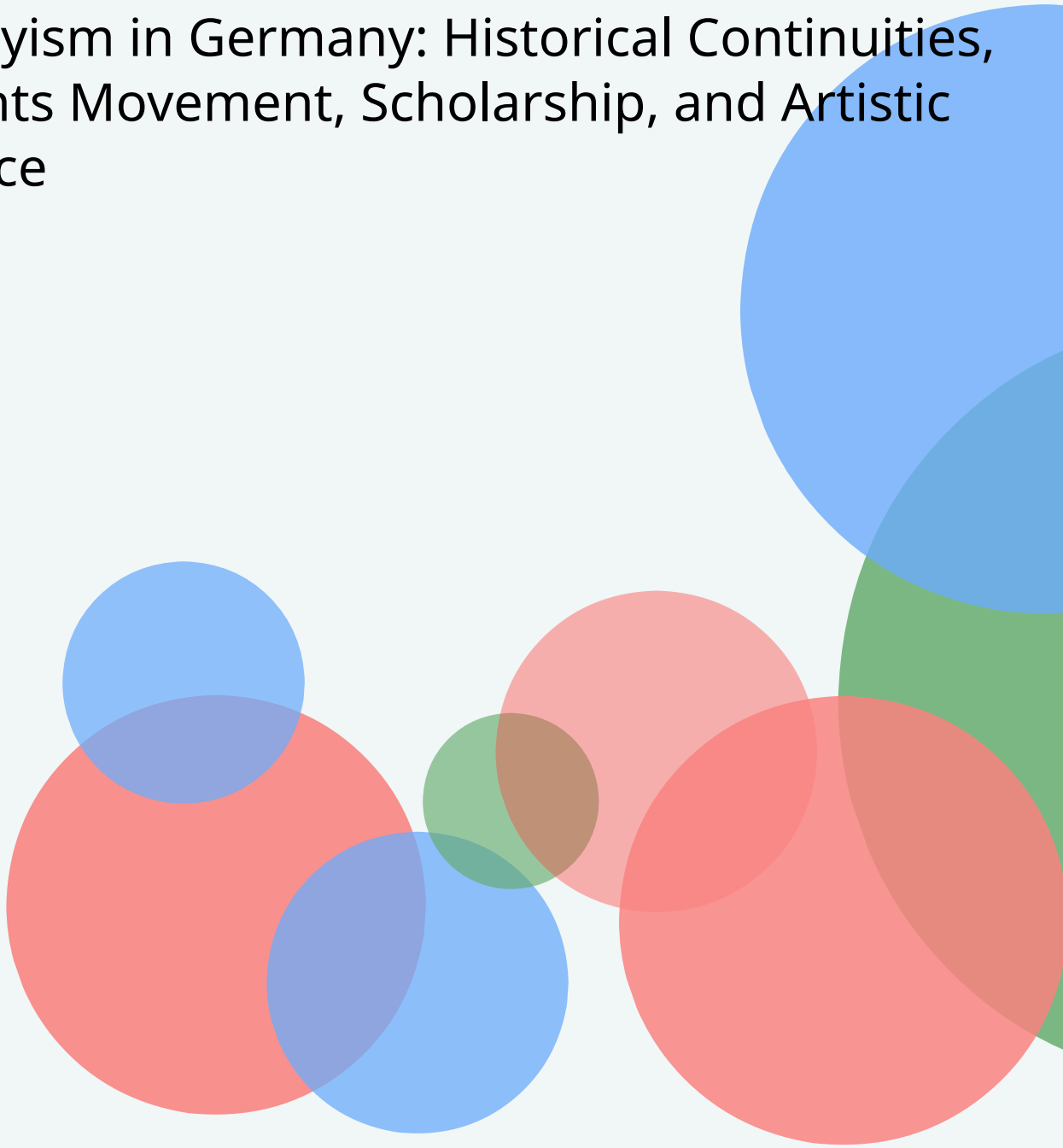
Antigypsyism in Germany: Historical Continuities, Civil Rights Movement, Scholarship, and Artistic Resistance



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European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC)

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JEKHIPE
RECLAIMING OUR PAST, REBUILDING OUR FUTURE:
NEW APPROACHES TO FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

The JEKHIPE Project

The JEKHIPE project *Reclaiming our past, rebuilding our future: new approaches to fighting antigypsyism against Roma* is a CERV-funded project aimed at improving the lives of Roma by addressing systemic and institutional antigypsyism, promoting transitional justice, fostering knowledge-building and awareness, and strengthening Roma identity and participation.

It is a follow-up to *CHACHIPEN*, an earlier CERV project, officially titled *Paving the way for a Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe*. *Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building*. Concluded in 2023, CHACHIPEN introduced an innovative transitional justice-based approach to raising awareness of systemic injustice and ongoing antigypsyism in policymaking, while advocating for a comprehensive truth and reconciliation strategy.

JEKHIPE focuses on multiple levels of policy-making, including research, monitoring, advocacy, networking, alliances building, awareness raising, capacity building, and empowerment. It aims to engage with national and European institutions, academia, politicians, justice mechanisms, state authorities, civil society, and Roma communities themselves to challenge the status quo on approaching Roma issues, particularly antigypsyism, and propose mechanisms for increased accountability by national governments.

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Introduction

Antigypsyism remains one of the most persistent and least acknowledged forms of racism in Europe. In Germany, it has shaped both the historical trajectory of Sinti and Roma and their contemporary realities, from centuries of exclusion to the racial persecution under National Socialism and the discrimination that continues today. Recognition of the genocide of Sinti and Roma came only in 1982, after years of activism led by survivors and their descendants. The civil rights movement that emerged in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s played a decisive role in forcing public acknowledgment, challenging discriminatory state practices, and opening a path for both research and cultural resistance.

This paper examines antigypsyism in Germany across three interrelated dimensions: historical continuities, the civil rights movement, and the interplay of scholarship and art. It first situates contemporary debates in the long history of persecution and the struggle for recognition, showing how activist interventions exposed the persistence of Nazi categories and institutional racism well into the Federal Republic. It then analyzes the development of antigypsyism research, from Markus End's discourse analysis of the press to the institutional work of the Independent Commission on Antigypsyism (UKA), MIA, and the Zentralrat's monitoring initiatives, demonstrating how antigypsyism is continually rearticulated across media, politics, and everyday life. Finally, it explores Roma artistic resistance – memoirs, music, theater, performance, and memorial art – as a vital arena where trauma is voiced, memory preserved, and belonging asserted.

By bringing together history, activism, scholarship, and art, the paper shows that antigypsyism is both a structural injustice and a cultural battleground. While research exposes its mechanisms, Roma artistic and political resistance interrupts its reproduction, insisting on dignity, presence, and memory. The struggle against antigypsyism in Germany must therefore be read not only in legal and institutional terms but also in cultural production, where survivors and their descendants continue to resist silencing and claim their place in German and European society.

Antigypsyism – through the History of Sinti and Roma in Germany

Early Arrivals and Historical Uncertainty – The Beginnings of Antigypsyism

The arrival of the first Roma groups in Central Europe cannot be reconstructed with certainty. Sources are scarce, fragmentary, and filtered through local chroniclers. The first reliable mentions appear from 1385 in Wallachia, and by 1435 Roma were recorded in most European cities (Council of Europe 2008c). Sinti and Roma appeared in the territory of present-day Germany in the early fifteenth century, then part of the *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*.

