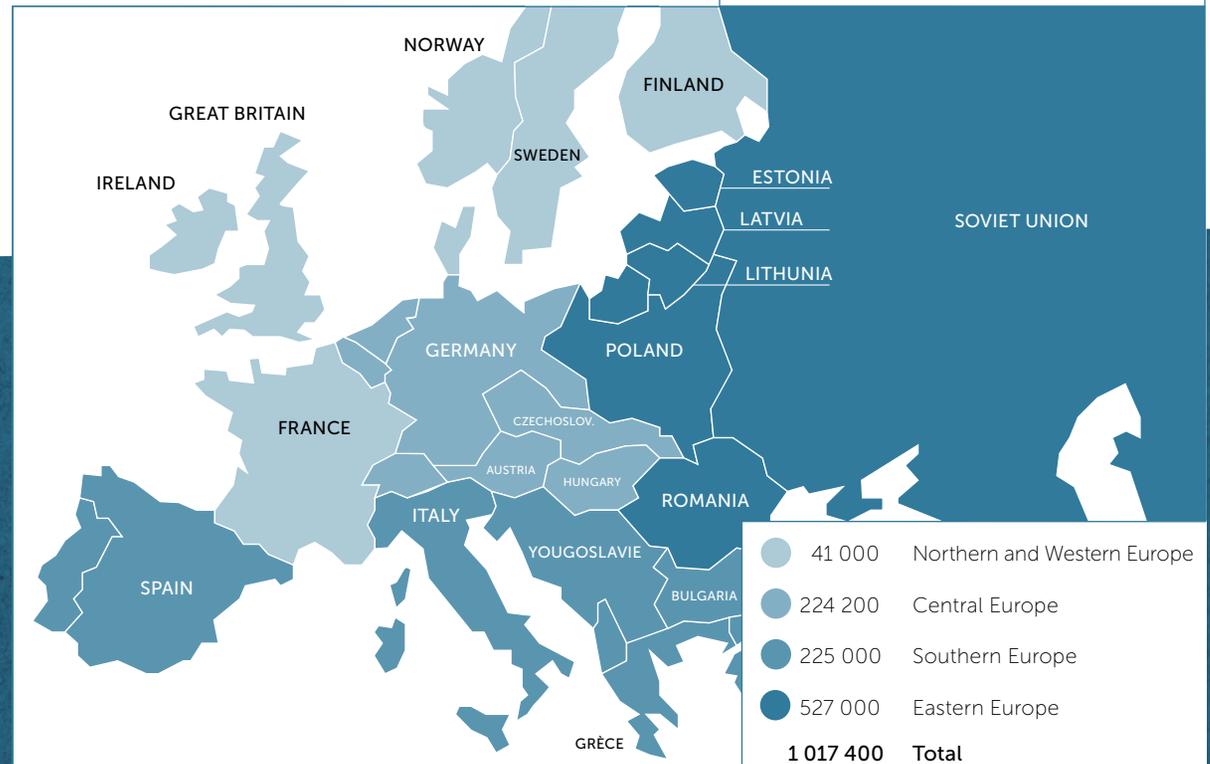
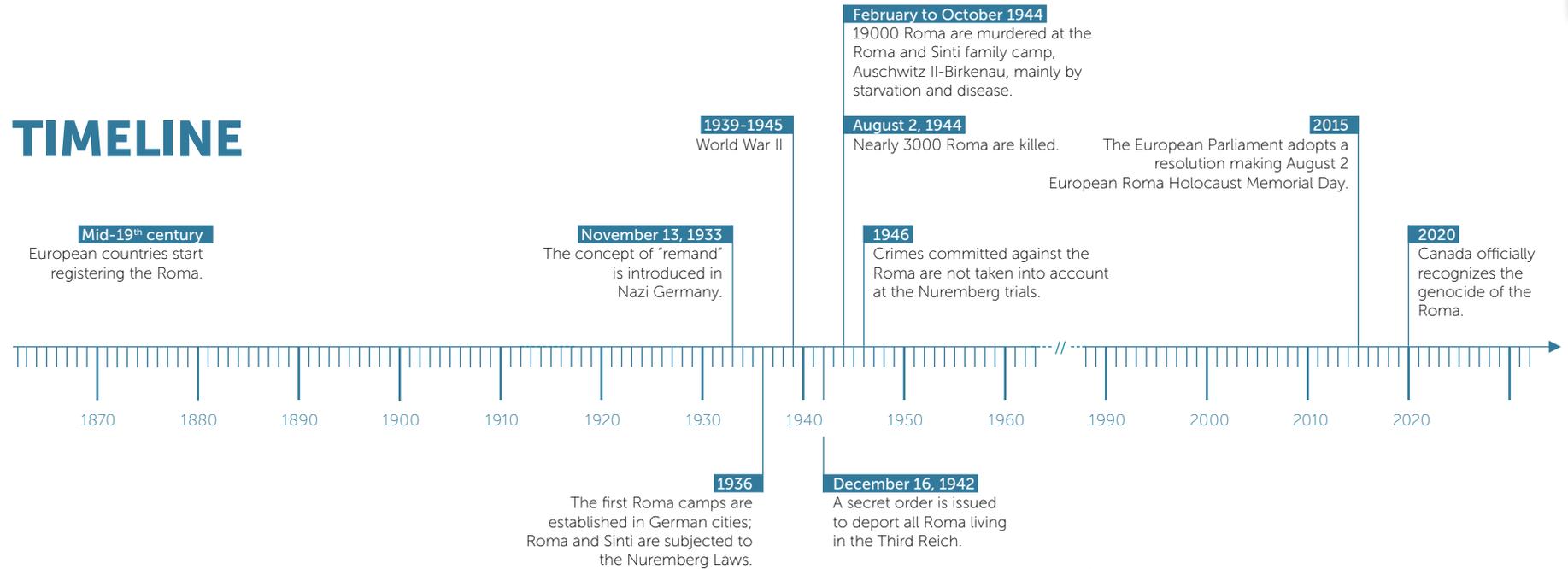


