Changes and Chances in Ethnomusicological Fieldwork: Navigating the Loss of a Research Partner

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of the death of a research partner in long-term (ethnomusicological) fieldwork, exploring its effects on researchers and potential methodological consequences, transformations, and opportunities that arise regarding the research process. The loss of a research partner is a rarely discussed topic across ethnomusicology and related disciplines. I reflect on the challenges of navigating such a loss in qualitative fieldwork. I thereby acknowledge researchers in their emotional dimensions, dealing with grief and seeking ways to both personally process the loss and sustain the long-term research endeavor.

Drawing on my work with the musical legacy of singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (1945–2022), who was the long-term research partner of my superior, Ursula Hemetek, I use this case study to provide firsthand insights into the consequences of a research partner's passing. I thereby identify four key areas of transformation following such a loss: (1) the reconfiguration of relationships with the deceased's family and community, (2) the re-evaluation of archival materials, (3) the development of experimental methodologies to represent and honor the research partner's legacy, and (4) the evolving role of the researcher, who may become a "spokesperson" or recognized expert on the deceased research partner's work.

By integrating personal reflections and engaging with scholarly literature on similar experiences, I challenge the perception of fieldwork as a predictable process. I argue that the loss of a long-term research partner is not merely a disruption but may in fact become an integral part of the research process, posing both emotional and methodological challenges. Rather than viewing a research partner's death as only an unforeseen, often tragic endpoint, I propose that it can serve as a catalytic event, opening new possibilities for scholarly inquiry and engagement.

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Aj si te merav, Devlam,
vadj kanav vadj niči,
si te mukav, Devlam, *hej,*
e šukar ljumica.

I must die, my God,
whether I want to or not.
I must leave, my God,
this beautiful world.

– "Nasvali sim, mamo," as sung by Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (Hemetek et al. 2024b)

1. Introduction

"The only thing in human experience we can confidently expect . . . is that the unexpected will happen" (Jenkins 2013: 6). This notion of the certainty of the unexpected permeates every aspect of life, manifesting at any moment and regardless of whether we are asleep, engaged in leisure, or focused on work. As qualitative and ethnomusicological researchers,[1] we conduct fieldwork that often involves sustained, long-term engagement and the cultivation of close relationships with research partners. These individuals, like us as researchers, are susceptible to the unpredictability of life's events, subject to "the unexpected," including death. Richard Jenkins reminds us: "Each of us is a potent source of the unexpected for ourselves: our emotions are not necessarily in our control and will surprise us; we respond to events in a way that we would not have predicted; illness does not announce itself well in advance; death often comes as a surprise" (ibid.). As researchers, we might feel tempted to maintain the illusion that academic research is orderly and logically structured, defined by clear beginnings and ends. We might also be told by our academic superiors or peers to exclusively focus on cognitively articulated aspects (Benoot and Bilsen 2016: 485), neglecting aspects of human life that do not fit into a research agenda. However, qualitative research is not only *about* life but *part* of life. Hence, it is exposed to the unpredictable and unexpected at any moment.

As researchers, engaging with people during qualitative fieldwork frequently pushes us to the boundaries of what is expected. The limits of our preparation are often surpassed in unforeseen ways, repeatedly surprising and confronting us with the unexpected. In these moments, researchers must navigate and process the emotional responses that inevitably arise as reactions to these experiences. Preparatory courses and handbooks on how to do fieldwork have traditionally neglected the impact of emotions on the researcher's well-being, while paying little to no attention to the possibility of research partners dying during the process.[2]

[1] While I write from the discipline of ethnomusicology, I am aware that fieldwork as a method is common in qualitative research across disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology and sociology. This is reflected in my literature references throughout this article.

[2] In their *Handbook for Folklore and Ethnomusicology Fieldwork*, Lisa Gilman and John Fenn (2019) offer guidance on navigating unexpected challenges during fieldwork, addressing topics such as health issues, social conflicts, identity politics, gender dynamics, sexual considerations,

In this article, situated in the field of ethnomusicological minority studies yet also drawing from other disciplines, I speak about the death of research partners in long-term fieldwork, its effects on researchers and potential methodological consequences, as well as changes and chances for the research outcome. I do this from the perspective of someone who has not personally witnessed the death of a research partner during long-term ethnomusicological fieldwork. Instead, I am writing from the perspective of a novice researcher working on the project *Ružake gila* (Hemetek et al. 2024a), which is exhibiting the musical heritage of the singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, who had been the long-term research collaborator of my supervisor Ursula Hemetek. Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos died in 2022. In 2023, I was hired to create a digital exhibition revolving around the singer's songs and life. The research process I find myself in thereby illustrates new perspectives on research after the death of a close research partner. For this reason, I use it as an empirical case study throughout this article, providing insights into negotiations behind the curation of the digital exhibition and highlighting its individual specificities.

In the following discussion, I use the term "research partner" or "research collaborator" to describe the relationship between an academic researcher – typically employed at a university and engaged in activities such as documenting, analyzing, and publishing qualitative research data – and an interlocutor, the research partner, from the field. The field can vary widely, depending on the researcher's interests and academic discipline. A research partner is usually identified by the researcher for their unique qualities and willingness to share reflections and insights from their life and/or cultural practices, thereby entering a research partnership. Such relationships often involve power imbalances and hierarchical dynamics, particularly – but not exclusively – in the discipline of ethnomusicological minority studies. For instance, in the case of *Ružake gila*, ethnomusicologist Ursula Hemetek, an Austrian academic, represents the dominant societal group, while her research partner, Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, belongs to the marginalized Roma community – a community that had to face severe systematic discrimination for years. This dynamic requires the researcher to approach the partnership with a heightened sensitivity, awareness, and trust, recognizing that knowledge is co-created as equals, thereby valuing and affirming the research partnership. By contrast, I use the term "academic peer" or "academic research partner" to refer to collaborators who work alongside the researcher on a shared academic endeavor such as being involved in the same research project.

I begin this article by giving insights into existing literature on the topic, explaining why we can read so little about research partners' deaths and their impact on the researchers. I then proceed with a note on emotionality during fieldwork processes, which has the potential to be both valuable data and a distraction from the research. I continue by proposing tools to navigate emotions in research in a systematic way. After this, I examine changes and chances for the fieldwork process that might arise after a

alcohol abuse, and financial compensation. Notably, however, their extensive counsel omits any discussion of death.

research partner's death, focusing on new relationships, transformed perspectives on research data, and experimental ways to pay tribute to the deceased. Finally, I examine the evolving role of the researcher who in some cases might become a kind of spokesperson for a research partner after their death. I then conclude and provide an outlook into future research on the topic. Throughout my reflections, my work on and the insights behind *Ružake gila* serve as a case study within ethnomusicological minority studies. This offers a firsthand account of observations and broader considerations that may arise following the death of a research partner, including practical examples of navigating both research-related and personal approaches following this event.

While I attempt to summarize various researchers' experiences in a systematic way by having reviewed existing literature on the topic, I am aware that death is always a personal matter that affects people differently. No experience is exactly like any other because research settings and relationships vary. Personal confrontations with death as well as spiritual beliefs further affect how we process the passing of people close to us. With my article, I aim to expand the limited body of literature on the topic and provide systematic reflections on various aspects resulting from a research partner's death. I further hope to encourage researchers to consider the deaths of collaborators as part of research processes rather than viewing them as unexpected, unwanted ends only.