For centuries, the *Hildesheimer Stadtrechnung* of 1407 – recording wine given to people described as *Tartaren* – was considered the first reference to Roma in Germany. More recent research questions this identification, but the debate itself illustrates how fragile the evidence is and how strongly historians have sought to pinpoint a "first appearance" (Council of Europe 2008c).

By the 1410s, further traces emerged. A 1414 entry from Hesse refers to *Heiden*, later equated with *Zigeuner*. Such terminology reveals how Roma were interpreted from the outset through categories of religious otherness, marking them as outsiders.

More detailed descriptions appear from 1417–1421, when large groups of Roma traveled across Central and Western Europe, sometimes numbering more than 300 people. Chroniclers described them as penitential pilgrims from *Kleines Ägypten*, led by dukes, counts, or voivodes. They often carried *Geleitbriefe* (letters of safe conduct) from rulers, including Emperor Sigismund and even the pope. These documents granted temporary rights of passage and hospitality.

In German-speaking regions, such groups passed through Hamburg, Lübeck, Rostock, Strasbourg, and Basel. Chroniclers noted their clothing, encampments, and fortune telling. Local authorities at first extended Christian hospitality, but acceptance was conditional and soon gave way to suspicion. Already at this early stage, their legitimacy was contested – a first sign of antigypsyist attitudes (Council of Europe 2008c).

Distrust and Reproaches: The Formation of Early Antigypsyist Stereotypes

Although safe-conduct letters initially secured tolerance, Sinti and Roma were soon regarded with suspicion. Chroniclers emphasized their "foreign" appearance – dark skin, unusual dress – and linked it to negative character judgments. They were depicted as wild, unmannered, and godless. Minor offences against property gave rise to the stereotype of "cunning thieves," while practices like fortune telling were condemned as *Zauberei*. Church authorities

denounced them as fraudulent or demonic, and fears spread that they spied for the Turks – although no one was ever convicted of espionage.

This distrust quickly reshaped their treatment: short periods of toleration were replaced by efforts to remove them from cities. Alms given "to honor God" became payments to secure their departure. This practice culminated in the first recorded *Auskauf* in Bamberg (Council of Europe 2008c).

From Pilgrims to Problems: The Bamberg Precedent

A crucial turning point occurred in Bamberg in 1463, when city authorities paid Roma to leave. This was the first documented buy-out in German lands, showing how they were no longer regarded as pilgrims but as a problem to be expelled, even at municipal expense. The act illustrates the shift from toleration to rejection and marks one of the earliest institutionalized expressions of antigypsyism in Germany (Council of Europe 2008c).

After Bamberg, expulsions multiplied. The 1482 Edict of Brandenburg banned Roma from the territory, while the 1497 *Reichstag zu Lindau* declared them *vogelfrei* – outside the protection of the law and subject to violence (Council of Europe 2008c).

Anti-"Gypsy" Laws and Institutionalized Violence

From the early sixteenth century, persecution became codified at the imperial level. In 1501 Emperor Maximilian I ordered the expulsion of Roma from imperial territory, declaring those who remained *vogelfrei*. Between 1500 and 1750, more than 150 anti-"Gypsy" mandates were issued, embedding antigypsyism in law (Council of Europe 2008a). These legitimized violent practices such as the *Kesseltreiben* ("Gypsy hunts"), especially in Saxony. In 1711, Augustus II even authorized local officials to shoot Roma who resisted arrest, making violence a public spectacle and normalizing persecution (Council of Europe 2008a).

Later Migration Waves and Intensified Control

Roma migration to Germany continued in later centuries. The abolition of slavery in Wallachia and Moldavia in the mid-nineteenth century brought westward migration, with some groups settling in Germany (Council of Europe 2008d). A third wave in the twentieth century included Roma labor migrants in the 1960s and, later, refugees from the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Many sought asylum, but their precarious status and frequent threat of deportation added a new dimension to antigypsyism, showing its persistence in the postwar democratic state (Council of Europe 2008e).

Nineteenth-Century Racial Science and Continuity

By the late nineteenth century, older patterns of exclusion and criminalization were reframed within the language of racial science and modern state administration. Antigypsyism did not disappear with modernization but acquired new tools. The shift from mandates and hunts to police files and legal codes reveals continuity: the logic of exclusion remained. Bavaria in particular became a laboratory for this rearticulated form of antigypsyism, shaping German policy and influencing neighboring states.

Antigypsyism in Germany before 1933: The Bavarian Precedent

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, centuries-old patterns of exclusion were rearticulated through the institutions of the modern state. What had once taken the form of expulsions or hunts was now pursued through police registries, anthropometric files, and special laws. Bavaria played a pioneering role, creating a framework that other German states – and later the Nazi regime – would adopt.

Already in 1885, Bavarian authorities restricted Roma livelihoods with a law tightening licensing rules for itinerant traders, allowing permits to be withdrawn from undocumented families (Dawsey 2021). In 1899, Munich's security police established the *Nachrichtendienst in Bezug auf Zigeuner* (Central Office for Gypsy Affairs), the first German state body devoted entirely to Roma surveillance. Its purpose was not to prosecute crimes but to register an entire population as suspect. By 1911, Roma in Bavaria were fingerprinted, and registry offices supplied data on births, marriages, and deaths to expand police files. Photographs, fingerprints, and ID cards circulated among police forces, reinforcing the idea that Roma were to be controlled rather than protected (Dawsey 2021).

This logic deepened with Alfred Dillmann's *Zigeuner-Buch* (1905), compiled from years of police records and genealogical data. The handbook catalogued over 3,300 individuals and circulated widely among administrative offices. Presenting Roma as inherently criminal, it criminalized everyday practices such as camping or moving with wagons. As the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma emphasizes, Dillmann's book was prescriptive: it shaped how officials defined and treated Roma, legitimizing repression (Bavarikon n.d.; Dokumentationszentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

A decisive step came with the 1926 Bavarian *Gesetz zur Bekämpfung von Zigeunern, Landfahrern und Arbeitsscheuen* ("Law for the Fight Against Gypsies, Vagrants and the Workshy"), which prohibited group travel, banned camping, and criminalized those without steady employment, who could be sent to forced labor for up to two years. In 1929 the law

was adopted nationwide, turning Bavaria's approach into German policy. As Herbert Heuss notes, it even influenced neighboring countries (Heuss 1997).

The effect was segregation and intensified control. Roma were pushed to town margins or into designated areas under police surveillance. In 1927, Prussia required all Roma to carry ID cards, with mass fingerprinting and photographing. By 1929, the *Zentrale zur Bekämpfung des Zigeunerunwesens* (Central Office for the Fight Against Gypsies) was established, granting police authority to detain Roma arbitrarily under the guise of crime prevention.

These measures reveal continuity rather than rupture: the centuries-old view of Roma as dangerous outsiders was now enforced through the bureaucratic and pseudoscientific tools of the modern state. The Weimar Republic thus codified discrimination into law, laying the administrative foundations upon which the Nazi regime would build.