GENOCIDE OF THE ROMA AND SINTI UNDER THE GERMAN THIRD REICH (1933-1945)

ROMA POPULATION IN EUROPE, 1939



TIMELINE



HIGHLIGHTS

What?

- // Hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti (some estimate as many as 1 million) out of a population of 1.5 to 2 million in Europe were murdered.
- // In racist Nazi ideology, the Roma were unjustly seen as criminals, asocial and a danger to the Aryan race.
- // The Roma were subjected to arbitrary arrests, dispossession, internment, forced sterilizations and "scientific experiments."
- // Tens of thousands of Roma and Sinti were shot and others were murdered or died of starvation in the death camps.

Where?

- // In the Third Reich and annexed territories

When?

- // 1933-1945, before and during World War II

Who?

- // The Roma and Sinti were the victims.
- // Nazi Germany and its allies were the perpetrators.

EXCERPT FROM AN ACCOUNT

I can't believe I'm still alive. My survival was a punishment. I asked God over and over: 'Why am I the only one to have survived?' They destroyed our lives: our love, our families, our cohesion. We no longer have families. Everything is in tatters. They took everything. People trusted each other, they were open, friendly. . . . That is all gone. I don't even believe in myself anymore. They destroyed our faith in each other, and all the feelings that inspired it."

ACCOUNT BY MARIA R., A SURVIVOR STERILIZED IN 1944 AND INTERVIEWED IN HAMBURG IN 1989 (TRANSLATION)¹

Two Roma or Sinti women in Germany, 1926

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



It is not easy to use the right vocabulary to name the victims of this genocide. The first difficulty comes from the omnipresence of degrading labels that have long been used to designate them, such as "gypsies" or "travellers". Another difficulty is the great diversity that characterizes them and prevents the use of more general names. The groups targeted in this genocide have, depending on the European regions they inhabit, their own history, language, culture and names. It was mainly the Sinti, mainly present in Germanic territories, and the Roma, divided into subgroups and dispersed in the Balkans and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, who were affected by the persecutions and mass murders during the Second World War (1939-1945). However, both groups can be encompassed by the generic "Roma" (Liégois, 2010)². This is what we will do, as far as possible, in the following lines.