2. The Difficulty of Writing about the Deaths of Research Partners

Communities' and individuals' perspectives on death, death rituals, and funeral practices, including, for example, funeral songs or the handling of grief, are common topics in sociological, anthropological, ethnographic, and ethnomusicological research. However, few authors write about the effects of a research collaborator's death on the research process, the researcher's well-being, and the difficulty of writing while grieving.

One of the most notable publications addressing the emotional impact of death on the researcher is "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" (1989) by Renato Rosaldo which first appeared in 1984. He describes how his wife's unexpected death during a fieldwork trip caused him to understand the rage that the Ilongot people feel after a bereavement, triggering them to go headhunting. His focus lies on how his experience of grief helped him to fully understand a ritual practice that he had been studying for 14 years. This is relevant as he showcases the importance of emotions in ethnographic research. However, he ignores aspects of researchers' well-being and methodological consequences following the death. Moreover, it is his wife's death that he writes about. While she was also his academic peer, both conducting fieldwork among the Ilongot people, she was not his research partner. For these reasons, Rosaldo's work only marginally deals with the topic of this article.

In general, a "blind spot" (Jakoubek 2019: 208) can be noted in qualitative research regarding research partners' deaths. This connects to a common neglect of the researcher's well-being, an aspect which has only recently gained more attention. The

reflexive turn in anthropology and social sciences in the early 1990s has brought researchers' well-being more into the spotlight: it led to a new "focus on the researchers themselves, including anthropologists taking critical account of their own emotions rather than only those of their participants" (Pilbeam, Greenhalgh, and Potter 2023: 820). As part of this reflexive turn, many scholars have argued that the "well-being of the researcher is just as much an ethical concern as that of participants" (Jakoubek 2019: 2012).[3] The fact that the relationship between researcher and collaborator is "an emotionally laden enterprise and that the well-being of a researcher might be affected by emotional engagement with participants" (ibid.) has been highlighted, changing the perspective on researchers' roles and responsibilities. In this light, the death of a research partner and its impact on the researcher have occasionally been addressed. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is end-of-life research. It has pioneered an understanding of fieldwork with terminally ill participants, confronting the emotional and methodological challenges inherent in studying a community where mortality is an anticipated yet complex reality. While some preparation can be made knowing a research partner is approaching death, this awareness does not mitigate the emotional difficulty of the actual experience. Besides this specific field of qualitative research, the topic of research collaborators' deaths remains underrepresented in literature and little scholarship on it can be found.

Considering statements by the few authors who did write about research partners' deaths provides indications why there is so little discussion on these topics: Susan R. Hemer, medical and psychological anthropologist, for example, shares that "the news of her [research partner's] death at the age of 51 years was personally and deeply upsetting" (2023: 631). She had collaborated with her research partner for 15 years. Similarly, Death Studies researcher Renske Visser writes that she "was not prepared for the way the dying and the death [of her research partner] impacted [her]" (2017: 13), even though her research partner was already 93 years old when they started working together. Marek Jakoubek, a Romani Studies scholar and anthropologist, further states that the deaths of his long-term research partners had caught him "completely unprepared both methodologically and personally" (2019: 207), causing a "loss that was personally very painful, combined with the knowledge that along with the individual, a wholly irreplaceable 'source of information' was lost" (ibid.: 209).

Several scholars further express a sense of guilt and obligation towards the bereaved community and individuals, not knowing what is expected of them now: how to behave "correctly" and which feelings are the "appropriate" ones when a research partner dies (Hemer 2023; Ryan 2019; Visser 2017; Frohlick 2022). This ranges from insecurities around having to attend the funeral of the deceased and perhaps contribute fi-

[3] Many scholars criticize that ethical regulations almost exclusively focus on the well-being of research participants while neglecting the researchers (Watts 2008; Burles 2017). Meridith Burles, for example, states: "[E]thical focus is on protecting participants, more so than the researcher well-being" (2017: 171).

nancially, to the pressure of publishing a form of tribute to the lost research collaborator and perhaps continuing the research process with the research partner's family. Caitlyn Ryan, researching in the field of feminist and postcolonial studies, expresses the emotions around dealing with the death of her research partner, who she had worked with for a number of months, as follows:

> My guilt, my feelings of obligation – to her family, to academic discussions about fieldwork – are tangled in my project. I feel pressure to get publications out as soon as possible . . . But reading the interviews she conducted is a struggle. . . . And then I feel guilt for feeling so upset – I am not her daughter. She was not my daughter, sister, wife. I am not grieving in the right way. (2019)

It becomes clear that writing about the death of a research partner is a painful matter to researchers. They have not only lost important sources of information for their work but a person dear to them. As such, this might explain why we are able to find so little discussion of the topic, because, as Jakoubek argues, it is "difficult to write about it" (2019: 208).

In addition, researchers make themselves vulnerable by writing about the death of a research partner, exposing their own pain and positionality towards the deceased. Vulnerability can be understood in two ways: Firstly, it may refer to the personal "moments when we realize that our research subjects . . . and our personal lives overlap – moments when, suddenly, our research topic becomes a personal journey that stretches out to our family and friends [while] facing our own fears, doubts" (Neves and Baltag 2019: 183). Writing about a research partner's death is not something that finishes with the closing of a laptop but permeates all aspects of our personality and serves as an – often unwanted – reminder of the unexpectedness of life. Secondly, from an academic standpoint, vulnerability is commonly construed as a condition to be minimized or avoided across the majority of scholarly disciplines. Exposing too much about their own emotions makes researchers "vulnerable to accusations of bias, prejudice and partiality" (ibid.: 183), supposedly rendering their work less "academic" and criticizable – critique that might feel particularly inappropriate and unwelcome when concerning a personal matter such as grief.

In recent decades, however, the disciplines of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and ethnology have, based on their historical development and intrinsic nature of observation, increasingly emphasized the researcher's positionality, subjective impressions, and emotional experience. In this sense, they may be regarded as special among academic fields, insofar as that they invite an element of researcher vulnerability into publications formats that other disciplines might not consider acceptable to the same degree.[4] Within ethnomusicology, scholars often explicitly engage with questions of posi-

[4] For more insight on this, see, for example, Ruth Behar (1996), Collins Peter and Anselma Gallinat (2010), Thomas Stodulka, Samia Dinkelaker, and Ferdiansyah Thajib (2019), and Elizabeth Mackinlay (2022).

tionality, including reflections on the dynamics and consequences of research partnerships, notably Matt Sumera (2020) and Holly Wissler (2009).[5] Denise Gill (2020) extends this discussion by theorizing the role of transparency and personal accountability in the study of music and affect. The topic of vulnerability has also gained attention, for instance, by Dan Bendrups (2015) in his contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology* where he proposes frameworks to support researchers in transcending personal and professional vulnerability in the field. While these developments within ethnomusicology and related disciplines demonstrate a growing willingness to articulate subjective experiences and emotions in scholarly contexts – and to acknowledge them as legitimate forms of knowledge – this tendency remains disputed. Not all forms of experiential disclosure are regarded as equally appropriate in the academic landscape, and different epistemic approaches continue to coexist. Perspectives that privilege analytical distance and methodological neutrality remain influential within ethnomusicology today. Consequently, the challenges researchers encounter when writing about their own vulnerability are not only personal but also professional, shaped by the competing epistemic expectations of the discipline and the scientific community at large.

