 2021:

279) – stimulated me to explore the Facebook group’s functionality for research communication. One of the two Facebook groups I have initiated is “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra,” established on July 30, 2019.² Initially, it was called “Latvijas romu vēsture fotogrāfijās” (“The History of Latvian Roma in Photos”). It was used for sharing historical photos found in public and private archives, thereby contributing to the visibility of Roma in Latvian history and promoting access for Roma to archival resources. Gradually, the group’s content broadened and included other types of data. Alongside my YouTube channel,³ this Facebook group serves to share resources, discoveries, and questions. Since 2019, the group has shifted from primarily science communication and one-way sharing towards a digital participative ethnography in this self-created field-site.

New methodologies for digital ethnography in social media platforms have been tested lately, such as immersive cohabitation (Bluteau 2021) and collaborative (auto)ethnography (Vik, DeGroot, and Lanterman 2022). Digital fieldwork sites have been characterized as social spaces with shared cultural literacy and references (Wood 2008). The impact of gender-based cultural habits and norms on Facebook communication has also been addressed (Abdullah and Banikalef 2019). It has also been noted that the researcher’s familiarization with and acquisition of the modes of communication take longer in digital fieldwork compared to face-to-face interaction (Bluteau 2021: 273). Generally, a more elaborated reflection on digital and specifically social media ethnography has developed during the last decade. The recent nature of the current social reality can be realized by reading older studies and discovering that some former understandings, such as the distinction between offline and online life, are already losing their relevance.

In ethnomusicology and related fields, several doctoral theses and shorter studies have been based on digital ethnography. They have discussed the networked creativity in chipmusic culture (Polymeropoulou 2014), Taiwanese Indigenous musicians’ self-presentation on social media (Lin 2021), the intersections of popular music and politics in Tanzania (Avidan 2023), and musical interaction between people in diasporas and their previous homelands (Schell 2013; Krishnamurthy 2013). Several articles have analyzed the digital infrastructures of music circulation (Durham 2020), the impact of social media and digitalization on the music industry (Adedeji 2023), as well as distribution patterns and public perception of music published online (Yu and Schroeder 2018). Young ethnomusicologists have started a more coherent discussion in a special issue of *SEM Student News* devoted to digital ethnomusicology (SEM 2013), including a section on Facebook practices.

Ethical issues are constantly present and often acute in social media on personal, group, formal, and informal communication. Besides inequalities resulting from the

² Facebook group “Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra”:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/905708096447850> (accessed September 17, 2024).

³ Author’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkpbEOjgJY499cLm_i4jh0w (accessed September 17, 2024).

digital divide, the online disinhibition effect⁴ has been considered both favourable and disturbing for the interaction. Social media can be perceived as uneasy spaces full of danger, which, in my opinion, cannot even be solved by the most careful considerations. Discontinuity, difficulties in delivering non-verbal communication messages, and random encounters with strangers can lead to misunderstandings and boundary turbulences. Despite these deficiencies, social media still can provide advantageous fieldwork sites. They are affordable and resource-saving, enable communication over long distances, allow reflection before reacting, and let one choose a preferable form of communication (text, emojis, images, audio, and video).

The seminal ethnographic study by Sally Baker proposed a three-part conceptualization of using Facebook in research: as a medium of communication, as data, and as context, “a shared space between the researcher and the participants” (Baker 2013). A recent collective (auto)ethnographic study has recognized the audience as “not only a passive participant who reads and disseminates a story, but also an active agent who co-constructs it” (Vik, DeGroot, and Lanterman 2022: 12). Facebook has been defined and researched as “a dynamic database of social attitudes” (Abdullah and Banikalef 2019: 401). Initially, I defined the Facebook group “History and Culture of Latvian Roma” as a one-way commitment to share historical sources with the permission of individuals and institutions. However, group participants were encouraged to share photos, stories, and comments and contact the Archives of Latvian Folklore if they wished to digitize their family photos professionally. I noticed that Roma value old photos considerably and like to share and see them online. From the very beginning, it was an observational project exploring Roma digital practices, reactions, and feedback on academic work. Posting and monitoring the group became a self-reflexive practice and a site for immediate sharing and reciprocity.

