

# **Why Should We Teach About the Holocaust?**

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## **For a Worthy Place Among the Victims**

### **The Holocaust and the Extermination of Roma During World War II**

The extermination of Roma during World War II used to be spoken of as the forgotten Holocaust. Basically it still is. Unlike the Holocaust of the Jews, or the genocide committed against other peoples and minorities, the massacre of Roma has not yet entered the canon of modern history curricula. In the majority of European countries it would be useless to search the school and university history textbooks for even fragmentary information about what happened to this minority in the Nazi era.

Does this in some way implicate the state institutions responsible for curricula? Does part of the responsibility lie with the historians themselves, who excluded or overlooked the fate of a “marginal” minority in their studies and thus did not supply the sources and knowledge needed for teaching? Was it a result of the creation of a dominant narrative of the fortunes of the nation’s citizenry, in which there was no room for the plight of the Romani minority? Or, finally, does it implicate the Roma themselves, who for one reason or other did not manage to present the world with their history of suffering and persecution, so that it would become part of the institutionalized memory of the Second World War in European countries?

History – both the history that researchers write and the living history formed of memories that are cultivated, maintained and ritualized – is not something that exists and functions for its own sake. It is often subservient, it fills a need, or is instrumentalized, particularly when it is ethnic

history. Written and lived history also functions within the broader context of political and international relations, so it is often revalued. Finally, it is a central element of national or group identities, in the maintenance of which institutionalized education plays a fundamental role.

In attempting to answer the questions posed here, it is worth first noting that history is something learned, that historical memory is not only the result of personal experiences and imparted knowledge, but above all its elaboration by historians, and its teaching. States, or ethnic minorities that had the backing of their states, disposed the means to teach history and in this way fashion the historical memory of their national or ethnic communities. The Roma never had such a chance; they did not have their own ethnic school system like other minorities, and in the schools they may have attended, the history of the dominant society was taught, not their own.

In the little Gypsy settlement attached to Czarna Góra village in the Polish part of Spisz, where I was born and spent my childhood, the memory of the war was virtually nonexistent.<sup>44</sup> In my family home, only Mama occasionally returned in memory to that time, and only sporadically. In the evenings, as if casually, she told stories of the Germans and of what had happened to people she knew, or to herself. So we found out that during the war Czarna Góra was in Slovakia (during the time of Fr. Tiso), that our father had been in a P.O.W. camp somewhere in north Germany, liberated by the English.<sup>45</sup> That as a young girl (she was 17 at the outbreak of the war) my mother had survived several roundups in the Gypsy settlement in Czarny Dunajec, that few of the many taken to Auschwitz had returned; one of the victims did return, and had a camp number tattooed on her forearm... For us children, those fragments of Mama's wartime recollections left impressions of what our parents had experienced. School

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<sup>44</sup> Spisz: a region in the Western Carpathians.

<sup>45</sup> Jozef Tiso: President of the collaborationist government of Slovakia from 1939 to 1945; executed for treason and war crimes.

and history lessons filled out the picture of the horrors of World War II, but did not lead to an understanding of what nazism and the war were for the Roma, and why the Roma were murdered and persecuted... The individual memory of the victims, even if present in the form described above, was not generalized in the form of reflection on the fate of the Roma during the war. For that would have required going outside the individual framework of memory to trace and reconstruct the course and scale of events, to discover existing sources and compile reference works; thus it would have required an elite able to put together the experiences and generalize them, an elite able to create and disseminate a historical narrative.

Historiography and the teaching of history cannot proceed without the educated elites that perform those tasks. The Roma had no such elites, neither before nor directly after the war. Nor were there individuals among the Roma who would have recorded their personal tragedy or the group's tragedy in memoirs, or left traces or documents of those experiences in some other form. The case of Papusza and the poem "Bloody Tears," or of Karl Stojka's Auschwitz pictures are exceptions.<sup>46</sup> This absence of elites, especially the absence of Romani historians, is still felt today. The majority of works devoted to the extermination of Roma are by non-Romani historians.