The difficulty of writing about research partners' deaths therefore seems to be influenced by both personal and professional factors. Challenging emotions and the risk of vulnerability are key factors, making most qualitative researchers avoid the topic. However, as I will outline below, emotions play a pivotal role in qualitative research, fostering empathy and contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural practice, individual, or community under study. While this is often an implicit assumption among qualitative researchers, it is crucial to explicitly acknowledge the centrality of emotions in navigating the challenges of fieldwork. The death of a research partner, though an extreme case, therefore exemplifies the profound emotional dimensions and relational dynamics inherent in qualitative research processes.

3. The Role of Emotions in Qualitative Fieldwork

In qualitative research, emotions not only represent vulnerability but are used as key insights for understanding and participating in research partners' lives and cultural practices. Emotions are thereby considered having epistemological revelatory potential, "giv[ing] us an insight on what is going on" (Neves and Baltag 2019: 184), enabling us to emphasize with the respective individuals. Pilbeam, Greenhalgh, and Potter, for example, state that "emotional experiences can be considered as data, as they are an integral part of how ethnographers relate to participants, make sense and knowledge, and develop representations of those fieldwork experiences" (2023: 821). Emotions also

[5] I would like to express my gratitude to one of the anonymous peer reviewers of this article, who further rightly emphasized that positionality, transparency, and accountability are expected and required aspects of ethnomusicological research in the 21st century, as is reflected, for example, within many methods syllabi within the discipline.

allow us to partake in fieldwork relationships. In this way, writing about the death of a research partner and its emotional impact on the researcher might make readers understand the relationship and the emotional toll that goes into maintaining long-term (ethnographic) fieldwork.

Death, and thus the forced end of a long-term research partnership, is not the only emotional challenge in qualitative research. In fact, each fieldwork process is a highly emotional matter, with the notion of the "objective," "emotionally detached" researcher revealing itself as an illusion. Working with the same person over many years affects the researcher deeply, beyond potential career achievements. Researchers and research partners share parts of life: "[B]oth researcher and participants age and go through varying life stages [together]" (Hemer 2023: 637). This shapes the researcher's identity. While this is common to all qualitative research methods, Michelle Kisliuk argues that the influence on the researcher's personality happens even more so in ethnomusicological work, often involving participant observation: "When we begin to participate in music and dance our very being merges with the 'field' through our bodies and voices, and another Self-Other boundary is dissolved" (2008: 183). As such, the researcher's body, voice, and mind are involved in the field and its people. This constitutes decisive experiences, imprints, in the researcher's life and personality.

While recognizing emotions as integral and important parts of fieldwork processes that help to build rapport with people and an understanding of the field, it is nonetheless important to maintain critical distance where possible. Otherwise, the researcher becomes consumed by emotions, unable to detect and present research findings. There is the risk of diffused perception that hinders the research process. Kate Woodthorpe formulates this in the following way: "The challenge is, therefore, to balance the act of disclosure with being astute and professional, while also recognizing that, as human beings, researchers are vulnerable and open to emotion that can inform, but also blur, their perception and interpretation of events. Emotional responses can be as enlightening as they are distracting" (2009: 82). In this way, strong emotions, such as grief following a research partner's death, might be an obstacle for the research process as it can shift the focus and blur perception. Perhaps for this reason, many scholars who write about the impact of their collaborators' death need time to process the shock and ensuing emotions before proceeding with their work.[6]

3.1 Ružake gila: Ursula Hemetek's and Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's Research Partnership

> Eva Leick: "What would you say you learned from Ruža? What was your 'takeaway' from her as person as well as her music?"

[6] See, for example, Susan Frohlick's tribute to her research partner Yoko "after a long period of silence around his passing and not knowing what to make of it or how to proceed intellectually with that loss" (2022: 11) and pondering the "idea of commemorating his importance to me somehow, through an anthropological lens of some kind" (ibid.: 4).

> Ursula Hemetek: "Ruža was an unbelievably positive and kind person who had endured so much hardship. . . . It is unimaginable how one can overcome all of this. And yet, she remained a loveable person. This deep friendship that developed and the partaking in her family life taught me much more . . . than all books."
>
> (Hemetek, interview, 29 March 2024)

My inspiration for exploring the topic of research partners' deaths and the methodological implications that may arise from such transformative events stems from my recent work on the project *Ružake gila. Ružake gila* deals with the musical heritage of Romani singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (1945–2022),[7] showcasing aspects of her life story and, most prominently, her songs via a digital exhibition.[8] The project is rooted in the long-term research partnership between minority ethnomusicologist Ursula Hemetek and Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, a collaboration that began in the late 1980s, years before I was born. In 2023, I was employed by Hemetek for a postdoctoral position after responding to a job posting. At that time, I had no prior involvement with Hemetek's work or Nikolić-Lakatos's music. What initially drew me to the project was the opportunity to curate a digital exhibition and engage academically with minority music. As I delved into the project, I discovered the long history and deep connection between Hemetek and Nikolić-Lakatos as research partners. To my surprise, I quickly found myself emotionally immersed in the shared lives and stories of these two women – one of whom I had never met in person, and the other I came to know as my direct supervisor.

Ursula Hemetek's and Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's research collaboration spanned over 30 years. The ethnomusicologist first took notice of singer Nikolić-Lakatos through a television documentary about Roma in 1988. Fascinated by her singing voice and expressive quality – an initial emotional reaction by the ethnomusicologist –, she began searching for the singer amongst the Austrian Romani community. This engagement with a minority culture and its musical traditions became the primary impetus for Hemetek's research. Her commitment as a researcher to engage seriously with the field of Roma music and her interlocutors had been unprecedented. At first, Nikolić-Lakatos was reluctant to sing for the ethnomusicologist. This emotional response of rejection represents important data for the research process, as it was necessary to understand the implications of that reluctancy. It took several years until the singer had gained enough trust to "gift" Hemetek with her songs, allowing the researcher to document and archive them at a university. In Hemetek's obituary for the singer, the ethnomusicologist reflects: "[I]t was a gift, for which I am still grateful. 'Sa ća pačivake Uschi,'[9] [Ruža] often said after a song, which means something like 'In your honor, Uschi.' I was allowed to record about 150 of her songs back then" (Hemetek 2022a: 14).[10] What followed were more than three decades of research partnership between the singer and

[7] For a detailed overview of Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's life, see Hemetek et al. (2024c).
[8] See Leick, Sharif, and Hemetek (forthcoming) for background information on the creation of the digital exhibition.
[9] "Uschi" is an affectionate diminutive of "Ursula," used by those close to Ursula Hemetek.
[10] All translations from German are the author's.

the researcher, including the publication of CDs and the organization of performances in various locations across Austria. In addition, Hemetek became politically active, seeking better conditions and public recognition of the Roma in Austria.

