



HANNA DIMITRI (born as Brzezinska)

(Pozekreng, Poland, September 9, 1931 - Stockholm, Sweden, January 12, 1992)



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Hanna Dimitri was the only Roma Holocaust survivor, besides her cousin Sofia Taikon (see separate biography), who at the end of World War II **managed to defy to Swedish immigration to prohibit Roma, as well as successfully fighting for Roma reparations from the state of Germany.**¹

Dimitri was only eight years old in 1939 when she witnessed her family being shot by Nazi German invaders in an area close to the border. Only she and her little sister Anita survived. They were deported to Auschwitz soon after. There, Anita was gassed to death. Dimitri managed to survive by exaggerating her age and was considered fit for forced labour.

The topic of survival is sensitive. Berith Kalander, Dimitri's daughter, reflects on this in the following way: "I am convinced that my mother not only had luck and fate

on her side. She and most of the others who survived had a strong will to get through the hell they were living in. Also, they were extremely observant on the routines of selections etc. I am convinced that my mother and other prisoners who survived were both responsive and clear-sighted, which enabled them to know what it takes to stay alive."²

Dimitri witnessed unthinkable cruelty and suffered torture. She had to endure several camps, including Maidanek, where **at the last moment she managed to evade the gas chamber line and was instead transported to Hamburg** for forced labour in a munitions factory. Shortly before the end of the war, she was rescued by the "White busses" under the initiative of the Swedish Red Cross.

Due to negotiations between Folke Bernadotte and Heinrich Himmler, the "White Buses" were allowed to evacuate thousands of concentration camp internees. Their prime target was Scandinavian citizens, but also a number of Polish women were evacuated. **Since Sweden, until 1954, had an explicit immigration policy to prohibit Zigenare (Gypsies), it is remarkable that she, as well as her cousin Taikon, were rescued.**

¹ This essay is mainly based on the biographic writings of Hanna Dimitris daughter, Berith Kalander, *Min mor fänge Z-4517* (My mother prisoner Z-4517) (1996) and print media archives.

² Berith Kalander, personal correspondence, August 2020.

A widespread myth is that Dimitri and her cousin did this by “pretending to be Jews”.³ However, there is no evidence of this, neither in either survivor’s testimony or elsewhere. Moreover, it is highly unlikely: as Kalander states in an interview. **“They had their identification on their arms, Z-4517 and Z-4515”**.⁴ Instead, Kalander gives a more plausible explanation: “Some friendly soul has looked between the fingers. But where? It must have been as they were taken on board the White buses.”

Despite good treatment at the hands of the Red Cross, she was marked for life, psychologically and physically. Due to the suffering in the Nazi camps, she only reached a height of 149 centimetre and had life long health problems. In 1947, she married the Swedish Rom, Georg Dimitri, and her marriage was happy. However, she now had to **fight Swedish anti-Gypsyism**. As Zigenare it was impossible for them to rent a flat, even though he was employed as a miner in the Nordic town of Malmberget. They had to live in a camper van, which must have been more than challenging in the coldest area of Sweden.

One day, social service representatives came and threatened to take their children away. Dimitri’s husband chased them off and managed to change their mind. They finally got a flat and could keep their children. In 1964, Dimitri became aware of the possibility of compensation from the West German state for her suffering during Nazism. Her first application was turned down, and after that, her lawyer simply “forgot” to send in an appeal in time.

At that point, she got help from the head of the Swedish Roma organisation, Zigenarsamfundet (“Gypsy” Society). She was also supported by journalist Evert Kumm, and notably the exiled German former resistance member, Walter Pöppel, who had good connections to the head of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Willy Brandt. After explaining the facts to responsible German politicians, an exception was made, and her application approved. Her case was of principal importance since the German compensation legislation was revised in 1964. Her story received publicity in the German press and made the headlines of major Swedish newspapers, which reported without anti-Gypsy bias.⁵ Since the fate of Roma during Nazism up to then received no public attention in Sweden, **her struggle and willingness to communicate with media substantially contributed to raising awareness of the Roma Holocaust.**

Sources:

1. Biography of Hanna Dimitri, written by daughter Berith Kalander (1996), *Min mor fånge Z-4517*. [My mother. Prisoner Z-4527].
2. Personal reflections on the suffering inflicted by Nazis on Roma and on the meaning of commemoration, by Berith Kalander (2015), *Sörj inte lidandet. Välkomna livet*.

This biography has been written by Jan Selling

3 E.g. in Mohtadi, Lawen (2012), *Den dag jag blir fri. En bok om Katarina Taikon* (The day I am free. A book about Katarina Taikon).

4 Thür, Andrea. “Jag följde min mammas fotspår mot gaskammaren” (I followed the footprints of my mother to the gas-chamber), *Allers*, 26. January 2016.

5 Scholze, Manfred, “Walter Pöppel. Fotograf och publicist” (Walter Pöppel. Photographer and publicist), *Dagens Nyheter* 13. May 1993. “Krigsoffer vägras tyskt skadestånd”, (War victim denied compensation). *Dagens Nyheter* 26. April 1964; “Zigenarsamfundet ledde aktion för norrländska. Nazioffer vann lång kamp” (“Gypsy” association led action for north Swedish woman, Nazi victim won a long battle), *Dagens nyheter* 17. August 1964; Stensson, Tommy, “Fyrabarnsmor får skadestånd för fem år i tyska fångläger” (Mother of four children gets indemnity for five years in German prison camps), *Expressen* 17. August 1964; “Hon satt sex år i koncentrationsläger. Nu får hon skadestånd för sitt lidande” (She was six years in concentration camps. Now she receives indemnity for her suffering), *Aftonbladet* 17. August 1964.