ISSUE

The genocide of the Roma and Sinti by the Nazis under the Third Reich (1933-1945) refers to the persecution and mass murder of two groups who were both known as "Gypsies": the Sinti, who lived essentially in Germanic lands, and the Roma, who inhabited mainly the Balkans and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

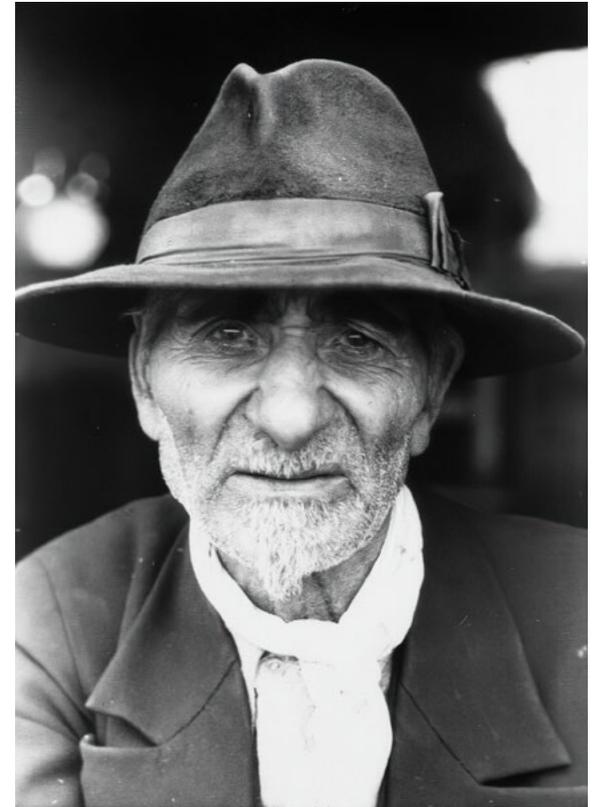


Roma and Sinti dancing in a Hungarian village, 1928
Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

Once they arrived in Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries, the Roma maintained more or less friendly relations with the local populations.³ They were victims of racism and discrimination because of their origins, the colour of their skin, their language and geographic mobility (ironically this mobility is forced and at the same time an act of survival) and other reasons. The authorities relied on racist misconceptions about the Roma to justify the implementation of laws and measures aimed at getting rid of them. Treated as outcasts, the Roma were incarcerated, tortured or separated from their children, and even enslaved and executed. Then, at the end of the 19th century, the racist theory of eugenics, which promoted “race purity,” caused the Roma to be relegated to the bottom rungs of society. Pseudoscientific arguments and racist ideas anchored in society legitimized and justified their murder by the Nazis under the Third Reich in Germany (1933-1945). How did racism and discrimination against the Roma turn into genocide, and why did it take so long for the genocide to be recognized as a crime? To answer these questions, we will examine the events that occurred in Germany and in certain Axis countries under the Third Reich, although historians favour a much broader sociogeographical vision of events.⁴

Eugenics

Pseudo-genetic science aimed at improving future generations



Roma or Sinti man

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Originally from India and other regions, including the Byzantine Empire, the Kingdom of Armenia and Venetian-owned lands, the Roma migrated to the European continent in the 14th and 15th centuries. The reason for their migration is unknown.⁵ At the end of the Middle Ages and in the Modern Era, among their occupations, they earned their living by training animals, working metal, playing music, telling fortunes or engaging in trade. Given the repeated wars and other crises, large swaths of the European population were destitute.

School for Roma children in north Berlin, 1913. Each child who graduated from the school was granted a parcel of land to cultivate. The aim was to sedentarize them.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



The Roma were no exception. Some had to beg or steal to survive, which racist theoreticians used to fuel prejudice against the Roma, who became scapegoats for explaining the people's misery. As a result, more than a hundred "anti-Roma" measures were implemented in Germanic principalities.⁶ The Roma received similar treatment elsewhere in Europe. Depending on the country or region, they could be marked, whipped and expelled, forcibly sedentarized, sentenced to forced labour for life, executed without trial, or have their children taken away and placed with a Christian family.⁷ For example, in Romania, formerly the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, the Roma were reduced to slavery by the princes, nobility and clergy until the mid-19th century.⁸ To avoid persecution, some groups had to constantly be on the move. Others practised travelling trades to make a living.