In the numerous hours of field interviews recorded as part of their research collaboration, Hemetek's process of working with the singer, getting increasingly familiar with the musical tradition, language, and culture of the field, can be retraced. When listening to the material, both the musician and the researcher become tangible as holistic personalities. They appear not only as mere representatives of their respective roles as academic researcher and expert musician, but as people with hopes and fears subjected to the unexpectedness of life. In a mental image that arises when I am listening to the old recordings, I see the two women sitting in Nikolić-Lakatos's kitchen where many of the interviews were conducted. I have never seen that kitchen, yet I am almost able to smell the coffee in front of the two. While the women mostly speak about music, they also discuss life in the past and present, including the topics of loved ones, hardships, successes, and hopes for the future. One almost gets the feeling of eavesdropping on a conversation between friends that is not meant for the public, even though the recordings are institutionally archived and accessible.

Over the years, Hemetek and her research partner experienced many moments of life together, among them the deaths of the singer's husband, Mišo Nikolić, and one of their sons, Sascha. In the obituary for Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, Hemetek describes her as "one of the kindest, friendliest, and most positive people I have ever met" (2022a: 14). When I asked Hemetek in an interview for our digital exhibition what she had learned from the singer over the years, she became visibly emotional. Among other things, she highlighted that she learned "how to deal with life, death, and family" (interview, 29 March 2024). It is noteworthy that she named these three fundamental aspects of life – all subject to "the unexpected" while being present in everybody's circumstances – rather than focusing on her music or any academic knowledge gains. This provides an impression of Hemetek's and Nikolić-Lakatos's long-term collaboration which clearly went beyond the mere gathering of information, involving emotions in all parts of the process. The "complexities in long-term research, where participants also become collaborators, friends, and even family" (Hemer 2023: 642) are clearly illustrated.

The point of this case study is to show that emotionality connected to the research process is indispensable and integral to fieldwork. Emotions help build rapport as well as an understanding of the field and its people. In research outcomes, openly addressing emotions allows the partaking of readers in the process, seeing the humanity behind the research outline.

3.2 Methods to Deal with Emotions During Qualitative Fieldwork

In the following paragraphs, I discuss existing methods aimed at addressing emotions and supporting the well-being of researchers in qualitative fieldwork, particularly in the context of confronting the death of a research partner. As previously noted, this topic remains largely overlooked, with handbooks and preparatory or accompanying

fieldwork courses often neglecting it. Furthermore, scholars who have faced the loss of a research partner frequently emphasize that "no amount of training" (Visser 2017: 15; see also Ryan 2019) could ever fully prepare one for the deep impact of such an experience anyway. For this reason, personal experiences with death, spiritual beliefs, and self-care strategies gain importance when processing the death of a research partner. However, while they might help to accept and process the situation to some extent, the death of a research partner always remains a difficult matter. It appears understandable that researchers have conflicting emotions around the deaths and its impact on their work process. A need to "do something" with these feelings may arise, searching for a vehicle of expression. In this regard, methods such as debriefing in groups and reflective journaling might constitute helpful tools of expression.

End-of-life research, consciously anticipating and dealing with research partners' deaths, offers useful methodological insights for this scenario. Among others, preparations for end-of-life research include "creating space for reflection [and] debriefing" (Pilbeam, Greenhalgh, and Potter 2023: 824), "reflective journaling," as well as "researcher support groups and counselling services provided through the researchers' institutions" (Burles 2017: 177). Moreover, the importance of speaking to academic peers about the death of one's research partner and the resulting feelings in debriefing sessions is mentioned throughout the literature. However, as J.H. Watts notes, there is often little opportunity "as a lone researcher" (2008: 10), for example, in ethnomusicology, to share feelings at peer debriefings. This differs from sociological (health) projects, which often consist of larger research teams in which peers share involvement with the people participating in the project. Not having an academic peer group, the researcher's personal network of family and friends might become the main source of support. While vitally important, it might, however, not always be easy to share the experience of a research partner's death and connected feelings with non-academic peers. Friends and family might have difficulties with understanding such a research relationship. Working in death research, Renske Visser reflects on the method of debriefing without a peer group: "Yet the question remains: debriefing to whom? Supervisors, colleagues or friends? One tool that was suggested to me during my Master's degree is to record oneself just after finishing an interview. In this way certain concerns and emotions are voiced. Methods of support and debriefing seem to happen on an ad hoc basis" (2017: 16).

Similarly, the method of journaling or personal writing does not depend on other people. It serves as a tool to "manage tensions" (ibid.: 14) and reflections on certain emotions and situations. Rebecca Campbell states that personal writings can provide "catharsis, reflection [and] a vehicle for processing the experience" (2002: 29) and are further "effective in demonstrating how feelings enter the research process" (ibid.: 30). There is no specific form that these diaries need to follow. The importance lies in them functioning as a space for the researcher to write down personal accounts of what happens during a research process, with a focus on emotions and opinions. Campbell suggests that these "'behind-the-scenes' accounts of what happened in a research study" (ibid: 82) might even be published separately from the main study, providing additional

information regarding research processes. However, the researcher is under no obligation to do so.

While not calling them "journals" but rather "reports" or "logs" ("Berichte" in German),[11] Ursula Hemetek has written down fieldwork experiences with personal accounts throughout her career. In most cases, her logs accompany fieldwork interviews and musical recordings, providing both insights into musical details as well as her personal perceptions and emotions. In this way, they work as a mixture between professional fieldwork notes and personal writings. On 25 May 2022, one day after Nikolić-Lakatos's funeral, for example, Hemetek (2022b) wrote a log about the burial. When I asked Hemetek about her motivation in doing so, she told me that it was not so much for reasons of "mental hygiene" but rather to document "what was going on" (pers. comm.). However, the short text speaks from the personal perspective of a person grieving her friend's and long-term research collaborator's death while barely functioning as an objective report of events. The text thereby serves as an insightful document for me to understand not only the events of the funeral but also Hemetek's positionality in the Romani community surrounding Nikolić-Lakatos and her emotional processing of the death.

In addition to using writing as a means of expression and emotional structuring, I observed that speaking about Nikolić-Lakatos and recounting memories of her was – and continues to be – significant for Hemetek. Listening to anecdotes, events, and relationships from Nikolić-Lakatos's past was certainly also a crucial part of my work in curating a digital exhibition that aims to do justice to both the singer's music and her personality within the broader historical socio-political context. At the same time, I soon came to understand that speaking about her late research partner also held deep personal meaning for Hemetek, perhaps in an attempt to keep the singer's memory alive. While Hemetek seemingly appeared to appreciate speaking with me – a stranger to Nikolić-Lakatos's life and to the Romani community in which Hemetek is well acquainted – maintaining contact with individuals who had been close to Nikolić-Lakatos gained importance. For this reason, the research process for the digital exhibition included monthly meetings with Nikolić-Lakatos's daughter, Manuela Nikolić, as well as ac-

[11] To the best of my knowledge, Hemetek did not select the terminology of "*report*" or "*log*" with particular deliberation or systematic awareness. In German, the term "*Bericht*" means a documentation of facts and events, yet its form and style are relatively flexible. Accessible through the Music and Minorities Research Center, much of Hemetek's fieldwork documentation comprises not only musical recordings and written commentary regarding musical details but also collections of posters, flyers, entry tickets, program booklets, personal photographs, and these so-called logs. It is noteworthy that Hemetek's methods of documentation developed over time, becoming increasingly systematized and structured. In doing so, she established a pioneering model within the Department of Folk Music and Ethnomusicology at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna where she was employed and started her initial research. In the following, I use "log" to refer to Hemetek's written records, in accordance with her own usage.

quaintances and researchers Mozes Heinschink and Christiane Fennesz-Juhasz. Occasionally, Nikolić-Lakatos's granddaughter, Shireen Nikolić, was also able to join. These gatherings took place over lunch in a relaxed restaurant setting and combined elements of research planning with opportunities to share memories and anecdotes about the singer, as well as to exchange news from the Roma community. While it was an unusual research setting for me at first, I soon got to appreciate the direct contact with Nikolić-Lakatos's family, gaining a completely new perspective on the singer distinct from what Hemetek would have experienced herself. Hemetek continuously emphasized that these meetings should maintain their informal character, embodying the spirit of a Romani *patjiv* – a tradition of honoring someone by inviting them to share a meal and spend time together – something that Nikolić-Lakatos herself would – as I imagine her – probably have insisted upon.