The Persecution and Genocide of the Sinti and Roma during the Nazi Regime – the Deadliest Continuation

Centuries of exclusion culminated in the Nazi genocide of Sinti and Roma. Declared racially inferior, they were subjected to sterilization, internment, deportation, and mass murder. Up to 500,000 Roma were killed across Europe, including tens of thousands in Germany. This genocide did not arise in isolation but represented the most extreme outcome of long-entrenched antigypsyist policies (Sinti und Roma n.d.-b; n.d.-c).

Post-War Marginalization and Civil Rights Advocacy

After 1945, Sinti and Roma survivors continued to face exclusion. Many were denied recognition as victims of racial persecution and excluded from compensation schemes, deepening their marginalization (Sinti und Roma n.d.-d). In response, new organizations emerged: the *Verband Deutscher Sinti* (1972) and the *Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma* (1982), which became central voices for civil rights, historical justice, and the recognition of ongoing antigypsyism (Council of Europe 2008b).

Memorialization and Recognition

A symbolic milestone came in 1982, when Chancellor Helmut Schmidt – responding to the hunger strike of Sinti and Roma activists at Dachau – officially recognized their persecution under National Socialism as genocide (*Völkermord*). This acknowledgment laid the groundwork for later institutional recognition. In 1997, Germany reinforced this stance by formally using the designation *Völkermord aus Gründen der Rasse* and by inaugurating the *Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma* in Heidelberg, a permanent institution for research, education, and commemoration (Sinti und Roma n.d.-e).

Case Study: Fortune Telling as Gendered Antigypsyism

Verena Meier identifies the persecution of Roma women for fortune telling as an early and persistent form of gendered antigypsyism, demonstrating both continuity and transformation: from medieval stereotypes, to modern criminological classifications, to Nazi incarceration policies (Meier 2023).

From the late medieval period onward, Roma women were stereotypically associated with palm reading and chiromancy, practices framed as fraudulent or irrational. This image circulated in literature, encyclopedias, visual art, and ethnography, before being reinforced by criminology and penology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Laws and police decrees increasingly prohibited fortune telling, targeting women stigmatized as "Gypsies."

This continuity culminated in the Nazi period: on 20 November 1939 the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) decreed that all Roma women suspected of fortune telling be placed in preventive police detention in concentration camps. Local criminal police offices in Cologne and Magdeburg implemented this order, incarcerating or threatening women with deportation, stripping them of legal income opportunities, and branding them as public dangers.

Meier stresses that this stereotype did not end in 1945: the association of Roma women with fortune telling continues to shape discriminatory representations and practices today (Meier 2023, 30–43).

Antigypsyism in 20th-Century Germany: Structures of Persecution before, during, and after the Second World War

The Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma was rooted in racial pseudo-theories that framed them as "asocial," "mixed," and biologically "inferior." From 1933 onward, they were placed within the ideology of *Rassenhygiene* (racial hygiene), alongside Jews, disabled persons, and others defined as "unfit." In Nazi thought, Sinti and Roma were of Indo-Aryan origin but had become "racially degenerate" through centuries of migration, which marked them as racially alien and socially dangerous – outsiders who could be excluded and annihilated (USHMM 2023a).

The 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws institutionalized this exclusion. The Reich Citizenship Law stripped Jews and, by extension, Sinti and Roma of German citizenship, while the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour prohibited marriage and sexual relations between "Aryans" and those categorized as racially alien. These laws relegated Sinti and Roma to second-class status and provided the legal foundation for intensified racial persecution (USHMM 2023b).

A decisive role was played by Robert Ritter's *Rassenhygienische und Bevölkerungsbiologische Forschungsstelle* (Research Unit for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology), founded in 1936 under the Reich Health Office. Ritter drew on entrenched stereotypes that portrayed Roma as deceitful, criminal, and "asocial," and sought to systematize these prejudices under scientific and medical authority. His colleague Eva Justin, called *Lolitschai* by Roma communities, carried out anthropological and psychological studies on Roma children in foster care and institutions, many of whom were later deported to Auschwitz. Justin submitted her dissertation in 1944 and, after the war, returned to Tübingen University to continue teaching. Ritter, for his part, escaped prosecution and died in 1951. Their genealogical files on Sinti and Roma families were preserved in the archives of Tübingen University and later the Federal Archives, where they remained in use until civil rights activists occupied the Tübingen archive in 1981, exposing their role in ongoing persecution (USHMM 2023c).

Ritter's institute also provided justification for forced sterilizations under the 1933 Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring. Roma were sterilized as "hereditarily criminal" or "mentally deficient," in prewar Germany and in annexed territories during the war. These sterilizations, a direct attack on reproductive rights, marked an essential stage in the Nazi project of biological control (USHMM 2023d).

The Kripo (Criminal Police) was another central institution of repression. Initially a professional police force, many officers had not been Nazis before 1933 but nevertheless aligned themselves with the regime, internalizing its racial worldview. Under Himmler, the Kripo was

merged with the SS into the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA). While presenting itself as a professional crime-fighting body, it grew increasingly aggressive, applying Nazi racial policy and sending Roma and Sinti into concentration camps even before the war. After 1945, many officers attempted to portray their actions as continuity with pre-Nazi policing traditions, concealing their active role in racial persecution (USHMM 2023e).

A major step in codified repression came with Himmler's *Decree for Combating the Gypsy Plague* (*Bekämpfung der Zigeunerplage*), issued in December 1938. It ordered the comprehensive registration and racial-biological assessment of all Sinti and Roma in the Reich and placed their fate under the Reich Criminal Police Office. This decree marked the shift from surveillance to systematic incarceration and deportation (USHMM 2023j).

One of the earliest sites of municipal detention was the Berlin-Marzahn camp. Just before the opening of the 1936 Olympic Games, Berlin police raided Roma encampments across the city and transported entire families with their wagons to a field in Marzahn, near a cemetery and sewage dump. The conditions were degrading: some 130 caravans and a barracks were crowded together with minimal food, water, or medical care. By September 1938, around 852 people were confined there, labeled as "asocials." They remained imprisoned under police authority until 1943, when most were deported to Auschwitz. Marzahn demonstrates how antigypsyism was enforced at both the local and national levels, embedding persecution in everyday governance (USHMM 2023e; Sinti und Roma n.d.-b).

With the outbreak of war, persecution escalated into genocide. Sinti and Roma from Germany and annexed territories were deported to ghettos, forced labor camps, and extermination camps. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the *Zigeunerlager* ("Gypsy family camp") confined entire families in horrific conditions. On the night of 2 August 1944, nearly 3,000 Roma were murdered in the gas chambers—a date now commemorated as Roma Holocaust Memorial Day (USHMM 2023f). Medical experiments further revealed the brutality of Nazi racial science: Josef Mengele carried out procedures on Roma prisoners, including children and twins, subjecting them to diseases, blood transfusions, and fatal experiments (USHMM 2023g).

The defeat of Nazism in 1945 did not bring justice. The racial scientists' files remained in use for decades, and former perpetrators continued their careers largely unchallenged until Sinti and Roma civil rights protests in the late 20th century forced public recognition of these continuities. The trajectory from prewar persecution to genocide underscores how deeply antigypsyism was embedded in the Nazi worldview. Sinti and Roma were not only excluded but marked as racially alien, biologically inferior, and socially dangerous. This construction justified sterilization, incarceration, and mass murder. What began with pseudo-scientific

studies and police repression in the 1930s culminated in genocide across Europe, organized and commanded by the Nazi state (USHMM 2023h).