In the second half of the 19th century, European countries established a system of racial profiling. They prohibited vagrancy and nomadism in an attempt to marginalize and monitor the Roma. Then they began registering them. Yet most Roma were integrated into society and led a sedentary existence. In Germany, the bureau for "Gypsy" affairs in Munich published the "Zigeuner Buch" ("Gypsy book"),

a detailed list of German Roma considered potential offenders, in 1905.⁹ In France, a July 16, 1912 law defining the term “nomad” obliged all Roma over the age of 13 to carry an anthropomorphic identity booklet containing their fingerprints, measurements and physical characteristics if they wanted to move around the territory.¹⁰ These documents facilitated the identification, persecution and internment of the Roma in France.¹¹ During World War II, in the countries occupied and annexed by the Reich, records and booklets also facilitated the arrest and deportation of Roma to Belgium, Northern France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Czechoslovakia.

In 1933, when the Nazis came to power in Germany, they instituted what they called “remand” in some German territories, which allowed them to arrest people even if they had not committed a crime. On December 16, 1942, the government ordered the deportation of the “Zigeuner” from the Reich, i.e. Germany and the regions annexed by Adolf Hitler starting in 1938. Family **roundups** began in 1941. Thousands of German and Austrian Roma were forced into ghettos, some in Warsaw and Cracow. Half of them died there. The Roma in the Lodz ghetto were murdered at the Chelmno death camp. In 1943 and 1944, 23 000 Roma living in the Reich were deported to the Roma and Sinti family camp in Auschwitz I-Birkenau in Poland. Roma were also deported to concentration camps such as Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Dachau and the Terezin ghetto camp. Although it is difficult to determine the exact number of Roma victims, the most recent studies estimate that there could have been up to one million,¹² many of whom were murdered or subjected to pseudoscientific experiments. Others died of starvation or diseases such as **typhus**.

Roundups

Mass arrests

Typhus

Contagious disease that causes fever and skin rashes. If not treated, it can be fatal.

STAGES OF THE GENOCIDE

TO CLASSIFY

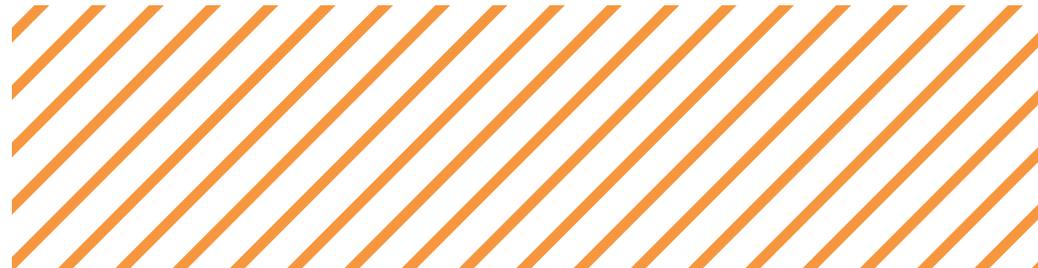
“We are on the right path,
 we thank the great men
 and, above all, our own,
 our golden one: Jerzy Ficowski,
 the father of the Gypsies!
 He called us to the big city
 and introduced us to people.
 We are on the right path:
 we did what they said.
 We will lead a sedentary existence,
 and all our children
 will go to school.
 We will abandon the darkness
 and impurity of the heart.
 We will live pleasantly like everyone else.
 The old Gypsies will weep,
 they will remember the past,
 the forests, the rivers,
 the mountains and the fires.
 The old Gypsies have hearts of stone.
 They grew up in the forest
 and have turned to stone.”