The group is public, but to post or comment there a person needs to become a member by writing a short statement on their interest in the group. The posts are published after a basic review to stay close to the topic and avoid scams. Sometimes, irrelevant posts by Roma (such as financial, political, religious messages) are accepted to respect their preferred content and get anthropological insights. Repeated irrelevant posts are rejected, and this decision is addressed in a private message or publicly in a generalized manner. The intention is to maintain an open, shared, and respectful space for Roma and non-Roma who want to learn about Roma history and culture. I also attempt to use clear and non-academic language for inclusive communication. Being aware that people are participating in a group initiated and monitored by me, I try to diminish my voice by referencing and acknowledging the contribution of other people and institutions.

⁴ The term “digital divide” points to the peoples’ differences in both accessing and using digital technologies (Vigo-Arrazola and Dieste-Gracia 2019: 207). The online disinhibition effect is that people say and do things online that they would probably not say or do in face-to-face interactions (Suler 2004).



Figure 1. A photo of Kārlis Leimanis' family, posted by his daughter on the Facebook group "Latvijas romu vēsture un kultūra" on July 27, 2020. Some reactions by other Roma appear on the right. The first commenter says she recognized this family (screenshot made by the author on October 20, 2023; the post is used by permission).

At the beginning of July 2024, the group had 1,440 members, the majority of them Roma. Others are scholars involved in Roma studies, Roma policy implementors and activists, and people related to Roma or interested in their culture and history. Around 65% of 165 posts in total were created by me. Other posts (around 60) have been published by Roma themselves (at least 20 persons have been engaged in this way) or by researchers, experts, and active enthusiasts. More than 70 historical Latvian Roma photos have been published, sometimes with an added comment. Other types of content are interesting facts and documents, polls, media and academic publications, news from Latvia and abroad, calls for collaboration, genocide testimonies, Roma literature, and music. 25 posts are related to music, and 17 contain video or audio recordings. Music posts are actively engaged with by users, who like, share and comment on them. The group's top post is a fragment of a documentary released in 1969 containing Roma musicians and a Roma song, which has reached 5,300 Facebook users. Also, the statistics of my fieldwork recordings' views are pretty high on Facebook as well as my YouTube channel, often reaching some hundred and, in some cases, more than a thousand views. This shows that Roma are actively interested and engaged in digital music content.

The most frequent comments are on the historical photos of people that Roma recognize and honor. They express this by mentioning their names and kinship ties, praising their virtues, asking for their personal updates in Romani or Latvian, as well as posting hearts, red roses, thumbs up, applause, or prayer/gratitude emojis (often animated; see Figure 1). The other most actively commented posts have been on Roma literature, history, language, visual symbolics, and funeral traditions. Sometimes, Roma publicly or privately ask for a clarification or explanation of my posts and express disagreement. Several times, private messaging has been initiated by a group post and led

to interviews, valuable insights, detailed information, and other types of communication. It can be concluded that in five years, the group has developed towards a more participatory site, which has recently been emphasized in a re-formulated description of the group.

The level and forms of Roma engagement with the digital content (provided by *gādže*) was one of the issues in my digital ethnography. The most popular posts have one to five thousand views. Some of them have dozens of shares and likes. Still, many posts seem to lack interest or engagement, even when a post contains a question. These cases can give the impression of a distanced and uninterested presence, but other occasions prove that Roma are ready to engage and share their expertise, views, and feelings. It is a reminder that digital behaviors are as diverse, complex, and layered as face-to-face ones, pointing to the different user resources, habits, and social norms. Benjamin Tausig suspected the application of the older “area studies” paradigm to digital ethnomusicology and the framing of Internet sites through spatial metaphors: “I was struck by the uneven character of my friends’ use of such mediating forms. . . . None of the tools employed by a . . . community were ‘places,’ as such; rather, they were layers of affordances imposed on an already richly layered community. These tools influenced connection but did not flatten class, ideology, or gender politics” (Tausig 2013: 3).

