

# 'NO GYPSIES SERVED!' ROMANY-TRAVELLERS IN WARTIME BRITAIN

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AUSCHWITZ IN 2003.

The years between the wars (1919–39) in Britain were often regarded as something of a 'golden age' for English Gypsies and Travellers. Agricultural work was plentiful, roads were largely open to waggons and *vardos*, the beautifully decorated and carved Gypsy caravans, and the profound social and economic changes of the post-war 1950s and 1960s had not robbed the Romany Gypsies and Travellers of their livelihoods, lifestyles and heritage.

Romany people [English Gypsies] whose accounts have been collected and recorded, or those who have written their own stories, often contain references to this time, couched in a kind of glow. There are many photographs from this time of families, waggons and trailers, camps and 'stopping places', working in the fields hop-picking or amongst the trees cherry-picking, to be found in collections and anthologies that would appear to support such a notion. In a sense, the period 1850–1950, is the 'waggon-time and after' (Harvey 1999), from when Romany Gypsies and Travellers first took up living and travelling in *vardos* in the mid-nineteenth century, to the point where the Town & Country Planning Act of 1947 and a host of other legislation began to radically alter the landscape for Romany Gypsies and Travellers in Britain forever.

Such a golden vision rarely encompasses the whole picture, of course, as the evidence from numerous other testimonies shows. The antagonism towards Romany Gypsies and Travellers, both from the authorities and local residents of cities and towns, was increasingly apparent, as British society became more urbanised (and polarised between town and country) and the pressure on the countryside, by expanding development, brought tensions between the sedentary, agrarian and travelling populations into sharp relief. The number of evictions, usually organised by the local police constabulary and whichever men the police officers could "round up" (often from the public houses), were increasingly frequent and began to tackle more often the traditional stopping places that had been established for decades (Orpington, Belvedere Marsh, Corke's Meadow, Ruxley Pit and St Mary's Cray, to name a few) rather than just the roadside encampments, harassing families and communities.



Working parents and older siblings would often return to sites to find that their waggons and families had been towed or moved away during the day, particularly when they had stopped on the common land that came more and more to be 'contested' in the control of the countryside. Though the huge evictions of the post-war period were some years away, a hardening of attitudes against 'Gypsies' behaving 'illegally' in Britain was taking place.

The wartime experience for many Romany Gypsies and Travellers increased both the pressure upon them in all kinds of ways and affected them similarly to the entire population. As with all young men in Britain, the need for military personnel meant that many Romany Gypsies and Travellers joined, or were conscripted to fight in the British forces on land and at sea. Many lost their lives; some were captured and made prisoners of war and a few were decorated for their bravery.

Whether any Romany Gypsy soldiers were part of the forces that liberated the Nazi extermination camps, or who met Roma and Sinti refugees that had survived the suffering and horrors quietly depicted in **Sofia Z-4515** we don't know; we do know that knowledge of what had happened to European Roma and Sinti was apparent after 1945, when the Secretary of the Gypsy Lore Society wrote:

It is more than time that civilized men and women were aware of the Nazi crime against the Romanies [*sic.*] as well as the Jews... for these two people shared the horror of martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis for no other reason than that they were – they *existed*. The Romanies, like the Jews, stand alone...

Yet such knowledge was not widely *acknowledged*, in the years that followed and little was done to ensure that 'civilized men and women' were made aware of the fate of Europe's Roma and Sinti. **Sofia Z-4515** is part of the process of acknowledging the Nazi crime against the Roma and Sinti in Europe. In Britain (1939–45), the families of Romany Gypsy and Traveller servicemen waited anxiously for news of their loved ones, as did the majority of the population. Radio broadcasts took the place of fireside tales and entertainment, as all lights were 'put out' with the increase in bombing raids from the German air force after 1940, and the collective Romany culture of the past began to fade, whilst movement in general, and the great gatherings of English Gypsies and Travellers were controlled far more tightly.

In total, perhaps some 25,000 Romany Gypsy and Traveller soldiers and sailors served as part of the British forces during the Second World War, though like many Commonwealth troops that faced discrimination and exclusion, Romany Gypsy and Traveller men would often hide their identity from others, non-Gypsies. Like all the men who survived their wartime experiences, they were promised 'homes fit for heroes' and a better future for their children, yet despite their valiant and brave efforts against Nazi Germany and its allies (including Japan), they continued to be discriminated against, marginalised and rejected by post-war British society, as they had been in pre-war Britain. As they discovered when they returned and wanted to celebrate in the local public house, their military service counted for nothing as the signs read 'No Gypsies and Travellers Served'...