The Genocide of Sinti and Roma during the Second World War

As the ultimate expression of antigypsyism in Europe, the persecution of Sinti and Roma during the Second World War culminated in genocide. Nazi authorities and their collaborators implemented a systematic program of internment, sterilization, forced labor, deportation, and mass murder of Roma across German-occupied Europe (USHMM 2023; Sinti und Roma n.d.-c). Because Roma communities were never fully counted before the war and much documentation was destroyed, exact victim numbers remain uncertain. Historians estimate that up to 500,000 European Roma were killed. Within Germany itself, numbers are even harder to determine, as many victims were neither properly registered nor recognized as racially persecuted until much later (USHMM 2023).

The Direct Aftermath of the Genocide in Germany and the Struggles for Recognition

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Sinti and Roma survivors faced the difficult task of rebuilding their lives in a Germany that was both their homeland and the site of their destruction. Most had lost homes, family members, and livelihoods, and yet, despite being left with almost nothing, they returned. For many, German was their mother tongue, and they felt a deep connection to the land of their ancestors. As Christian Pfeil recalled, when he asked his father why the family came back to Trier after liberation from the Lublin (Majdanek) concentration camp (USHMM 2023i), his father replied: "because this was the only language we spoke and because we regarded this place as our homeland" (Pfeil 2022; ARD Mediathek 2024). At the same time, survivors like Reinhard Florian, a Sinto from East Prussia, recounted how attempts to "return home" brought further displacement, poverty, and exclusion, reflecting the persistence of antigypsyist stigmas (Stiftung Denkmal 2020).

The persistence of persecution was not only social but also institutional. In West Germany, many former Kripo officials who had enforced racial policies under the Nazis returned to positions of authority in police and administrative offices. Nazi categories continued to shape official attitudes: Sinti and Roma were often still labeled "asocials" or "vagrants," rather than recognized as victims of racial persecution.

The Magolsheim Affair (1957)

Another case that illustrates the depth of postwar antigypsyism in everyday life is the Magolsheim Affair of 1957. As Markus End has shown, even once Germany was formally at peace, Sinti families remained vulnerable to public hostility and legal impunity (End 2009). In

Magolsheim, a Sinti family had acquired a house funded by a neighboring municipality on the condition that they leave their former residence. On the eve of their planned move, villagers gathered in the local pub to plan obstruction of the settlement. That night, dozens of residents – led by the local teacher – destroyed the two-story house with tractors, tearing off its roof, smashing windows and doors, and dismantling walls until only the foundation remained. The next morning, under humiliation and threat, the family was unable to move in. Although 31 people were later charged with breach of peace and property destruction, most received only suspended sentences. Public reaction was muted, and some local officials defended the perpetrators, claiming Sinti could not adapt to village life (End 2009; ARD Mediathek 1957).

As in the fifteenth century, when initial alms for Sinti and Roma pilgrims turned into "buy-outs" to drive them away, the Magolsheim Affair demonstrated the same logic: Sinti and Roma were cast not as citizens with rights, but as outsiders to be excluded at any cost (Council of Europe 2008c). Despite formal citizenship—many had held it long before 1933, though some were stripped of it under the Nuremberg Laws and not always reinstated after 1945 – they remained criminalized and subjected to arbitrary police control. In this sense, the Magolsheim Affair is not just a local scandal but evidence of the long continuity of antigypsyism in German history.

The Traveler Ordinance and Institutional Discrimination

The *Landfahrerordnung* (Traveler Ordinance), enacted in Bavaria in 1953, further institutionalized exclusion. Officially framed as a regulation on "traveler families," it circumvented constitutional bans on racial discrimination while continuing surveillance and marginalization (Bayerisches Staatsministerium des Innern 1953). Under this law, individuals defined as "travelers" could be monitored by police simply because of their lifestyle, with the ordinance remaining in force until 1970. While other federal states did not adopt identical regulations, Bavaria's law was frequently cited as a model. Additional measures, such as the withdrawal of citizenship in North Rhine-Westphalia in the 1950s, reinforced the idea that Sinti and Roma were inherently suspect, blocking access to justice and compensation.

Wiedergutmachung and Legal Exclusion

The legal framework of compensation (*Wiedergutmachung*) introduced further injustice. Although designed to provide restitution to victims of Nazi persecution, implementation for Sinti and Roma was marked by obstruction and denial. In 1965, the Federal Court of Justice (BGH) under Judge Guido Schmidt ruled that persecution of Roma before 1943 was not racially motivated but the result of alleged "asocial behavior." This decision excluded many

survivors from compensation and perpetuated Nazi stereotypes within postwar jurisprudence.

Joey Rauschenberger's research sheds light on survivors' persistence within this unequal system (Rauschenberger 2024). He documents cases such as the Sintezzas Rosa Winter and Elvira Bühler, who petitioned despite limited literacy caused by disrupted schooling during the Nazi era. Their appeals emphasized illness, poverty, and old age, and they persisted for decades despite systemic obstruction. While some lawyers acted as allies, others neglected or undermined their clients. Women's petitions, in particular, left a record of resilience, complicating portrayals of Roma as passive victims and showing how they asserted dignity and agency even under hostile conditions.

The case of Theresia Winterstein and her daughter Rita Prigmore further demonstrates the hardships survivors faced. Both were subjected to Nazi medical experiments: Theresia as a young woman, and Rita as a newborn. Rita suffered lifelong physical, mental, and emotional consequences. Their decades-long legal struggle for recognition highlights how personal survival stories intersected with entrenched bureaucratic denial. In their persistence, they embodied the early steps of what later became a collective civil rights movement.

Toward Civil Rights Mobilization

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, frustration with exclusion and violence erupted into visible protest. Police brutality became a catalyst for mobilization. The killing of Anton Lehmann, a Sinto man shot by police in Heidelberg in 1973, galvanized outrage within the community (Dokumentationszentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2023). His death symbolized how state institutions continued to view Sinti and Roma through the lens of criminality rather than as citizens entitled to protection. The first organized demonstration of Sinti in Heidelberg that same year protested not only police violence but also the broader structures of exclusion. This marked a turning point: the struggle for justice shifted from isolated petitions to a collective, politicized civil rights movement.

The Civil Rights Movement of Sinti and Roma in Germany - Organized Response to Antigypsyism

The killing of Anton Lehmann (1973) – the start of the Sinti and Roma civil rights demonstrations in Germany

On 31 May 1973, Anton Lehmann, a Sinto and survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau (Bohrer 2000), was shot dead by police in Heidelberg. The incident began as a minor dispute in a local pub, where Lehmann's son tried to buy a crate of beer for his mother's birthday without paying the bottle deposit. The pub owner's mother responded with a whip and racist insults, escalating the situation. Lehmann and his son returned home, but five police officers followed and attacked them with batons. A bystander even fired a gas pistol to support the officers. The confrontation ended when an officer fired eight live rounds, killing Lehmann instantly and injuring his sons. Authorities ruled the shooting "self-defense," while Lehmann's sons received prison sentences of up to two years for assault. Later research revealed that the family had long been targeted by local residents because of their Sinti background (Müller-Münch 2020). Witnesses recalled that Lehmann shouted "Nazi-Schweine" ("Nazi swine") at the officers after the pub owner's mother reportedly told him: "Ihr dreckigen Zigeuner gehört vergast" ("You filthy gypsies should be gassed"). His killing exposed the persistent criminalization of Sinti and Roma in postwar Germany and became emblematic of how little had changed since 1945.