Virtual participation practices belong to a broader topic of technology use among Roma. Some years ago, I witnessed the physical home of a Roma family in Latvia extended by a virtual room – a computer screen leading to a room of their family in the UK. The remote UK family members entered and left the room and sometimes engaged in random domestic conversations with the family in Latvia. This example of postdigital reality emphasizes the role of technologies in a group that has been physically separated by migration. Audio and video calls on Facebook Messenger are a widespread Roma communication practice suggested by some of them as being the primary one. As observed in the fieldwork, the most visible devices are smartphones. It was also concluded that writing might not be the most effective communication medium. Unscheduled direct Messenger calls are common; in addition, I have been advised to use voice messaging. Church events show that Roma – both men and women – are skillful users of technologies for amplifying, recording, live broadcasting, and sharing. A vast informal “archive” of Latvian Roma funeral and wedding videos is stored and shared on YouTube. Furthermore, live broadcasts of church services and podcasts are stored on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, allowing a researcher to carry out regular observation. This leads to the insight that the older image and role of a well-equipped, technologically skilled and helpful researcher is not an exclusive position anymore. This loss of the position so typical for the researcher raises questions about other important functions of a contemporary fieldworker, archivist, and academic.

The Physical, Social, and Spiritual Mobility of the New Latvian Roma Diaspora in the UK

In the summer of 2023, I resumed fieldwork by traveling to England to hopefully meet the families of my previous fieldwork in Ventspils, Latvia. I also planned to visit and film the Roma church service at least twice, knowing that this is an important context of their music-making. Yet, my preliminary questions were focused on continuing the earlier research: to discover how migration has influenced the previously recorded repertoire and how the dance tradition, funeral customs, and the old Roma values and ways have changed. During fieldwork in Ventspils in 2003–2005 I noticed and recorded some recent religious songs and heard about Roma attending church. Back then I did not pay much attention to this topic and prioritized traditional music and contexts. However, during the fieldwork conducted in England, Christian worship music was the most frequently encountered soundmark within the Latvian Roma musical soundscape.

When I reminded a Roma man in England that he had performed the international Roma anthem “Dželem, dželem” (Latvian orthography) in 2004, he replied that those were different times when he sang secular songs, and he did not even remember them anymore. Therefore, the following ethnography will add to the previous ethnomusicological research on Roma religion and religious music, particularly Pentecostalism (Lange 2003; Povedák 2017; Åberg 2014; Slavkova 2012).

The fieldwork in England lasted for ten days, mostly spent in Derby, East Midlands, with day trips to Warrington and Barnsley. According to information given by Roma, England has the most numerous Latvian Roma population outside Latvia. In Derby, Pēteris Leimanis and his wife, Zara Burkeviča, warmly welcomed me. I had previously visited Pēteris four times in 2004–2005, as he is a grandson of the Roma activist Jānis Leimanis (1886–1950), a son of the Roma writer and musician Juris Leimanis (1916–1973), and an acknowledged musician himself. During Soviet times, Pēteris performed in restaurants in Ventspils, a port city with a vibrant international audience, and was called the local Tom Jones. Zara moved to England in 2004 and Pēteris in 2010; they have been married for ten years, are retired British citizens, and active Christians serving as ushers in the local Latvian Roma church Dēleski ģimena (God’s Family). Initially, Pēteris was invited to participate in the worship music band, but since all the other participants were much younger he did not feel he was in the right place. However, he sings religious songs at home and has been involved in training younger musicians. During the fieldwork, we recorded two religious songs of his choice, one in Romani and one in Latvian, performed by him with a synthesizer accompaniment (see Figure 2). He was self-critical about the result and chose not to publish the songs on YouTube. Still, during the fieldwork, he skillfully and enthusiastically discussed music-related topics.



Figure 2. Pēteris Leimanis at home with his synthesizer during a recording session of worship songs on August 26, 2023 (photograph by Ieva Weaver; the photo is used by permission of Pēteris Leimanis).

Zara was a highly hospitable hostess, preparing excellent meals and helping to plan and arrange other meetings. I also noticed her voice and singing skills, but she was unwilling to record them. Zara and Pēteris were also keen to see and comment on historical Roma photos and other archival sources they value as their heritage.