Excerpt from the French adaptation of the poem *Sur la bonne voie* [On the right path] by Bronisława Wajs (alias Papisza), a survivor [translation]¹³



Roma winter camp north of Berlin, 1926

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



When they arrived in Europe, the Roma, who had a variety of identities and traditions, were catalogued. Under the Third Reich in Germany, they were labelled asocial, a supposedly hereditary flaw. This marginalization relegated them to an inferior class, together with “alcoholics,” “vagrants,” “criminals” and “sexual delinquents.” The Nazis believed in a hierarchy of “races,” with the German Aryan “race” at the very top. Thus, they claimed that the Roma were a danger to the German population and strove to keep the peoples apart.¹⁴



“ . . . all their faces, I thought, reflected centuries of unrelieved hate, the expression of the Roma’s deep ‘enemy-memory.’ . . . This look is so much the norm that, to most other Central and Eastern Europeans, such a demeanor gives the definition of what it is to be a Gypsy—the black black-marketeer—a stereotype of the Gypsy ‘other’ no less pervasive here than the flamenco dancer or fancy caravan-dweller is in the West.”

Account by Isabel Fonseca, a journalist who travelled with the Roma for several years to learn more about them, in Fonseca 1996, 173-174¹⁵

The Roma and Sinti were subject to classification throughout Europe. Here you see Roma and Sinti flouting the English government’s prohibitions by setting up camp near Epsom Downs Racecourse, April 1929.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



TO DEHUMANIZE

“We were treated the same way everywhere. I was one of the ‘kinder,’ that’s what the Germans called children. We had nothing to eat but beets. We were beaten. The guards told us: ‘You Gypsies are pigs.’ People were dying of disease. I slept on corpses, scratching at the lice.”

Account by survivor Margit Sztojka [translation]¹⁶

At the turn of the 20th century, eugenics became popular in America and in some European countries, including Germany. The instigators of the movement believed they could improve future generations, in particular by limiting the reproduction of individuals deemed inferior. The Roma were seen as a threat to German race purity and subjected to forced sterilization under the Nazi regime. At the time, the term “Zigeunerplage” (“Gypsy plague”) was entrenched in the various classes of society.¹⁷



Racist anthropologist Eva Justin conducting pseudoscientific research (anthropometry, craniometry) in the Palatinate, Germany, in 1938, and measuring the skull of a Roma or Sinti woman. The goal was to prove the so-called inferiority of these populations.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



Works such as *An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1855) by diplomat Arthur de Gobineau, which portrayed mixed populations as inferior, and *Criminal Man* (1876) by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, which claimed that the Roma had a natural tendency toward

crime because of their racial composition, also contributed to the racialization and dehumanization of the Roma and spread the idea throughout the population.¹⁸ These racist theories were scientifically unfounded.



German psychologist Robert Ritter and anthropologist Eva Justin conducted racist pseudoscientific research (anthropometry, craniometry) at the Reich health office's "racial hygiene and human biology department." Here you see two nurses at the department making a mask of a Roma or Sinti man around 1938.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

"Our actual knowledge of the life of these tertiary races is very slight. Only in the misty beginnings of human history can we catch a glimpse, in certain places, of the white race when it was still in this stage—a stage which seems to have been everywhere short-lived. The civilizing instincts of these chosen peoples were continually forcing them to mix their blood with that of others. As for the black and yellow types, they are mere savages in the tertiary stage, and have no history at all."

Arthur de Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853-1855), 148-149¹⁹

TO POLARIZE

34/30/3A



Nr. I. 1104		L.Nr. 40/768	
Augen: 12		Haare: 0	
Haut: hbrl.		Kopfl.: 169	
LBH.: 79		Körpergr.: 39	
Blg. 1/4 Ker.:		Abstammung:	
Fam. Name: Dihari		Geboren: 9.11.1935	
Vorname: Maria		Rassenzugehörigkeit: Zigeunerin	
Zigeunername: Miezi		Vater	
603		Mutter	
		Alter: 5	

“Four police officers entered and two others stood in the doorway. Two approached Jozef, two others, Jani. They put chains on their wrists like the chains used to string up hogs for bleeding. And, without a word of explanation, they dragged them outside. That night, they arrested all the Roma in Kapusany, as well as a poor Gadjo who had married a Roma girl. They took away Jozko, Jani, Ferenc, Baro, Sero, Feri, Deza, all of the men aged 18 to 60 without exception, and held them at the station. I couldn't sleep. All I could do was cry.”