Shaping historical awareness is also the task of political elites. A few Romani ethnic organizations began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s in

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<sup>46</sup> Papusza (Bronisława Wajs), 1908?–1987: Romani singer, poet and composer of songs, some of whose work was translated to Polish and published by Jerzy Ficowski, including the autobiographical ballad "Bloody Tears: What We Went Through Under the Germans in Volhynia in the Years '43 and '44"; Papusza, *Lesie, ojciec mój*, Warsaw 1990, pp. 66–81. Ficowski was the first to write about the extermination of Roma, in: *Cyganie Polscy*, Warsaw 1953. See also an article about Papusza by Gigi Thobodeau at [www.kmareka.com/growinganewskin.htm](http://www.kmareka.com/growinganewskin.htm)

Karl Stojka (1931–2003): Roma from eastern Austria, imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau at the age of 12, who made paintings in his later years depicting the wartime sufferings of his family and people; *The Story of Karl Stojka: A Childhood in Birkenau*, Washington, D.C. 1992.

the countries of Europe. The first congress of Roma, held in London in 1971, initiated a wider Romani ethnic movement. This led to the establishment of the International Romani Union (IRU) in 1972. The Romani elites associated in the IRU raised the question of the extermination of Roma and began to demand a worthy place among the victims of nazism. IRU efforts for recognition of the Holocaust of Roma became part of the construction of broader historical awareness in Romani society.

The lack of Romani intellectual or political elites after the war does not furnish a strong argument to explain the historians' silence or indifference about the fate of this minority in the course of the war. More significant, it would appear, was the way the Nuremberg trials dealt with the mass murder of Roma, on the one hand, and on the other hand the outcome of efforts by German Sinti and Roma to obtain compensation for war victims from the newly established Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the Nuremberg trials, the sequence of events and the scale of the mass murder of Roma were treated only marginally; there was not a single Roma among the witnesses, and the documents and other testimony confirming the extermination of Roma were few. In the indictment against Hermann Goering, based on Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal (IMT) (conspiracy, crimes against peace, war crimes and crimes against humanity), the Roma were mentioned in the war crimes charge, but did not appear in the charge for crimes against humanity. In Judge Robert H. Jackson's opening statement, the Roma were mentioned in the context of the experiments in the concentration camps (the first victims were four Romani women in Dachau). In the closing statements of the English, French and Russian prosecutors, there were references to "genocide" committed against Roma, but the Roma were not mentioned, as for example the Jews were, in the wording of Goering's sentence.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> M. Rooker, *The International Supervision of Protection of Romany People in Europe*, Nijmegen 2002, pp. 38–51.

More attention and space was devoted to the Roma in successive trials: the so-called medical trials, those against the justice system, and against the Einsatzgruppen. The ones on trial were Nazis of lower rank, however. Thus the Nuremberg trials did not become a watershed for the Roma as they did for the Jews; the Holocaust of the Jews was proven and was judged, while the extermination of Roma was merely noted. Not until the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1962 in Jerusalem were the crimes against the Roma broadly presented and proven. That was still not enough of a stimulus for historians to turn their interest to the Roma and undertake laborious research into the plight of this community during the war.

The efforts by German Sinti and Roma in the Federal Republic of Germany to get reparations and compensation for the persecution and repression, fruitless for decades, illustrate the difficulties facing this minority – and any historians who may take up the subject. The new Germany was obliged by the Allies to compensate the victims of nazism. This obligation was fulfilled under three federal laws. The first was enacted in 1953, and the following two were revisions of the first, in 1956 and 1963.<sup>48</sup> They dealt with reparations for victims of persecution for political, racial, religious and ideological reasons. If the question of reparations to Jews for the Holocaust was clear, and settled through direct negotiations with the Claims Conference (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany), the comparable demands of German Sinti and Roma were challenged by the authorities of the new Germany. They could only direct individual lawsuits to the German courts, invoking the laws mentioned above. The German courts dismissed these claims on principle, stating that they had not been persecuted on racial but rather on social grounds, as “asocial.” In other words, the German courts questioned the fact of the genocide perpetrated against this minority – the preplanned policy of ex-

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<sup>48</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, German Compensation for National Socialist Crimes, at: [www.ushmm.org/assets/frg.htm](http://www.ushmm.org/assets/frg.htm)

termination for racial reasons.<sup>49</sup> This view was widely shared by German society, its elites included. Having no strong support in the Nuremberg trial judgements, disposing no broad base of sources documenting the crimes committed by the Nazis against this minority, having no support from influential historians and German political circles, up to the early 1980s the Sinti and Roma were unable to seriously challenge that interpretation applied by the German courts.