I met a few other Roma whom I recorded in Ventspils 20 years ago. One is now a worship musician in Barnsley in the Latvian Roma church Jēzus Kristus Mīlestības Draudze (Church of the Love of Jesus Christ). An older woman was surprised that I remembered her and asked if I could help her find a photo of her father. Other Roma families I had previously met were either on a visit to Latvia, were not attending church, or lived in other towns. This time, my companions were active Christians from several Latvian towns. My visit coincided with the annual religious conference where the Latvian Roma churches met for two days of devotion and celebration.

During the fieldwork, there were 11 Latvian Roma congregations in the UK associated with three churches, all established and led by Latvian Roma pastors: Dēleski Ģimena, Jēzus Kristus Mīlestības Draudze, and WCF Jēzuski Khangeri (World Christian Fellowship Jesus' Church). These are charismatic churches influenced by and closely

connected to different Evangelical Christian churches in Latvia, the UK, and other countries. All the first Roma pastors were originally from Ventspils; later, Roma from other Latvian towns were ordained. Mainly Latvian Roma attend the churches, and some ethnic Latvians and Russians also participate; therefore, the services, which are primarily in Romani, are translated into Latvian or Russian. In the Dēleski ģimena church, around 20–30 Latvian Roma were trained for the service (*kalpošana*), which means working towards the church's goals as worshippers, prayers, ushers, preachers, and Sunday school teachers.

The Latvian Roma churches in England were initiated by pastor Argo Dagmars Gindra, who was born in 1969 in Ventspils. No exclusively Roma congregations have been established in Latvia, but there is a history of Pentecostal Roma missions, and active born-again Christian Roma families live in some towns. They have been researched in Vidzeme, the Northeastern region of Latvia bordering Estonia (Roht-Yilmaz 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2023). Argo Dagmars Gindra returned to God in 1996 in a non-confessional church, Dzīvības Avots (Source of Life) in Ventspils, and was an active Christian and church musician there from 1999–2009. He also obtained his first religious training in this church by completing three seminars. For two years he studied by distance learning at the Bible school of the Pentecostal church in Jelgava, Latvia, and he has also been in contact with the international Life and Light Roma mission founded in France. In Soviet times and the 1990s, he made business trips to Moscow, which he stopped after conversion. Only three born-again Christian Roma were in his congregation during his first active Christian years in 1999–2000. They started to meet on Saturdays and prayed for the Roma; during that time it was not an ordinary or well-understood practice in their community. A broader programme of Roma conversion started around 2003 (which was also the time of my most active fieldwork in Ventspils). Besides religious life, Dagmars owned a construction business. When the financial crisis hit Latvia in 2008, his business was closed and he moved to England in 2009. That same year, he founded the Dēleski ģimena church, initially in Barnsley and gradually in other towns.⁵ Currently, this is his only job and mission. Dagmars is a cheerful, warm-hearted, and inspired pastor who also likes music-making and appreciates the Romani “character” and the historical Roma values and customs:

The Word of God says that we are new creatures. Okay, all that is here, but in our bodies, we are still Gypsies. And I like it! Our nation has good traditions that other nations do not have. . . . There are good things that should be kept, but what obstructs life and does not bring any benefit, you throw it away. . . . All nations have something very, very good. And not everyone is the same; everyone has their own characteristics – some are cool in this regard, others in that regard. However, when everyone is together – it is a great

⁵ Online channels of Dēleski ģimena church:

https://www.youtube.com/@Deleski_Gimena

<https://www.instagram.com/deleskigimena/>

<https://www.facebook.com/deleskigimena> (accessed September 17, 2024).

force. . . . Still, no one could change people the way God changes the Gypsies. Even communism could not change the Gypsies, but God does. (Argo Dagmars Gindra, interview, August 28, 2023; translated from Latvian by the author)

Roma church services are held in a free and participatory atmosphere. In Derby, the premises are rented from a United Reformed Church. The services take place in a spacious, bright, and minimally decorated room, and a separate room is used for the youngest children, who play tennis and spend time in other activities during the service. When we arrived at the church on Sunday at 2 pm, the worship music group was rehearsing, ushers left for prayer, people arriving put the prepared food on the table, and an attendant arranged it; people also wrote down in a notebook the names and needs of the people for whom prayer was needed. A young Roma woman was preparing the equipment for the live broadcast. An audio console was set up for sound amplification, and video screens displaying visuals were on either side of the altar.