Account by survivor Ilona Lackova, recorded in Slobodia in August 2003 [translation]²⁰

Gadjo

A non-Roma

Example of an anthropometric identity booklet. This one was for Maria "Miezi" Dihari. These documents were used to identify Roma and Sinti.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

On November 13, 1933, Nazi Germany introduced the “remand” system. This arbitrarily increased the number of arrests of Roma.²¹ In 1936, the Roma were subjected to the Nuremberg Laws instituted the previous year. The *Nuremberg Laws*, which included the *Reich Citizenship Law* and the *Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour*, were used to justify the persecution of Roma. That was when the Third Reich police force began apprehending the entire family or clan of Roma “caught in a guilty act.”²² Roma could no longer marry Germans (Aryans) or, as of 1940, join the German Army,²³ or, in some regions, even attend school.²⁴ In 1943 and 1944, the Roma deported to the “Zigeunerlager” [“Gypsy camp”] at Auschwitz II-Birkenau were tattooed with a “Z” for “Zigeuner” [“Gypsy”] and a number. In some concentration camps, they were identified by a brown triangle or the black triangle of criminals.²⁵



Arrest of Sinti and Roma
in Renningen, Germany,
circa 1937-1938

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

TO ORGANIZE

“We were given a coffee cup of flour and a few potatoes for the entire day. Then we were moved to nearby villages, where we enjoyed some freedom. I don’t know how long that lasted. Then they placed us in an enclosed camp, a kind of concentration camp, despite the fact that my parents were wealthy and had horses, harnesses, gold, more than 40 pieces. I don’t know what happened to all of it, but during those months we lived in abject poverty.”

Account by Gheorghe Constantiniu, survivor of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti [*translation*]²⁶

In Nazi Germany, the police were responsible for guarding and controlling those considered “asocial,” such as the Roma. They also had the power to arbitrarily decide whether or not a person was of Roma origin.²⁷ Toward the end of the 1930s, the first camps for Roma and Sinti (“Zigeunerlager”) were established on the pretext of preventive justice. These camps were created without any legal basis and on the initiative of local authorities.²⁸ Their rules differed from country to country, and even from city to city. They were all, however, guarded by police officers.



Police officers guarding an internment camp for Roma and Sinti (Zigeunerlager) in Berlin

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

The entire Roma population in the Reich was deported under an order issued on December 16, 1942. However, the first deportations took place well before that date. The previous year, some 5 000 German and Austrian Roma, including many children, were sent to Poland's ghettos, including Lodz, along with 20 000 Jews.²⁹ In June 1942, General Antonescu's government in Romania, after registering and disqualifying them, deported 25 000 Roma to camps in **Transnistria**,³⁰ where more than 15 000 were murdered.³¹



"Sedentarized" Roma and Sinti in Ravensburg, 1933. They were identified as "travellers."

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

Transnistria

Independent State in Moldava, currently not recognized by the international community or the United Nations. Romania occupied the territory for a few years during World War II

"When Maria was 16, her father was drafted by the Romanians to fight against the Soviet Union. The following year, Iasi's Roma were rounded up by the Romanian police and sent eastward by cattle car. When they disembarked in Transnistria, they were marched to a farm and left in open fields to die slowly. . . . By coincidence, her father's unit was stationed nearby and on New Year's Eve of 1943 he smuggled some of them back to Romania on a troop train."

Excerpt from the experience of Maria Savia Moise, survivor of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti³²

TO PERSECUTE AND TO MURDER



Roma and Sinti are arrested in Asperg, May 22, 1940.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

The stereotypes and prejudices against the Roma served as a pretext for interning them in municipal camps (“Zigeunerlager”) with their families. These internments, the fate of both nomadic and sedentary Roma, were initiated by municipalities without explicit orders from their superiors³⁴. Some 3 000 Roma were sterilized between 1933 and 1945 in the name of eugenics and racial hygiene³⁵. Also, Dr. Robert Ritter and his team at the “racial hygiene and human biology department” in

“During one week, 15 000 Gypsies arrived. The commander of the gendarmes reported to me verbally . . . that [the Gypsies] were in an incredible state of misery . . . there were a lot of old people, women, and children. In the wagons there were paralysed, older persons well over 70 years of age, blind and on the verge of death. The great majority of them were naked in rags. I spoke with them. They protested, they screamed, they cried, they ranted: why were we arrested and sent to Transnistria?”