Vinzenz and Oskar Rose: Survivors and Pioneers of Civil Rights Movement in Germany

The emergence of a civil rights movement among Sinti and Roma in postwar Germany cannot be understood without recognizing the pioneering role of Vinzenz Rose (1908–1996) and his brother Oskar Rose (1906–1968). Both were German Sinti and Holocaust survivors born in Upper Silesia. Many of their family members were victims of the Nazi genocide: their father, Anton Rose, and Vinzenz Rose's two-year-old daughter were murdered in Auschwitz, while their mother, Lisetta Rose, died during deportation to Ravensbrück. Oskar Rose escaped internment in a concentration camp, while Vinzenz Rose was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and later to the Neckarelz subcamp, from which he escaped with Oskar's help on 30 August 1944. They survived until the end of the war in hiding (GDW Vinzenz Rose n.d.; Gress, RomArchive 2018).

At the late 1940s, the two brothers, together with other Holocaust survivors, sought to bring Nazi perpetrators to justice. They founded the *Interessengemeinschaft rassisch Verfolgter nicht-jüdischen Glaubens* ("Association of Racially Persecuted Non-Jews"), one of the first survivor organizations to represent Sinti interests in West Germany. Their goal was to support survivors in claiming compensation and to challenge the persistence of Nazi categories within

the postwar administration. Yet despite their testimonies and legal initiatives, most prosecutions were dropped, and their work attracted little public attention (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; GDW n.d.).

Oskar Rose hired a private detective in the early 1950s to track down Robert Ritter. Both Oskar and Vinzenz Rose testified in the subsequent investigation against Ritter, though it ultimately failed to secure accountability. These efforts nonetheless illustrate how survivor-led activism directly confronted the continuity of Nazi ideologies in German institutions (Gress, RomArchive n.d.).

In 1971, Vinzenz Rose founded the *Zentral-Komitee der Cinti Westdeutschlands*, soon renamed the *Verband Deutscher Sinti*. This marked a crucial step in institutionalizing the political representation of Sinti in Germany. The organization's focus moved beyond individual compensation cases to structural challenges: exposing ongoing police surveillance, discriminatory laws, and the lack of recognition of the genocide of Sinti and Roma. After the killing of Anton Lehmann in Heidelberg in 1973, Vinzenz Rose, as chair of the Verband, initiated and organized the first public demonstration of the civil rights movement, bringing one hundred Sinti from across Germany into the streets of Heidelberg to demand equal citizenship and an end to racist violence (Dokumentationszentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2023).

Vinzenz Rose's activism also extended into commemoration. In 1974, he personally erected the first memorial to Sinti and Roma victims of the Holocaust at the site of the "Gypsy Family Camp" (*Zigeunerlager*), today referred to as Auschwitz-Birkenau II.e. The project was entirely financed by him, as German authorities offered no support and Polish officials only tolerated the initiative. Built from bricks of the former barracks, the memorial bore an inscription dedicating it to German Sinti. Over time, it became a symbolic site of remembrance for all Sinti and Roma murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Since 1994, annual commemorations have been held there on 2 August, the anniversary of the camp's liquidation (Memorial Museums n.d.).

These efforts reveal that the struggle for justice began immediately after 1945, even if largely ignored by the broader public (Gress, RomArchive n.d.). While Vinzenz Rose and Oskar Rose laid the foundations, their work was carried forward by Romani Rose, Oskar's son, who in 1982 co-founded the Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma together with nine associations (Gress, RomArchive n.d.). Today the umbrella organization includes sixteen state and regional member associations and provides Sinti and Roma in Germany with an officially recognized political voice in dialogue with the federal government (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.). Under Romani Rose's leadership, the Zentralrat became the central institution of civil

rights advocacy, securing the recognition of the genocide of Sinti and Roma and ensuring their voices entered German political and cultural life.

Through these efforts – from postwar legal testimonies and the first organizations of the 1950s, to the Heidelberg demonstration in 1973, the Auschwitz memorial in 1974, and the founding of the Zentralrat in 1982 – the Rose family embodied the continuity of survivor-led resistance. Their work demonstrates how civil rights activism grew directly out of the Holocaust experience and developed into a sustained struggle for recognition, justice, and equal citizenship.

Demonstrations, Protests for the Recognition of the Roma Genocide during the Nazi Regime

For decades after 1945, the genocide of Sinti and Roma was denied in the Federal Republic. Survivors were not recognized as victims of National Socialist racial policy, and most claims for compensation were rejected. Authorities and medical experts, many of whom had served under the Nazis, openly upheld racist views consistent with National Socialist ideology. As a result, the damage to health, education, and livelihoods caused by persecution was dismissed, while many perpetrators pursued uninterrupted careers in government or private business. Deportations of Sinti and Roma during the Nazi regime were even retrospectively justified as "crime prevention measures."

The genocide of the Roma also remained marginal in scholarship and at memorial sites, where it was often omitted from narratives of persecution. Against this silence, political self-organization among Sinti and Roma sought to force recognition. Activists adopted the classic tools of the civil rights movement—organizing demonstrations and public protests at symbolically and historically significant sites of persecution. Among the most decisive were the Bergen-Belsen rally (1979), the Dachau hunger strike (1980), and the Tübingen protest (1981). These actions marked a turning point in the struggle for recognition and in the broader civil rights movement.

The First International Memorial Rally at Bergen-Belsen (1979)

On 27 October 1979, the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement in Germany achieved a major breakthrough with the first international memorial rally at the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The event was part of wider efforts by activists to force recognition of their persecution under National Socialism, protest continuing discrimination, and affirm dignity for survivors whose suffering had been largely ignored in postwar Germany (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

Around 2,000 people attended, including about 500 Roma from twelve European states, Holocaust survivors, German politicians, and representatives of other victim groups. The main

speaker was Simone Veil, the first female president of the European Parliament and a Jewish survivor who had endured Auschwitz and lost her mother at Bergen-Belsen. Her address stressed both the moral duty to remember and Germany's responsibility to acknowledge the erased history of Sinti and Roma victims (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The rally's goals were clear: activists demanded official recognition of the genocide (Völkermord) of Sinti and Roma, public commemoration of the crimes, and an end to structural discrimination in the Federal Republic – especially the continuation of Nazi-era file-keeping, racial profiling, and the marginalization of survivor voices (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.; Gress, RomArchive n.d.).

After the rally, a delegation from the Verband Deutscher Sinti, the Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, and the International Romani Union submitted a memorandum to the Federal Chancellery, outlining the movement's demands. This moment reflected and reinforced the growing political organization of Sinti and Roma and helped pave the way for later recognition of their suffering by the German state (Gress, RomArchive n.d.).