When the worship music group returned from their prayer, the service started with the worship – a half-hour long, non-interrupted amplified music flow (see [Video 1: Weaver 2023](#), recording of the Dēleski ģimena church service in Derby on August 27, 2023; created by the author, posted with the permission of pastor Argo Dagmars Gindra). It consisted of three songs of different tempos and characters in Latvian, Romani, and Russian. The types of songs are praise, worship, and gratitude songs, but they can all be called worship songs (*slavešanaki giļļa*). The songs were alternated with prayers and speeches, a type of spoken word performance of the overlapping voices of a preacher and a translator accompanied by the band. The worship band consisted of a female solo singer-worshipper, a synthesizer player (the *līderis*, i.e. leader), a drum set player, five female backing vocalists, and the bass guitar was played by the pastor Argo Dagmars Gindra. Around 50 people participated in the service, actively engaged by standing, moving, clapping, raising their hands, singing along, and applauding at the end of the songs. A part of this section was also collecting donations, encouraged by a speech on the meaning of that aspect.

A sermon that followed the worship was preached by pastor Dagmars and simultaneously translated into Russian by the leading worshipper. The sermon was uplifting and included cultural references and insider jokes. A prayer and a final song followed. After the service, people shook hands and gathered at the back of the room for an informal meal and communication (see Figure 3).

This religious event contained many features of traditional Romani values and behavior: the strong and egalitarian feeling of togetherness, the importance of family and relationship ties, collaboration, informal and witty communication, a community celebration with a banquet, and lively bodily engagement with the music. The reception and celebration following the service, including a generous banquet, are features of Latvian Roma churches which pastor Dagmars has not encountered in other churches. An example of their egalitarian collaboration are two publications prepared by a team of Roma from different Western Latvian towns – Western Latvian Romani translations



Figure 3. Members of the Dēleski ģimena congregation after the service. From the left, fifth to seventh – ushers Zara Burkeviča, Pēteris Leimanis, and pastor Argo Dagmars Gindra, August 27, 2023 (photograph by Ieva Weaver; the photo is used with the permission of the church members).

of Matthew’s Gospel and a part of the Psalms (Dēleski Ģimena 2018a, 2018b). The editorial team discussed the dialects and language nuances and agreed on the most appropriate translation.

The style of Roma religious music has features of new sentimental Western devotional music; still, often it also corresponds to the popular secular music preferred by Roma, such as a typical voice and synthesizer style performed by Russian Roma popular bands that can be heard in their homes, cars, and parties. In this way, the new Christian music repertoire and style maintains some continuity with the previous musical tastes and practices of Latvian Roma. Other ethnomusicologists have also noted that Roma worship music is diverse and synthesizes elements from religious, traditional, and popular music (Povedák 2017; Åberg 2014). Besides worship music, traditional dancing has been accepted as a part of their religious life. Pastor Dagmars stated that the traditional dance *kozakus* does not contradict the born-again Christian life because in the past it was not used for worshipping pagan deities or customs; thus, it can be freely filled with a new religious meaning and used for the expression of joy given by God. This complies with the general Pentecostal view of dance as “an integral part of ‘Pentecostal commoning,’ a collective embodied effort to materialize a divine timespace” (Pype 2022: 36).

Addictions and illegal behaviors are the main cultural practices in which the two moral codes, Romani and born-again Christian, visibly contradict each other.⁶ One of the most typical renunciations is alcohol use, which has been an integral part of traditional celebrations. Currently, there are two types of funerals, which is the biggest traditional celebration for Latvian Roma – “with or without the alcohol.” Cigarettes are seen as another challenge, but the most radical life changes can be heard in the testimonies of previous drug addicts. These are the most extreme examples of changing lives, values, and behaviors; still, they can be interpreted in a broader context of the changes experienced by the Latvian Roma diaspora in the UK.

