



ILONA RAFFAEL

(Adács, Hungary, August 1928 – unknown)



Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site, source: <https://europe remembers.com/destination/dachau-concentration-camp-memorial-site/>

At first Dachau was used to hold political prisoners, but after the Nuremberg Laws, other groups were transported here too: Jews, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma, and Sinti.

From Dachau, Raffael was taken to another concentration camp, somewhere near Berlin, she recalls. The scenes of punishment for defying orders (or even the inability to obey them) were the most enduring memories: people being thrashed for not jumping out of plank-beds at four in the morning, those who could not or did not work being burnt alive, people being beaten to death if they questioned the brutal treatment, people being tied between two electric wires for stealing carrots from the kitchen, or, the worst punishment of all, public killings of those who attempted to escape, used to deter others from following suit.

Even though Raffael saw these cruelties herself, **she nevertheless somehow found the courage to disobey**: “I was already in the kitchen at four [in the morning]...Once the Germans knocked out my teeth. We were stealing meat, and they caught us and pulled out my good teeth.” Food was vital to survival. Some suggest that the Nazi's used food as a weapon of control, but even in its absence, **the memory of food helped sustain prisoners**¹. Raffael recalled another act of disobedience, which appeared to be motivated by resistance more than survival: “One day a familiar Romani woman...said to me: ‘**Take the label off your clothes, don't work today!**’ There were six of us who took them off...It was a sticky little label with my name on it. We did not notice that the officer-women were watching us from upstairs.”

They were punished for their actions “[The guards put us] in a building where the dead bodies were piled on one another as if they were wood. We had to stay there until the

¹ Andrea Pitzer, *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2017

Ilona Raffael was taken, along with numerous relatives, from her home in 1944. The Gendarmes told them they were to be gathered for work on a sugar-beet plantation in the town of Hatvan. In reality, they were **taken to the infamous Komárom, where Ilona first faced the sheer brutality of the regime**. Raffael recalls, “they thrashed us when we did not stand in line properly. Once they hit me because I hid behind my mother next to the children. They struck me hard.”

From Komárom, Raffael and her father were transferred to Dachau. During the three months she spent there, she witnessed how inhumane conditions and cruelty killed so many innocent people.

evening. We were looking for familiar faces among them...In the evening we broke it open so that we could get out of there...As the day was breaking, we sewed the labels back on. Thus, they could not find us.”

When the liberation was inevitable, Raffael remembers that many were driven on foot away from the Soviets. Ilona hid in a house with some others. **When they were found and fed, many started dying again**, “because people, whose stomach had contracted, ate a lot,” she recalls. Raffael’s life was saved by a caring Romani woman, who warned her of the dangers, and suggested she eat only boiled potato to start. **After four months, Ilona made it home, in 1945**. She reunited with her mother and siblings, her father never returned.

Sources and further information:

1. Bernáth, Gábor, ed. 2000. Porrajmos: Recollections of Roma Holocaust Survivors. Budapest: Roma Press Center Books, pp. 58-66.
2. Raffael Ilona’s testimony from the original source (above) was then disseminated in various news platforms and educational resources:
3. Borsodi Ágnes - Krug Emília, “Roma holokausztipar: Kárpótlások útvesztőjében [Roma Holocaust Business: Labyrinth of Reparations]” in Magyar Narancs (2005). Available at: https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/roma_holokausztipar_karpotlasok_utvesztotildejeben-53408
4. Dupcsik Csaba, “A Roma Holokauszt az oktatásban [Roma Holocaust in Education]” (n.d.). Available at: <http://hdke.hu/files/csatolmanyok/RomaHolokauszt.pdf>
5. Múltkor, “A roma holokauszt emléke [The memory of the Roma Holocaust]” (2011). available at: https://mult-kor.hu/20110802_a_roma_holokauszt_emleke

This biography has been written by Katya Dunajeva