The Bergen-Belsen rally was both commemoration and political act. It marked one of the first times the genocide of Sinti and Roma was publicly memorialized on an international stage, with demands for justice voiced alongside remembrance (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The Hunger Strike in Dachau (1980)

On Good Friday, 4 April 1980, twelve Sinti men – among them Holocaust survivors such as Jakob Bamberger and Franz Wirbel, alongside younger activists including Romani Rose – began a hunger strike at the Dachau concentration camp memorial site. Their main demand was the official recognition of the Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma as genocide, coupled with the removal of genealogical "race files" still maintained by police and administrative offices in West Germany. Originally compiled by Robert Ritter and his assistant Eva Justin at the Rassenhygienische Forschungsstelle, these files had provided the pseudo-scientific basis for Nazi persecution. "Race researchers" still active at Tübingen University possessed copies, and police continued using them for surveillance and discrimination decades after 1945. By targeting these files, the hunger strikers exposed the continuity of Nazi racial science in the Federal Republic and demanded their transfer to the Federal Archives (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

Organized only months after the Bergen-Belsen rally, the protest carried strong symbolism. Some survivors wore their former concentration camp uniforms, while Dachau itself – one of

the earliest Nazi camps – had by then become a memorial site. The hunger strike lasted seven to eight days. The turning point came on 12 April 1980, when Federal Minister of Justice Hans-Jochen Vogel visited the site, acknowledged the legitimacy of the strikers' demands, and later described the action as a *"sehr wichtigen Anstoß"* ("very important impulse") in confronting the prejudice and discrimination that Sinti and Roma continued to face. Although not all files were immediately secured, the protest forced public recognition that Nazi-era documents were still being used against survivors (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-a).

The participants also drew wide national and international attention with symbolic acts, such as laying wreaths in camp uniforms, underscoring that the persecution of Sinti and Roma was not just history but remained embedded in present-day institutions. About one hundred media outlets covered the action, amplifying its message far beyond Dachau (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-a).

The hunger strike is widely recognized as one of the central milestones of the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement: it transformed survivor testimony into public protest, disrupted the silence surrounding postwar discrimination, and compelled political authorities to confront long-ignored injustices (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The Tübingen Archive Protest (1981)

In September 1981, eighteen Sinti activists occupied the basement of the University of Tübingen's archive, demanding the removal of Nazi "race files" stored there and their transfer to the Federal Archives in Koblenz. Originally compiled by the Racial Hygiene Research Centre, these files contained genealogical family trees, measurement sheets, photographs, and around 20,000 *Rassengutachten* (race reports). They had formed the scientific and bureaucratic foundation of Nazi persecution, and disturbingly, parts of them remained in use for research and police purposes decades after 1945 (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-b; Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The protest followed the Dachau hunger strike and marked a shift from symbolic protest to direct retrieval of evidence. Under pressure, the University of Tübingen conceded and handed over some files to the Federal Archives, but the transfer was incomplete. The *Rassengutachten*, central to Nazi racial persecution, were withheld, and their disappearance became the subject of later legal and historical inquiries (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-b; Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The occupation revealed a more mature stage of Sinti and Roma activism. By 1981, demands were no longer confined to memorialization or reparations but extended to transparency, accountability, and institutional change. The protest made clear that archival suppression –

not only social erasure – perpetuated injustice. Survivors and allies pursued court cases and public campaigns to uncover the fate of the missing files, pressing universities and government institutions to explain their use and disappearance (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-b).

Although not all goals were achieved, the occupation is widely recognized as a key institutional breakthrough. It exposed the secrecy surrounding Nazi-era documentation and compelled public acknowledgment that racial science had not been dealt with after 1945. It reinforced that civil rights claims by Sinti and Roma were about more than recognition of past wrongs: they challenged how the legacies of those wrongs persisted in institutions, education, memory, and law (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

Protests Against Special Registration by the Police

In June 1982, the German Conference of Interior Ministers decided to continue the special registration of Sinti and Roma within criminal investigation departments, including the "ZN" label – *Zigeunername* ("Gypsy name") (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-c).

This practice, rooted in Nazi-era jurisprudence, had persisted for decades after 1945. Police continued to use special files and labels that stigmatized Sinti and Roma as inherently suspicious, drawing on older practices already in place during the German Empire. After the war, "Landfahrerstellen" (traveler offices) within regional police forces maintained these registrations, and into the late 1960s official guidelines still echoed Nazi terminology (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-c).

The 1982 decision triggered a protest on 30 January 1983 – the 50th anniversary of the Nazi seizure of power—held in front of the Federal Criminal Investigation Department. About 250 people from across Germany participated, including concentration camp survivors. Activists such as Ranko Branter, Anton Franz, and Romani Rose led the demonstration, demanding an end to the practice (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-c).

Under pressure, officials pledged to remove the ZN label. In reality, police simply replaced it with "HWAO" (*Häufig Wechselnder Aufenthaltsort* – "frequently changing residence"). The change in terminology left the underlying system of stigmatization and surveillance intact. Even today, analogous forms of special registration persist in some police departments, under different names, perpetuating discrimination against Sinti and Roma (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.-c).

Recognition of Persecution and Genocide by Helmut Schmidt

After years of civil rights activism, public protests, hunger strikes, and archival occupations, the German government finally issued formal recognition of the crimes committed against Sinti and Roma under National Socialism. This crucial turning point came under Chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1982, following persistent demands by Sinti and Roma organizations for not only material restitution but also moral and legal acknowledgment of their suffering.

On 17 March 1982, Schmidt met with a delegation from the newly founded Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma and officially recognized that Sinti and Roma had been persecuted for "racial" reasons. He declared these crimes met the legal criteria of genocide (Völkermord). This was particularly significant because postwar judicial decisions had often minimized or denied the racial character of Nazi persecution before certain years, excluding many survivors from compensation or acknowledgment (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.; Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung 2022).

Schmidt's statement marked a break from earlier attitudes in postwar Germany, which had largely relegated the genocide of Sinti and Roma to the margins of Holocaust remembrance (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

Alongside this recognition, Schmidt's government created legal mechanisms to address "Härtefälle" (hardship cases) among non-Jewish persecuted persons. These mechanisms allowed for some financial and formal support for survivors who had previously been denied recognition under postwar compensation schemes. However, the recognition did not automatically erase all discriminatory practices or unjust jurisprudence; many survivors still encountered obstacles, delays, or denials when seeking redress (Helmut-Schmidt-Stiftung 2022; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

Schmidt's recognition had lasting effects. It provided a moral and legal foundation for subsequent advocacy by the Zentralrat and local Sinti/Roma organizations. It also contributed to changing public and institutional discourse: from seeing Sinti and Roma as victims of isolated wrongs to acknowledging their suffering as part of the Nazi genocidal policy. Over time, this recognition fed into the expansion of memorial culture, education, exhibitions, and more inclusive policies toward survivors (Gress, RomArchive n.d.; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.).

The Perspective of German Reunification

The trajectory of the civil rights movement must also be seen in the context of German division and reunification. In the Federal Republic, despite persistent discrimination, Sinti and Roma could organize, protest, and establish associations. In the German Democratic Republic,

however, their specific persecution was silenced within the official antifascist narrative, which emphasized generalized victimhood and discouraged minority-based activism.