To summarize, there seems to be no adequate preparation for the unexpectedness of the death of a research partner. However, debriefing settings with academic peers, people who were close with the deceased person, as well as within private networks might help researchers to process their feelings. Personal writings that are free in form and focus on the researcher's emotions are another tool that can offer support following the event. This discussion of ways to handle the emotional impact of the death of a research partner leads me to the analysis of methodological changes and chances that might occur after such a death, examining how it can influence the ongoing research process and serve as a catalyst for initiating projects with new perspectives.

4. Methodological Changes and Chances after Research Partners' Deaths

> Eva Leick: "With regard to Ružake gila, there are, of course, many questions that one can no longer ask Ruža. How do you deal with this when content-related questions arise in the project – questions that you would actually like to ask Ruža?"
>
> Ursula Hemetek: "Yes, there are many things I would like to ask Ruža . . . Sometimes, an answer can be found in the field recordings – that means, I had already spoken with her about it once and the answer can then be found there. For some matters, we try to ask Mozes Heinschink . . . And sometimes we ask the children, who, of course, shared a longer part of their lives with Ruža, but see her from a completely different perspective."
>
> (Hemetek, interview, 29 March 2024)

When the unexpected, the death of a research partner, happens, researchers are often left with the question of how to represent this unforeseen event in their research. This involves considerations for the research process being forced to an abrupt end as well as forms of personal tribute to the research partners. Taken from scholars who write about their experiences with deaths of research partners, three major changes and chances for the research process can be identified, namely newly developing or changing relationships with other community members/the deceased's family, a re-examination of archived data, and experimental forms of representing research data that pay

tribute to the research partner. In addition to this, researchers often experience a change of roles and responsibilities after their research partner's death. They may unexpectedly take on the role of a spokesperson for the deceased, assuming a responsibility they had most likely not anticipated nor wished for.

4.1 Newly Developing/Changing Research Relationships

In addition to the emotional distress caused by the unwelcome event, losing one's research partner also represents a severe loss in the process of data generation. The person one has relied on most and built strong rapport with is no longer available. A valuable source of information disappears. The following questions may arise: Who should one ask now? How can data generation continue without having had the chance to ask and document everything?

The research process and its outline significantly change with the death of a research partner. While unfortunate, some scholars also view this as an unexpected chance, enhancing and deepening the research one has started. Jakoubek, for example, highlights that "the death and dying of informants [is] part of research" and belongs to it "in the same way as the informant's answers to researcher's questions" (2019: 208). Hemer also emphasizes that "deaths of interlocutors in the field, particularly when they occur in the context of long-term fieldwork relationships, can reshape those relationships, which in turn can lead to new understandings and research trajectories" (2023: 632). In addition to reshaping already existing relationships, the death of one's research partner might lead to new research collaborations. Reasons for this could be, for example, the researchers' necessity to find other interlocutors following the death of their research partner, and the communities'/family members' wish to continue the research process in meaningful ways and with their own voice.

For instance, when Hemer visited her field for the mourning period and the funeral of her research partner, she was surprised to find a new openness towards her. This helped her understand the dynamics within the community in a new light: "This death seemed to have sparked people to discuss violence more generally with me" (Hemer 2023: 639), she argues and continues to state that the death of her research partner "provoked a shift in my relationships with people within my fieldsite" (ibid.: 640). She describes that her research partner's family now included her "in even more depth in family conversations" (ibid.: 641), communicating in much more informal and personal ways. This significantly strengthened her relationship to the community and enhanced her research unexpectedly.

Similarly, Ursula Hemetek's relationship to Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's family, particularly her daughter, Manuela Nikolić, shifted after the singer's death. Besides contributing financially to the funeral because she "felt the need to help during this difficult time and to express my solidarity with the family" (Hemetek 2022b), Hemetek closely involved the singer's family in our ongoing research process as a form of dialogic

knowledge production for *Ružake gila*.[12] As an official research partner in the project, daughter Manuela's insights were crucial in this matter. Her consenting to everything we published as part of the digital exhibition *Ružake gila* was particularly important to Hemetek, as she respects and trusts the daughter's opinions to represent Nikolić-Lakatos's personality and songs in an authentic way. In addition to this, Manuela Nikolić happily shared memories and materials such as photographs and text documents of her mother with us. Her perception – as is to be expected given the different relationship between mother and daughter – often differed from what Hemetek had experienced and observed with Nikolić-Lakatos. This constitutes research insights and material that, under different circumstances, might never have been accessed.

Furthermore, in 2024, Hemetek organized a concert evening in honor of Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, titled "Sa tja patjivake, Ruža. Songs by Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos (1945–2022),"[13] to which she invited the singer's family as participants. Her daughter Manuela, son Mischa, and granddaughter Shireen uniquely got together as *Ruža's Kids* for the event. They performed three songs by Nikolić-Lakatos, which sparked a new interest in continuing the musical legacy of their mother and grandmother. Without Hemetek's incentive, the musical trio would not have been formed. The collaboration provided inspiration to Hemetek's work. It informed and enriched the project *Ružake gila* significantly. The family's musical interpretations served as newly generated data, embedded in a collaboration of rapport with the next generation(s). These newly developed relationships and insights made the project topical, modern, and alive, even without the main research partner's presence.

As can be shown by these two examples of Hemer and Hemetek: while painful and transformative, the death of a research partner may lead to newly established and changing relationships with people, offering novel perspectives with new insights into the field and the deceased person's life. This allows for the generation of new data that, combined with previously collected material, may significantly enrich the research process and its outcome.

4.2 Re-Examination of Archived Data

Leaving the field in ethnographic and ethnomusicological research means physically distancing oneself from the respective site. However, it does not necessarily involve ending one's engagement with it. On the contrary, among other things, it typically means "rereading fieldnotes and transcripts, getting to know the field again, in more physically distant, but not necessarily a less emotionally charged way" (Coffey 1999:

[12] At the Music and Minorities Research Center, founded by Ursula Hemetek, dialogic knowledge production is described as the integration of diverse forms of knowledge contributed by both researchers and research partners through a collaborative approach: "Different perspectives on knowledge production are subject to negotiations involving all actors. In this sense, achievements and formats that emerge from the research process remain a matter of constant discussion" (Music and Minorities Research Center n.d.a).

[13] For more information on this event, see Music and Minorities Research Center (n.d.b).