A few voices of support came from Jewish victims of persecution who had witnessed the extermination of Roma. Simon Wiesenthal is one example. In the early 1960s he began to collect documents attesting to the Holocaust of Roma. In 1965 he transferred them to the Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Ludwigsburg. In his book from 1967, *The Murderers Among Us*, he included a chapter on the persecution of Roma.<sup>50</sup> Similar motivations – support for the efforts of German Sinti and Roma before the German courts – spurred Donald Kenrick and Gratton Puxon to gather together all the available archival sources and articles on the subject from many countries of Europe. The result of their research was the book *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, published in 1972.<sup>51</sup> It helped break through the dominant narrative of the Holocaust in the decades that followed. It also supplied strong arguments to the Roma themselves, in their work to get Germany to recognize the persecutions of that community as crimes of genocide. In this process a special role was played by the Heidelberg organization Verband Deutscher Sinti und Roma, and its leader Romani Rose. With support from the German organization

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<sup>49</sup> S. Milton, "Persecuting the Survivors: The Continuity of Antigypsism," in: S. Tebbut (ed.), *Sinti and Roma: Gypsies in German Speaking Society and Literature*, Oxford 1998.

<sup>50</sup> J. Wechsberg (ed.), *The Murderers Among Us. The Simon Wiesenthal Memoirs*, New York 1967.

<sup>51</sup> D. Kenrick, G. Puxon, *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*, New York 1972.

Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (Society for Endangered Peoples) of Göttingen, German Sinti and Roma organized a number of spectacular actions intended to shake up German public opinion. It was this kind of activity, like the demonstration at the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1979 and the hunger strike at Dachau in 1980, or the 3rd Roma World Congress in Göttingen in 1982, that led Helmut Schmidt's government in that year to make a declaration acknowledging Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust of Sinti and Roma, affirming that they had been persecuted on racial grounds.<sup>52</sup> One consequence of Schmidt's declaration was the establishment of government-supported foundations in the German states, whose task was to review claims and pay compensation to German Sinti and Romani citizens who had been victimized by Nazi persecutions.

Schmidt's declaration broke down a certain mental barrier, at least among the political elites in Germany, not to say the whole of society. Jewish circles frequently resisted acknowledging that the mass murder of Roma was perpetrated out of the same racial motivations as in their own case. According to Simon Wiesenthal, when the anniversary of the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen camp was observed in 1985, the Central Council of Jews in Germany refused the request of German Sinti for a place among the speakers. Wiesenthal's personal intervention proved fruitless, so he turned to then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who referred to the tragedy of the Sinti and Roma in his address.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, when the Council of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington was estab-

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<sup>52</sup> Y. Matras, "The Development of the Romani Civil Rights Movement in Germany, 1945–1996," in: S. Tebbut (ed.), *Sinti and Roma: Gypsies in German Speaking Society and Literature*, Oxford 1998.

<sup>53</sup> S. Wiesenthal, "Jews and Gypsies: Genocide of Non-Jewish Victims in the Holocaust as Seen by a Survivor of the Holocaust," in: I.W. Charny (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, vol. I, Santa Barbara, California 1999, pp. 502–505.



lished in 1979, there was no Romani representative among its members. Years later, in 1987, William Duna was invited to the Council, and he was followed by Ian Hancock in 1997. The barrier has been breached among the historians as well; more and more researchers in Germany and other countries are tackling topics related to the Romani Holocaust. With his many publications on the subject, Ian Hancock has played a special role in this process.

The gains of German Sinti and Roma became the gains of Roma in other European countries a decade later, after the collapse of communism and the Berlin Wall. Today, in anniversary observances commemorating the Holocaust of the Roma or Jews, representatives of both communities participate. The annual ceremony on August 2nd at Auschwitz-Birkenau – the date of the liquidation of the so-called *Zigeunerlager* (“Gypsy camp”) – is already a permanent element of the observance schedule there. Every year it gathers multitudes of Roma from all over Europe, as well as representatives of the national executives and governments of many countries, including Israel. In 1997, the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma was established in Heidelberg;<sup>54</sup> there is a permanent exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington now devotes more attention to the Holocaust of Roma. In this way, gradually the memory of the Romani tragedy is becoming part of the institutionalized memory of the Holocaust. It is high time for it likewise to become part of the historical memory of both Roma and non-Roma. Incorporating the history of Roma, including the history of their persecution and their Holocaust, in core curricula, can bring this about, for “it is understanding, not the refusal of understanding, that makes it possible to prevent a repetition of the horror.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See: [www.sintiundroma.de/english/html](http://www.sintiundroma.de/english/html)

<sup>55</sup> T. Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, New York 1996, p. 277.