Reunification in 1990 opened new opportunities for Sinti and Roma civil rights work. West German institutions like the Zentralrat extended their reach nationwide, and memorial initiatives gained broader resonance. At the same time, it revealed uneven recognition: while the Federal Republic, under activist pressure, had begun to acknowledge the genocide, East Germany had left this history unaddressed. The 1990s thus became a period of both consolidation and expansion, as civil rights organizations strengthened their institutional presence while pushing for commemoration and justice in a unified Germany (Gress, RomArchive n.d.).

The Civil Rights Movement of Sinti and Roma in Germany -From 1990 until Today

Reunification and New Challenges

The 1990s marked a new phase in the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement in Germany. With the founding of the Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma in 1982, the community had gained formal representation toward the federal government. After reunification, however, the movement faced fresh challenges, especially in extending its reach to the former East Germany. There, the Nazi genocide of Sinti and Roma had been even more thoroughly silenced under the official antifascist narrative, and community structures for minority self-representation were absent (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.-a).

At the same time, the Balkan wars brought large numbers of Roma refugees to Germany, followed by new waves of labor migration from Central and Eastern Europe. Many arrivals lacked German citizenship and lived under precarious refugee status. Supporting them posed both humanitarian and political challenges. The Zentralrat's earlier advocacy, grounded in the long-established citizenship of German Sinti and Roma, had to be reframed to address discrimination and hostility toward these new communities. As Matras observed in the late 1990s, the movement could no longer rely exclusively on the citizenship argument but had to navigate the international dimension of Roma migration and its consequences in Germany (Matras 1998, 65–66).

The Strengthening of Holocaust Memory Culture

Another defining aspect of this period was the strengthening of Holocaust memory culture. In 1990, the Zentralrat acquired a historic building in central Heidelberg to establish the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma (Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma). It officially opened in 1997, together with the first permanent exhibition on the Nazi genocide of Sinti and Roma, built on survivor testimonies and family photographs. The Centre quickly became the key institution for research and education on both the genocide and antigypsyism, supported by federal funding and serving as an anchor of long-term recognition strategy (Dokumentationszentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2023; Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.).

In 2001, under its direction, a permanent exhibition was also opened at the Auschwitz State Museum, embedding the genocide of Sinti and Roma within one of the most significant international sites of Holocaust remembrance (Roma-Sinti Holocaust Memorial Day n.d.).

The Berlin Memorial: From Struggle to Symbol

The struggle for commemoration culminated in the long process of establishing a memorial in Berlin. After Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's recognition of the genocide in the 1980s, the Zentralrat pressed for an official site in the capital. Israeli-Jewish architect Dani Karavan was commissioned to design it, but bureaucratic resistance, political hesitation, and disputes over location delayed progress for decades. The memorial was finally inaugurated on 24 October 2012 in the Tiergarten, near the Reichstag and Brandenburg Gate (Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-a; Spiegel Online 2012).

Karavan's design centers on a dark circular pool of water with a triangular stone at its center, symbolizing the badges that Sinti and Roma prisoners were forced to wear in the camps. Stones around the pool bear lines of poetry by Roma poet Santino Spinelli ("Auschwitz"), while the surrounding landscape of trees creates a space of reflection and mourning, accompanied by the violin piece *Mare Manuschenge* ("Our People"), composed and performed by Romeo Franz, a Sinto musician, composer, and politician (Settela 2019). An underground chamber holds historical documentation, linking remembrance to education (Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-a).

On 24 October 2022, the memorial complex was expanded with an open-air exhibition, designed by Karavan shortly before his death in 2021. Featuring photographs, testimonies, and biographies of survivors from across Europe, the exhibition anchored individual life stories within collective remembrance. Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasized at the inauguration that the memorial is both a site of mourning and a place of education against contemporary antigypsyism (Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-b; Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-c; Steinmeier 2022).

Controversy has continued, however. Plans to extend Berlin's S21 metro line beneath the site raised fears of structural damage and symbolic desecration. While Roma organizations, and Karavan's family before his death, opposed the project outright, the Zentralrat under Romani Rose pursued negotiation with Berlin authorities. The conflict remains unresolved, highlighting the fragility of the memorial and the different strategies within Roma advocacy to defend it (Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-d; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.-b; Debatte Krisol n.d.).

The Berlin memorial's history encapsulates the transformation of the Sinti and Roma movement: from outsider protests to institutionalized dialogue, from precarious recognition to central sites of national and European remembrance—yet still vulnerable to political and urban pressures.

Education and Outreach

Alongside institutional gains, the civil rights movement deepened its commitment to education. The Zentralrat and its member associations organized school visits, seminars, and cultural programs to combat prejudice among the majority population and to strengthen self-confidence within Sinti and Roma communities. This work culminated in 2019 with the creation of the Educational Forum against Antigypsyism at the Documentation and Cultural Centre, which develops long-term strategies against racism and engages younger generations (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.-a).

The Emergence of Antigypsyism as a Political Concept

Another milestone was the international adoption of the term *antigypsyism*. First debated in academic and activist circles, it gradually became the preferred designation for a historically rooted form of racism targeting Sinti and Roma. A key breakthrough came with the European Parliament's 2015 resolution recognizing antigypsyism as a specific form of racism (European Parliament 2015). In Germany, the Zentralrat advocated for its political adoption, which the Bundestag soon affirmed, creating the basis for more targeted anti-discrimination policies (Bundestag 2021).

Monitoring and New Institutions

The Zentralrat supports systematic monitoring of antigypsyism in German society. Surveys and reports have documented structural discrimination and informed both national and EU-level policy. Key milestones such as the establishment of the Independent Commission on Antigypsyism in 2019, the adoption of the IHRA working definition in 2020, and the 2022 appointment of the first Federal Government Commissioner against Antigypsyism and for the Life of Sinti and Roma in Germany demonstrate the movement's embeddedness in German political and institutional life (IHRA 2020; Bundesregierung 2022; Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma n.d.-a). The launch of the national reporting and information center on antigypsyism (MIA) in 2022 under the auspices of the Zentralrat further underscores this shift (Antiziganismus Melden n.d.).

Conclusion

These developments show how the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement in Germany has evolved since the 1990s. Rooted in survivor-led struggles for recognition, it has become institutionalized, professionalized, and internationally connected. Today it combines commemoration and education with political advocacy, working with state institutions to protect the rights of both long-established German Sinti and Roma and newly arrived Roma migrants. This trajectory highlights both the achievements of the Zentralrat as a

representative body and the ongoing challenges of ensuring equality in the changing landscape of Germany and Europe.

Antigypsyism in the Recent Times in Germany in Light of Academic Research

Continuities and Transformations in Antigypsyism

Recent research on antigypsyism in Germany not only documents current forms of discrimination but also shows how these are shaped by the shifting social and political landscape of the Federal Republic since the 1990s. The civil rights movement of Sinti and Roma, once anchored in the voices of Holocaust survivors and their immediate descendants, now confronts a transformed field, where new generations of Roma activists and recently arrived Roma migrants and refugees face antigypsyism in ways that differ from earlier decades.

In the postwar decades, antigypsyism in Germany persisted through the continuity of Nazi racial categories in state institutions, the denial of compensation, and the criminalization of Sinti and Roma via police practices such as special registration (End 2016, 5–7). The 1980 Dachau hunger strike and the 1981 Tübingen archive protest exposed the ongoing use of Nazi "race files," as activists and survivors demanded recognition of the genocide and the abolition of discriminatory state practices.