107). For this reason, some scholars argue that long-term qualitative researchers never fully disentangle themselves from the field:

> Many fieldworkers will retell and remember fieldwork experiences for years or decades afterward. We continue to write about and talk about particular fieldwork relationships, instances, events or feelings. Indeed it is quite common to see both reanalysis of fieldwork data and autobiographical accounts published a considerable time after the original fieldwork was conducted (and ethnographic monograph or text produced). (ibid.: 111)

Highlighting the human relations in fieldwork, Pilbeam, Greenhalgh, and Potter note in a similar vein that "research relationships – even with those who have died – are never quite closed, as the researcher returns to materials collected and produced" (2023: 834).

Going back to one's fieldwork materials, which may, besides one's memories and fieldnotes, include any forms of media such as audio recordings, video footage, photographs, textual documents, or artefacts, is thereby a process of reconstruction and reproduction. Amanda Coffey expresses this in the following way, highlighting how the process is deeply interconnected with the researcher's personality:

> Through "remembering" fieldwork – in analysing, thinking, writing, reproducing – we are remembering a shared past. We draw on our memories of what the place was like – how it felt, looked, smelt, tasted – and what the people were like – how they felt, looked, talked, laughed, cried, acted, worked, played, lived (and in some cases died). Quite properly, leaving the field never happens completely, as that would be leaving ourselves, our pasts and our memories. (1999: 109)

While the process of revisiting fieldwork materials occurs with all qualitative research materials, it gains a different significance when a research partner has died. The materials might be viewed in a more nostalgic way, strong emotions might blur neutral views, and insights from newly developed research relationships might change the perspective on past events and conversations. In addition, the researcher must work with and around the knowledge that the deceased research partner is no longer available to provide answers to questions or to help recall past shared experiences. No more primary material by the research partner can ever be generated.

Knowing that the research partner can no longer support the collaboration, collected and archived material gains importance. In this way, the research partner's death may serve as an incentive to browse archives or reach out to people connected to the field and the deceased person. While there is the possibility of not finding any relevant materials, "treasures" might be discovered in certain archives or private holdings, complementing one's own research.

This can be well-illustrated by the example of *Ružake gila:* Ursula Hemetek's collection of Lovari songs by Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, archived at the Department of Folk Music and Ethnomusicology[14] at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, is impressive in its scope, with over 100 hours of audio recordings, extensive logs, concert

[14] See https://www.mdw.ac.at/ive/home/ (accessed 26 March 2026).

booklets and brochures. After Nikolić-Lakatos's death in 2022 and Hemetek's wish to "share [the singer's musical] treasures with others" (interview, 29 March 2024), a research collaboration with the Phonogrammarchiv at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (short: PhA) for the project *Ružake gila* was established. The PhA possesses an extensive archive of songs by Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos, documented by the Romani expert Mozes Heinschink tracing back to the 1960s: the Heinschink Collection (Fennesz-Juhasz 2015). Combining Hemetek's and Heinschink's collections in the digital exhibition *Ružake gila* by, for example, complementing early song recordings by Heinschink with later recordings of field conversations between Hemetek and the singer provides thorough representations of the songs and their contexts. This re-evaluation of archived materials significantly enhances research sources and output in quality and quantity. While being well aware of each other's works and archives, no previous attempt had been made by either Hemetek or Heinschink to combine the collections in a complementary way for publication; it only happened after the singer's death.

In addition to the combination of these two collections, *Ružake gila* also required the tracing of the long-term research process conducted by Hemetek, hence an engagement with an extensive body of fieldwork data, predominantly audio recordings. In 2023, Hemetek hired me to undertake this task, selecting meaningful and representative samples for the digital exhibition. She thereby particularly valued my perspective as an outsider in the field. I had not heard of Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos before my employment and was not aware of Hemetek's long-term research collaboration with her. While this undoubtedly comes with certain disadvantages, it also enables a more emotionally distanced and novel perspective on the research material and the people involved – an "outside eye." During my initial phase of engaging with Hemetek's archive and listening to field interviews, the ethnomusicologist was often surprised by my questions about context and relationship dynamics: Who is this person that was mentioned? What was their relationship with the singer? Why is this (not) relevant? What was the setting of this interview? What is the meaning of this? I imagine that for Hemetek, who connects all research material with her own memories and fills in the gaps of what was not recorded, including body language and other non-verbal cues, many of these questions must have come unexpectedly. They probably made her see familiar events and processes differently, starting a reflexive process on how to publicly represent her long-term research.

I want to illustrate this with a concrete example: during my initial review of Hemetek's recordings, I came across a high-quality version of the song "Sas ma mami dosta love" (Hemetek et al. 2024d). I was surprised to find that it was not included in my list of songs designated for publication on the digital exhibition. When I asked Hemetek about it, she smiled knowingly and explained that this particular song had sparked considerable debate over issues of ownership within the Roma community back in the day. The Lovari songs, however, cannot be said to *belong* to anyone exclusively, as they stem from a long oral tradition passed down through generations. Without delving too deeply into the matter here, it became evident that the song had raised a sensitive point in the ongoing dispute between two Lovari families, and that Hemetek had, to some

extent, been placed in a position where she was expected to take sides regarding its potential publication. Given that the circumstances surrounding this debate have changed significantly over the past three decades, particularly after Nikolić-Lakatos's death, we ultimately decided to include the song in our digital exhibition, accompanied by a note indicating that it was also a favorite of another well-known singer.

After this initial selection process, with Hemetek's support and counsel, I then proceeded to suggest specific parts of field recordings to be placed alongside the selected songs in the digital exhibition. They not only provide insight not only into the meaning, historicity, and performance setting of the respective song by Nikolić-Lakatos but also into the long-term fieldwork process between the singer and the ethnomusicologist. As stated previously, the fieldwork interviews are representative of the relationship between the two women, showing their familiarity, and they reflect the method with which the researcher attempted to understand and document the songs.

To summarize, after the singer's death in 2022, a new engagement and re-examination with the archived material around Nikolić-Lakatos's songs was initiated. This resulted in the open exhibition of selected recordings from both Hemetek's and Heinschink's archives. While this would also have been possible during the lifetime of singer Nikolić-Lakatos, her death served as the catalytic event that prompted Hemetek to find a format to widely publish her long-term research materials, employ someone to conduct the work, and pay tribute to the singer in this way.

4.3 Experimental Ways of Representing the Deceased

As I have shown, facing the loss of a long-term research partner is an emotional challenge for the researcher and it is often combined with feelings of obligation towards the deceased and the bereaved community. This may lead to the researcher's wish to honor the lost research collaborator publicly. In Ursula Hemetek's case, she was asked to write an obituary for Nikolić-Lakatos that was published a few months after the singer's death in a Romani newspaper (Hemetek 2022a).[15] In this text, she was given the opportunity to summarize Nikolić-Lakatos's achievements and reflect on her socio-political as well as musical impact over the years, paying tribute to her long-term research collaborator and friend. While the obituary is substantial in its overview of the singer's life, the medium does not allow a focus on Nikolić-Lakatos's songs. However, the music was the central component to Hemetek's and Nikolić-Lakatos's research collaboration and it falls within Hemetek's area of expertise as an ethnomusicologist. For this reason, Hemetek had a strong desire to publish and preserve the singer's recordings – which she views as "gemstones" that sparkle when "coming to light" (interview, 29 March 2024) – in another format. This wish eventually led to the project *Ružake gila*.