Memoirs of the Prefect of Oceacov (Ukraine)³³

Berlin examined the 30 000 “Zigeuner” in the Reich and concluded that 10% of the Reich’s Roma were “pure,” and 90% were “bastardized.” The latter were to be eliminated first.³⁶

On December 16, 1942, the order was given to deport all Roma in the Reich. A large number of Roma, about 23 000 individuals, were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau,³⁷ where a special section was set aside for them. They were crammed in, sometimes with family members.

In these barracks, where sanitary conditions were poor and food insufficient, they were subjected, among other things, to forced labour and pseudoscientific experiments. Starting in 1940, Zyklon B, the deadly gas used in the gas chambers was apparently tested on Roma children and people with disabilities.³⁸

Many Roma in the concentration and death camps died of starvation or disease. On the night of August 2 to 3, 1944, the “Zigeunerlager” at Auschwitz-Birkenau was liquidated a few months after the Roma uprising: nearly 3 000 Roma were murdered.³⁹



“1940–44: Gypsies were forced to register as members of another ‘race.’ Our campground was fenced off and placed under police guard. A year later, the Germans took my husband away; they returned his ashes a few months later. Grieving, I cut my long hair, and with the help of a priest, secretly buried his remains in consecrated ground. Finally, the Germans deported the rest of us to a Nazi camp in Birkenau for Gypsies. I watched over my children as best I could in that terrible place, but my youngest son died of typhus.”

Account by Marie Sidi Stojka, survivor of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti⁴⁰

Asperg, May 22, 1940.
The Roma and Sinti were gathered before being deported.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv



"I'm in Birkenau, the Vernichtungslager, an elimination camp, and I see these Gypsies: women, wives, husbands, families together, kids, filth, everything you can imagine. They're there, families together. So, some of the old-timers, we asked them: 'Oh, this is the Gypsies' camp, there are Gypsies here. They suffer the same fate as we are, but they're together with their families. . . . One night, they tell us, everybody in the barracks, late, nine o'clock: 'Lock the doors, nobody can get out even to go to the bathroom!' Locked. We were able to look out through the cracks of the wood of the barracks. All the Gypsies were taken out that day. All we heard was several trucks all the way through to the boulevard, the central boulevard where the roll calls take place. The motors are going loud, hollering, crying, dadadada. They took the last of the Gypsies. And that night, they gassed them and burned them, families together."

Account by Paul J. Herczeg, Jewish Holocaust survivor⁴¹

TO DENY



Asperg, May 22, 1940. After being arrested, the Roma and Sinti were taken to a gathering place.

Credit: Das Bundesarchiv

After World War II, the Roma and all of humanity mourned the loss of 200 000 to 1 000 000 of their own. In Germany, an estimated 80% of all Roma were killed. In Austria, some 90% were killed. The racial motive for the persecution and deportations was not, however, recognized in Germany or in Austria, and the few survivors continued to be treated as asocial after the war. Not only did the Roma have difficulty getting the world to recognize the persecution they suffered in Nazi Germany, the mistreatment continued. Indeed, despite the fall of the

“Ah that they learn by listening to me
not to languish after the war,
to be tender.

May they know what the Gypsies suffered
under the German occupation
because some of them did not feel anything
and do not believe us.

Ah good people!

Listen to this song because it is true.

It tells of the fate of the Gypsy, his wife, his children
covered in blood and tears in the brush
in the dark days of the war.

Listen! I sing for you,
my song is a sad song.”