My general observation from fieldwork was that the social and value changes besides the site’s physical shift are remarkable. The Latvian Roma diaspora in the UK which I visited has experienced physical, social, and spiritual mobility,⁷ which requires the redefinition of the previous field and its narrative. A fieldnote captures this new field of *happy Roma*: “Generally there is that very good feeling about Roma here. People are happy, satisfied, they live decent lives, eat good food, can dress up nicely, have proper cars and well-decorated homes” (fieldnote, August 27, 2023). According to the estimation of pastor Dagmars, the majority of Latvian Roma in England are born-again Christians. In the new site, some new skills and habits of Roma can be observed which were rarely encountered in Latvia, such as sophisticated cooking skills, traveling as tourists, or keeping bred pets. Elders receive pensions and medical care, housing, and support with transportation. Everybody can get a job. These are mostly physically demanding factory jobs such as loading goods or packaging food; still, the Roma are proud of being dedicated workers, which overturns the prevailing stereotype in Latvian society that Roma “do not want to work.” Still, Roma emphasized that the most crucial difference for them is the societal and governmental attitude towards them and not only financial stability. They enjoy the freedom of not being recognized and judged by their ethnicity. This new portrait of Latvian Roma strongly contradicts the older one, often accompanied by poverty, discrimination, and hopelessness narratives. However, further research is needed to assess the scope and spectrum of the changing lifestyles, narratives, and feelings. A similar observation was made by Ieva Garda-Rozenberga in her

⁶ The interaction of Romani and born-again Christian moral codes in Estonia and Latvia is discussed in Eva-Liisa Roht-Yilmaz’s (2023) doctoral thesis.

⁷ The term “spiritual mobility” is used here as a derivative of “social mobility” and points to the changing inner spiritual status of born-again Christians. Katrien Pype noted that “the idioms of ‘mobility’ and ‘movement’ are at the heart of Pentecostal discourse . . . ‘moral movement,’ or the transformation from an ‘unchristian’ and ‘sinful’ state to a healed, saved, and ‘Christian’ being underlies most Pentecostal rituals” (2022: 35). In this case, the term does not mean mobility across denominations and faiths or eclecticism in spiritualities. Another use of the term in academia emphasizes the spiritual aspects of spatial mobility such as tourism and migration. Sergei Shubin analyzed the spiritual element of transnational mobility’s transformative character. He sees “spiritual mobility” as “linked to physical and corporeal dislocations of migrants and their possessions, but . . . also related to faithbased sensations and performances of the spirit, movements beyond rationality and perception to the outside of knowing, and creation of new imaginations of our place in the world” (2012: 616).

fieldwork with Latvian Roma in England in the summer of 2023. She describes the significant improvements in the lives of Latvian Roma, regardless of the growing anti-Gypsyism sentiment in England (Garda-Rozenberga 2023). Other authors point to the potential of the “believer Roma” identity and image as more positive compared to older ones (Roht-Yilmaz 2023: 76; Povedák 2017: 177).

When mentioning Ventspils, Pēteris still uses the words “home” or “there, home,” but neither he nor other Roma plan to move back to Latvia. Older Roma describe the lives of young Roma growing up in the UK as totally different – they want to be educated, girls wear pants, and they often speak English among themselves. Zara’s sister, Lena, estimates that the old Latvian Roma culture will be gone in 15 years, and she is happy about the freedom and opportunities of the younger generation. Roma honor and are interested in their history and traditional culture, but they are not cultivating a fear of losing it. A quest for continuity can only be analyzed within the framework of triple mobility that has shaped the new Roma life. From a self-reflexive point, it is important to notice that Roma in the UK have lost the status of a highly discriminated minority and the need for a patronizing and advocating academic voice. That requires re-orientation in the fieldsite to respond to the changing roles and discourses.