The struggle of adequately representing the deceased research partner, paying tribute to their personality as well as their achievements and impacts, is something many

[15] Note that the singer's family fully supported Hemetek writing the obituary.

authors share. It seems that traditional publication formats, such as text-focused academic journal articles or book chapters adhering to established patterns of form and style, are not suitable for individual cases or for expressing the researchers' emotions connected to the event of the death. Jeff Titon, for example, states that he searches for "forms of representing that will keep [his] experiences before [him], in memory, and evoke the people making music who [he has] known" (2008: 34). Often, these forms consequently take experimental or novel shapes as attempts to pay exceptional homage to the deceased. "Death Poems for Cindy," for example, is an experimental photo and poetry montage by anthropologist Jennifer Syvertsen that provides intimate impressions of her research partner and touches in its immediacy. She introduces it as follows:

> Rather than mourn Cindy's death as an ending, I want to reframe it as an opening. . . . The absence of neat conclusions to my work with Cindy, reflective of the messiness of anthropological research more generally, invites an "opening" to use experimental forms of analysis, interpretation, and writing as ways to commemorate life. . . . Photography and poetry open spaces for creativity and emotional experience that can produce new modes of reflection in the world, and I use both here to honor a life. (Syvertsen 2019: 122)

Similarly, after her research partner Yoko had died, Susan Frohlick reflected on ways to write about him, reviewing their relationship and her role as a researcher. She states: "His death has prompted me to think more closely about how listening and hearing plays out in how, as an anthropologist, I know people who entrust me with their life stories" (Frohlick 2022: 8). She writes that her research relationship with Yoko was fashioned "predominantly through listening and speaking" (ibid.: 5), involving only very few written conversations in the form of text messages. As such, she highlights that "it is listening and audibility that I associate with Yoko over and above other sensory dimensions" (ibid.: 7). This realization led her to experiment with "listening stories" as a form of commemoration, where she reflects on encounters with her research partner from a personal perspective, vividly describing his voice and the surrounding sounds she recalls from these moments. The two examples published in her article are an experimental way of providing an immediate impression into their research partnership, making both researcher and research partner tangible in their positionality and personality.

Ursula Hemetek's wish to showcase Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's songs manifested in the idea of creating a digital exhibition. This method, following principles of contemporary digital humanities, enables the integration of multimedia elements such as audio recordings, photos, videos, and texts in an interconnected way. This represents not only a state-of-the-art use of technological possibilities that, for instance, a CD accompanied by a booklet could not offer, but also enables a more holistic and biographical approach to the singer's life and personality. In the digital exhibition, Nikolić-Lakatos's songs are foregrounded and easily accessible to a wide audience. Similar to the above-mentioned examples by Syvertsen and Frohlick, the digital exhibition *Ružake gila* is experimental

in its design. While challenging regarding its technical details, it is a rewarding publication format: research materials can be cross-linked and perceived in new ways, embedding the songs in rich contexts of musical, socio-political, and linguistic explanations. Besides the focus on Nikolić-Lakatos's songs, the exhibition also incorporates a "timeline" of Nikolić-Lakatos's life. It includes documented memories of her childhood, family life, musical career, and political activism. Thus, the digital exhibition not only presents the singer's music but also her personality in a multifaceted way transgressing more conventional scholarly formats. "Of course, the website serves to honor Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos's memory," Hemetek stated (pers. comm.) when I asked about her reasons for creating *Ružake gila.*

The mentioned examples demonstrate that after a research partner's death, researchers often seek ways of representing the deceased in appropriate forms. In this regard, experimental publications seem to function well as forms of expression, allowing for a representation of the researcher's emotional connection to the lost person and functioning as a tribute to the deceased collaborator.

4.4 The Changing Role of the Researcher

Another unforeseen consequence of the death of a research partner is the changing role of the researcher. Following the event of the death, the researcher may now be seen as an "expert" or a kind of "spokesperson" for the deceased. While it is impossible to fully represent another person's knowledge, skills, distinct experiences, and world views, the researcher's familiarity, often accompanied by documentation, with the life events, cultural practices, or language of the deceased may now be sought as a substitute for the person. In ethnomusicology, this typically concerns the individual's musical traditions and practices. Accompanying a research partner for several years or decades, as is the case in long-term qualitative research, researchers gradually become "insiders."

In awareness of the ongoing academic discourse surrounding these terms, I use "insider" and "outsider" as neutrally as possible to denote a certain level of understanding of a person's life and cultural practices, without imposing further judgment. The insider/outsider perspective has been thoroughly discussed in ethnomusicology, with the understanding that it exists on a spectrum rather than as a strict dichotomy – one is never entirely an outsider nor fully an insider, with many stages in between (Nettl 2015; Herndon 1993; Htong Kham 2024; Chiener 2002; Abu-Lughod 1991).[16] Familiarity is thereby dependent on the factor of time, as building an understanding of and a relationship with one's research partner is a gradual and slow process. Furthermore, being

[16] Bruno Nettl comments the following about this discussion: "Some ethnomusicologists define themselves as any persons, from any cultural background, who, as outsiders, study the musical cultures of the world's societies. But, in fact, the overwhelming majority have been members of Western society who study non-Western music, or members of affluent nations who study the music of the poor, or maybe city folk who visit the backward villages in their hinterland" (Nettl 2015: 158).

an insider appears to depend significantly on the acceptance and attribution by the research partners themselves. Jakoubek, for example, describes: "When I began to study Voyvodovo, I was a stranger; I became accustomed to declaring this fact – that I was not from the ranks of one of ours, i.e. of the Voyvodovo people. . . . Gradually, however, some informants began to say in certain contexts: 'but you're one of ours'" (2019: 2011). Similarly, ethnomusicologist Hemetek reflects: "In many families I socialized and socialize as a friend, in some I'm considered like a daughter, and I've always taken it as a compliment when I've been classified as a member of the group, for example: 'Uschi, you're already like a Romni'" (Hemetek 2001: 22).

It took Ursula Hemetek many years to achieve this "insider status" and to be accepted by the Lovari community of singer Ruža Nikolić-Lakatos. When she first reached out to Nikolić-Lakatos with the intention of recording her songs in the late 1980s, Hemetek had to prove herself worthy. "[I was] a naïve researcher who really didn't know much," Hemetek (2024: 05:03) reflects over 30 years later. Due to the brutal history of discrimination against the Roma, it took several years until Hemetek had gained the singer's trust, "proving [to] her that I didn't have bad intentions" (ibid.: 05:22). Apart from reading into Romani scholarship and learning the language,[17] it was primarily the participation in Nikolić-Lakatos's life over a long time that made Hemetek understand "the field" she engaged with. With the years and the development of the research partnership and friendship with the singer, Hemetek became an internationally renowned expert in the field of Lovari musical traditions. In addition, she became a known figure in the local Lovari community, well-connected with various musicians and closely involved in the organization of numerous Romani concerts in Austria. The researcher further engaged in political activism, working to improve conditions for Roma in Austria and to enhance their public recognition. Adopting an applied ethnomusicological approach, she achieved this by creating spaces for cultural exchange, often with music serving as the unifying element. Nikolić-Lakatos's death in 2022 marks a defining moment for the Lovari-Roma in Austria as she was considered one of their greatest singers and keepers of their musical tradition. By now, much of the old ways of singing and music-making seems to have been lost due to the community's assimilation to the dominant culture and an increasing loss of language speakers.