Excerpt from the French adaptation of *Les larmes du sang* [tears of blood] by Bronisława Wajs (alias Papusza), genocide survivor [translation]⁴²

Third Reich, they remained captive in some countries for several more months.⁴³ In France, some Roma remained incarcerated until 1946. In Germany, the Roma who applied for restitution were treated as if they were the ones responsible for what had happened to them, and they were refused any sort of assistance. The public servants handling their files were often the same people who had allowed their internment or sterilization in the first place.⁴⁴ Added to this is the fact that certain prejudices against Roma and Sinti persist over time:

“Views on Romanies as ‘asocials’ were ‘shared by many Germans after the war, including some of those responsible for compensation. (Von dem Knesebeck, 2011: 162)’ Members of the shattered postwar remnants of the surviving Romani population lacked the legal tools to challenge this statement, and no outside agency came forward to assist.”⁴⁵ It is important to understand that the genocide of the Roma and Sinti was enabled by the participation of ordinary citizens who believed the racist ideas of the time.⁴⁶ In the 1980s, the employees who contributed to the genocide were investigated, but no action was ever taken.⁴⁷

“What would people say if some asocial alcoholic, who from the point of view of hereditary science (*erbbiologisch*) was wrongly sterilized, should from now on be treated as the equal of all those who, as reputable citizens, were tortured for years on end in concentration camps simply because of their race, their beliefs, or their political convictions. A compensation provision for the sterilized would in many cases lead to a disavowal and ridicule of restitution among right-thinking minds (*echten Gedanken*).”

Statement by Sophie Erhardt,⁴⁸ an anthropologist who worked with Dr. Robert Ritter on biological specimens taken from Gypsy prisoners during and after the war. Taken from a debate about general compensation for all the forcibly sterilized in 1963, this statement portraying Roma as asocial shows the difficulty they had getting the world to recognize the injustices they suffered.

JUSTICE

After the fall of the Third Reich, the tragic fate of the Roma remained unrecognized, in particular because of the prejudice and discrimination they still suffer today. After the war, the German authorities held that they interned the Roma in camps or had them sterilized because of their asociality and not as an effort to eliminate them. Similarly, at the Nuremberg trials in 1946, the crimes committed against the Roma were not taken into account, and no Roma were called to testify.

In Germany, a commemorative plaque was placed at Dachau in 1982,⁴⁹ and a memorial was built in Berlin in 2012. After decades of denying the existence of the genocide of the Roma, in 2009, Romania unveiled a monument in remembrance of the Jewish and Roma Holocaust.⁵⁰ In 2015, the European Parliament adopted a resolution making August 2 European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. Three years later, on August, 2018, Canada took a stand, recognizing in a press release the genocide of the Roma perpetrated by the Nazis. This recognition was confirmed before Parliament in 2020, when August 2 was designated Romani Genocide Remembrance Day.⁵¹ These recognitions were more than symbolic, since a large proportion of the population of Europe

was unaware of the history of the persecution and genocide of the Roma and Sinti, who are still discriminated against in some European countries today. Roma populations in Canada and elsewhere continue to fight to raise awareness of their history, in particular to urge the adoption of concrete measures to counter anti-Roma discrimination. The organization Romanipe⁵² is actively raising awareness in Québec.



Berlin Memorial to the Sinti and Roma victims of National Socialism

Credit: Asio otus, Wikimedia Commons

“During the 50th anniversary of the Auschwitz-Birkenau bloodbath, we visited the site of the horror where more than 3000 Roma men, women and children died. All those present at the death camp that day, including myself, understood the significance of this terrible era, its immeasurable loss, and that the best part of us had perished there.

That was the time when we began to track down the broken branches of our family trees and our clans, the missing families. It was then that we started to put questions to the oldest people amongst us, who as small children lived through those days.

That was the time when we understood: the majority of the victims of our people remain nameless today, the only real sense their sacrifice makes is to remind us. And remembering has remained our obligation forever.”

Excerpt from a speech by László Teleki, Co-president of the Roma Affairs Inter-Ministerial and Member of the Hungarian Parliament at the opening of the exhibition “Roads to Death: The Pharrajimos in Hungary” in 2009⁵³

“[The Roma] are one of the most persecuted minorities today. . . . Recognition of the genocide of the Roma will not put an end to this situation, but it is definitely an important step.”

Dafina Savic, founder of Montreal organization Romanipe, at the 73rd anniversary of the massacre of 3000 Roma in a single night at Auschwitz-Birkenau [*translation*]⁵⁴



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