Conclusion: The Impetus and Practice of Interdisciplinarity

While describing the benefits of slow-paced long-term fieldwork, Anthony Seeger (2008: 13) warned of comfort and intellectual stagnation. In my Latvian Roma research that has been balanced by a constant need for the concepts and approaches of other disciplines such as history, choreology, visual studies, or digital humanities. Following the thoughts of Roland Barthes, Joe Moran, a literary and cultural historian, noted that “interdisciplinarity is always transformative in some way, producing new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines” (2002: 16). Including non-musical themes in my research agenda has led me to a kind of interdisciplinary practice with imaginable uncertainties. In this case, the transformative aspect can be attributed to academic practice itself.

The (ethno)musicological focus has helped me to enter the field of Roma studies through the “safe zone.” In contrast to the dark realm of poverty, discrimination, or persecution, my interest in music has encouraged trust and a readiness to share. Also, ethnomusicological fieldwork skills, particularly the participatory approach, such as the ability to sing Roma songs, have sometimes been useful in my non-musical studies. In those cases, my musicological interest shifted from being the focus to a mediative role. And yet, the practice of excluding “non-related” topics, which are characteristic of academic disciplines (Moran 2002), has caused me to disregard themes featuring Roma values and topicalities, such as practical survival strategies, traditional courts, genocide testimonies, religion, or traditional choreography. There were moments in the fieldwork when music was not the topic which was interesting for the Roma, especially when other more existential themes occupied their minds. The field was not always

submissive to my discipline, which led me to believe that the research themes should rather be derived from the field and not from the premises of a discipline.

An approach that could be named field-centricity or community-centricity suggests stepping back from the music-centricity implied by my field of expertise. Critical reflection on “musical exceptionalism” and the interdisciplinary potential of ethnomusicological research has been proposed by Henry Spiller (2014). By analyzing the perception of his ethnomusicological work in other disciplines, he argued against a too narrow definition of music and its separation from the overall context of expressive culture, which carries “deep structures” of cultural behavior. A different, broadening way is to study other social or cultural aspects which can provide new insights into music at some point. A theoretician of interdisciplinary studies, Julie Thompson Klein, wrote that “the problems of society . . . are not isolated to particular sectors or disciplines, and they are not predictable. They are emergent phenomena with nonlinear dynamics” (2004: 4). Field-driven or community-driven open research might be reasonable in the case of Latvian Roma as a relatively clearly self-defined and not too large group with shared issues. For instance, the recent wish of an older woman to find a photo of her father opens up the whole world of passport archives as a potential source for further research of the history of Latvian Roma. Potentially, it might also lead to discoveries about Roma musicians.

Other considerations arise such as the issues of reciprocity and the role of the researcher. It is not always self-evident that the values and interests of researchers and their research partners are shared. In the case of a researcher specializing in the ethnic Latvian traditional culture, their status as an authority may be based on national values, institutions, and aspirations. Consequently, the role of the research partner may be perceived as a matter of prestige, given that the researcher and informants share the value of preserving and continuing the ethnic Latvian heritage. Such an urge for cultural preservation was not widespread among Roma 20 years ago when I started my fieldwork, and researchers were mainly associated with journalists, politicians, or activists whose interests Roma approached skeptically or pragmatically. Also, the idea of pan-Romani nationalism was just emerging and not widespread. This situation raised the issue of a shared communication platform between researchers and those they research. A shared communication platform is an advantage of fieldwork “at home” or among “us” as opposed to “others,” because the distance can create a communication and value gap. In the case of a highly discriminated and poor group, a reasonable role for a researcher is to be an agent and advocate for their rights and needs. The social mobility of Latvian Roma in the UK has strengthened their agency and removed the obvious signs of discrimination. Their financial stability allows Roma to have their own technical equipment for documentation and sharing their activities, and the researcher-researched relationship now has more equal foundations. Currently, my institutional network and skills (e.g., working in archives and monitoring the news on the topic of Roma) can be used to support the growing interest of Latvian Roma in their history and heritage. A new reshaping process has been the fieldwork among active born-again Christians, which means that the old research questions inquiring about

personal motivations, strategies, or judgments do not always make sense since their agency is given to God. This shows that changes in the field cause uncertainty and the need to adjust not only for the people directly experiencing them but also for their researchers.

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Ethnographic Data

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