To a more extreme extent, Jakoubek witnessed the extinction of the Voyvodovo community: "[I]n the course of time, all of the Voyvodovo informants died. Progressive personal death of my informants resulted in quantity transforming into quality: the 'sum' of all deaths of (ex)Voyvodovo community members meant, in addition, the death of the community as a whole, which ceased to exist" (2019: 209). Consequently, his own positionality changed. In his article, Jakoubek dedicates a section to his transformation from "researcher to an informant." While he is no longer able to ask community mem-

[17] Ursula Hemetek reflects: "I have also learnt Romani, the language of the Roma, to the extent that I can write and understand the lyrics correctly. [This] covers some part of the minority cultures, but by no means all of them" (Hemetek 2001: 21).

bers, he states that he frequently gets asked about Voyvodovo and its former inhabitants. Even though the circumstances that put him in this position are painful to him, Jakoubek views this as a positive transformation:

> I am able, to a large extent, to substitute Voyvodovo witnesses. . . . I consider this situation very satisfying – what else could we desire as researchers if not to become the source of information on the topic we devoted so much time and energy; is there a highest [sic!] achievement than becoming informants ourselves? The darker side of such situation [sic!] is unfortunately the fact that it can occur only after no 'real' informants live. (ibid.: 215)

This extreme situation did not occur in Hemetek's case. There are still Lovari people in Austria, such as the Nikolić family involved in our project *Ružake gila*. However, the community's knowledge and traditions seem to have drastically declined in quantity over the last few years. Only a few people appear to be able to provide systematic answers to the many questions that arose during the preparatory work for our digital exhibition. One of them is Mozes Heinschink, whose recordings of Lovari songs are archived at the PhA as part of the Heinschink Collection, and who is unquestionably a knowledgeable and valuable source of information on several aspects regarding Romani culture (in Austria). However, while he might be an "adopted" community member, he is not of Romani decent himself. Another person to ask, particularly when it comes to the domain of music, is Ursula Hemetek. Although she is not Romani herself, Hemetek is widely recognized within the academic community as an expert in Romani musical traditions.[18] Over the years, and especially after Nikolić-Lakatos's passing, Hemetek has also become somewhat of a spokesperson for the singer, particular concerning her musical career.[19] In this role, Hemetek can count on the trust of Nikolić-Lakatos's children, having been a reliable presence in their mother's life for several decades. One indication of this trust is the children's use of the term "auntie" for Hemetek, signalling both a respectful and affectionate acknowledgment of her role in their mother's live and their own.

Additionally, due to the close working relationship between Hemetek and me, with her being my direct superior, the ethnomusicologist's role also extends to that of an

[18] Historically, it was common for non-Romani (*gadje)* researchers to observe and write about Roma communities, positioning themselves as authorities in the field of Romani scholarship. Among others, Hemetek, who began engaging with Romani music in the 1980s, emerged as a leading scholar during this period. However, the situation has changed today and there is a growing number of scholars with Romani, Sinti, or Traveller backgrounds in Romani studies. In the field of Romani music studies, there are, for example, Ioanida Costache (see, e.g., 2021), Hazel Marsh (see, e.g., Marsh, Wettermark, and Hore 2024), or Petra Gelbart (see, e.g., 2012).

[19] While writing this article, I asked Hemetek whether she had ever been directly confronted with or had consciously reflected upon her new role as a spokesperson after Nikolić-Lakatos' passing. She replied that she had never considered her position in those terms. However, she agreed that this description fits her current role well.

expert research partner. In fact, she was my primary interlocutor[20] for all questions concerning Nikolić-Lakatos's life and music. It can be argued that Hemetek is not only the lead curator of *Ružake gila* but also the main research partner in the project that focuses on the life and work of an individual who can no longer be consulted. Due to her year-long engagement with Nikolić-Lakatos's music, Hemetek knows more about the singer's songs, particularly the old, traditional ones, than the musician's surviving children. Nikolić-Lakatos's husband and their son Sascha, who had been indispensable for the singer's musical career, died years before her and can also no longer be asked. Speaking from my point of view as a research fellow for *Ružake gila* trying to understand more about Nikolić-Lakatos, Hemetek was my primary research partner, serving as the main spokesperson for the singer.

The examples of Jakoubek witnessing the extinction of the Voyvodovo community and Hemetek's expert status regarding Nikolić-Lakatos's life and music illustrate a potential shift that might occur after a research partner's death: the researcher's evolving role as an insider, an interlocutor, and, in some cases, a kind of spokesperson for the deceased. While this is not a necessary consequence for all research processes involving the loss of a research partner – many may simply end with the research partner's death – the two examples highlight how the researcher's role might transform in such contexts. From being outsiders during the initial fieldwork phase, the researchers gradually became, if not "adopted members," at least close and respected associates of the communities they were involved in, and, following their research partners' deaths, spokespersons for individuals who can no longer represent themselves. In this new capacity, researchers are often sought after for insights into their former research partners' life events and cultural practices, making them key figures for both personal and professional inquiries in their fields.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the profound impact that the death of a research partner can have on ethnomusicological and qualitative fieldwork, revealing both the deeply personal challenges and unique methodological implications that arise from such a loss. Through an exploration of the emotional dimension of fieldwork research, I have highlighted how grief and emotional responses, often neglected in fieldwork preparation, are inseparable from the research experience. I have discussed how a research partner's death can shift the researcher's role and perspective in unexpected ways, potentially catalyzing new relationships within the community, prompting a re-examination of archived materials, and encouraging innovative approaches to represent and honor

[20] I use the term "interlocutor" here to refer to a person with valuable pieces of information important to my research. Ursula Hemetek is my superior and project leader of *Ružake gila* and it is in both our interests to develop the digital exhibition, which constitutes an unusual research relationship as the field equals the project. This should, however, not discredit the fact that trust and rapport is important in this endeavor, similar to any other fieldwork partnership.

the deceased. I have further examined the new responsibilities as spokespersons of the deceased that researchers might find themselves in. I have exemplified all these discussions by referring to the case study of *Ružake gila*.

Future research and reflection on the topic of research partners' deaths might aim to provide structured frameworks for qualitative researchers encountering similar losses, including ethical guidelines for handling vulnerability and methods for balancing emotional responses. Additionally, further studies might focus more closely on the ways the researcher's role evolves post-fieldwork, especially when they become the primary repository of knowledge after a collaborator's passing. Embracing these complexities and developing support structures for researchers may deepen our understanding of how personal loss can enrich, rather than jeopardize, academic rigor, ultimately helping researchers honor both their research collaborators and the work they leave behind.

I hope my reflections presented in this article will encourage qualitative researchers who have faced the unexpected loss of a research partner and are struggling with its emotional and academic impact. Understanding how others have navigated this complex situation may provide new perspectives and the courage to continue one's research, even if the form is different than originally intended. For those who have not personally experienced the loss of a research partner, I hope this article sheds light on a widely neglected topic, offering insights that may serve as preparation should they ever find themselves in a similar situation. After all, fieldwork is intertwined with life itself – which inevitably involves the unexpected, including death.

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