By contrast, the arrival of Roma refugees during the Balkan wars of the 1990s and subsequent east–west labor migration, which intensified after the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, reshaped the Roma presence in Germany. Many lacked German citizenship, spoke limited German, and came from marginalized educational backgrounds. As a result, they were exposed to layered forms of antigypsyism: not only the traditional stereotypes of criminality or "asociality" but also stigmatization as foreigners, welfare dependents, or unwanted migrants (Jugendschutz.net & Zentralrat 2019, 12–15).

Generational change also shapes contemporary experiences

While the first and second generations of activists were defined by direct familial ties to Holocaust survivors, today's Roma activists often belong to the third or fourth generation. Their engagement is less about transmitting survivor testimony and more about confronting structural discrimination in education, employment, and digital spaces. Research by the Independent Commission on Antigypsyism (UKA) highlighted this shift, distinguishing between institutional, structural, and everyday forms of antigypsyism, noting that current practices often manifest in schools, housing markets, and media representations rather than through explicit state persecution (Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus 2021, 34–38).

The following five research initiatives, conducted since the mid-2010s with strong involvement of the Zentralrat and federal institutions, provide the empirical foundation for understanding antigypsyism in Germany today.

Markus End: Antigypsyism in the German Public Sphere (2016)

One of the first systematic attempts to theorize and empirically document antigypsyism in Germany was Markus End's 2016 report, commissioned by the Zentralrat. Approaching antigypsyism as a media-driven discourse, End analyzed media representations of Sinti and Roma through discourse analysis of press coverage (news reports and editorials) and political discourse. The study also provides a contextual analysis of how such reporting reinforced structural discrimination (End 2016).

He identified recurring strategies and mechanisms such as the homogenization of Roma, criminalizing narratives, and the construction of Roma as a social "problem." His study shows that Sinti and Roma are consistently framed as a problem through crime stories, welfare dependency, or refugee movements (End 2016, 23–30).

End argued that antigypsyism in the press operates through three core strategies: (1) constructing Roma as foreign and non-belonging; (2) portraying Roma culture as incompatible with modern society; and (3) linking Roma presence to security or integration "problems."

The study emphasized continuity with older forms of stigmatization – generalization, criminalization, and the culturalization of poverty – demonstrating how contemporary reporting echoes pseudo-scientific categories of the Nazi era (End 2016, 12–18). End concluded that antigypsyism in the media is not marginal but constitutive of mainstream discourse, shaping policy debates on migration, housing, and integration. In other words, media discourses do not merely reflect but actively shape public and political attitudes, legitimizing discriminatory policies (End 2016, 45–49).

Antigypsyism Online: The Research of Jugendschutz.net (2018/2019)

As digital platforms became central arenas for spreading racism, Jugendschutz.net, in collaboration with the Zentralrat, conducted the first systematic monitoring of antigypsyist hate speech on social media in 2018. The study surveyed social media platforms, online forums, and comment sections, cataloguing memes, slurs, and conspiracy narratives (Jugendschutz.net & Zentralrat 2019).

Using keyword searches and qualitative coding, researchers documented thousands of posts spreading anti-Roma stereotypes, from criminalization and dirt metaphors to Holocaust denial and calls for violence (Jugendschutz.net & Zentralrat 2019, 5–10). Findings revealed that antigypsyism online had become pervasive: from openly genocidal "extermination" fantasies to recycled stereotypes in digital form (Jugendschutz.net & Zentralrat 2019, 7–11).

Facebook and YouTube emerged as the main vectors, often embedded in far-right networks but also present in mainstream groups.

The study highlighted the alarming speed at which antigypsyist memes circulated globally, linking German hate speech with transnational far-right networks. Crucially, it concluded that online antigypsyism is not marginal but closely tied to offline discrimination: it fosters hostility, normalizes racist attitudes among youth socialized in digital culture, and legitimizes exclusionary practices in schools, housing, and local politics (Jugendschutz.net & Zentralrat 2019, 18–20).

The Independent Commission on Antigypsyism (UKA), 2019–2021

In 2019, the Federal Government established the Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus (UKA), an independent expert body tasked with investigating the causes, prevalence, and consequences of antigypsyism in Germany and issuing policy recommendations. The Commission included scholars, legal experts, activists, and community representatives. Its final report, published in 2021, was the most comprehensive study of antigypsyism in Germany to date and concluded that it is a "structural problem of German society" (Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus 2021, 11).

Drawing on expert hearings, case studies, and surveys, the report distinguished three levels of antigypsyism: institutional (embedded in law and policy, such as discriminatory practices in schools and welfare offices), structural (barriers in education, housing, labor, and healthcare, reinforced by political discourses that frame Roma as a "problem group"), and everyday (interpersonal discrimination and violence, including insults and housing exclusion) (Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus 2021, 34–38).

Key findings included the persistence of antigypsyist attitudes in schools, disproportionate policing, and barriers to housing. The report stressed that antigypsyism is not merely prejudice but a historically rooted system of power that produces exclusion. It called for new federal institutions to monitor and combat antigypsyism, many of which have since been implemented. The Bundestag debate following its release recognized antigypsyism as a specific form of racism, paving the way for monitoring bodies and funding programs (Unabhängige Kommission Antiziganismus 2021, 141–144).

MIA: The Reporting and Information Center on Antigypsyism (2022–2025)

In response to UKA's recommendations, the Melde- und Informationsstelle Antiziganismus (MIA) was established in Berlin in 2022 under the auspices of the Zentralrat. Its mandate is to document and evaluate antigypsyist incidents reported by individuals, NGOs, and regional

offices. Since then, MIA has published three annual reports and several thematic studies, with the 2025 report noting a 40 percent rise in reported incidents compared to 2024 (MIA 2025).

MIA combines victim reports, NGO submissions, and thematic focus studies, in a verified database of cases ranging from verbal harassment to institutional discrimination. Its annual reports (2023–2025) reveal sharp increases: incidents nearly doubled between 2023 and 2024, followed by another 40 percent rise in 2025 (MIA 2025, 7–9).

The 2024 focus study on schools and kindergartens documented systemic exclusion, including biased grading, bullying, denial of enrollment, lower expectations from teachers, and disadvantages in educational placement (MIA 2024, 12–14).

Overall, MIA's reports show antigypsyism most visible at the local, interpersonal level but also expose institutional complicity when complaints are ignored. By quantifying antigypsyism, MIA has made visible what activists long denounced as an under-acknowledged reality.

Zentralrat Press and Politics Monitoring (2024)

The Zentralrat's *Presse- und Politikmonitoring* systematically analyzes press coverage and political discourse on Sinti and Roma (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2024). Using discourse analysis, the study shows how antigypsyist stereotypes are reproduced in parliamentary debates and press articles, and how they are often linked to migration, crime, and welfare. Even sympathetic portrayals frequently reduce Roma to a collective "problem group" defined by security, integration, or poverty (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2024, 19–24).

The report emphasizes that media framing remains central in shaping antigypsyism: while overtly racist terminology is less common in mainstream outlets, subtler stigmatization persists through framing strategies, for example by linking Roma communities to "integration problems" or "security concerns" (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2024, 45–52). The report warns about the normalization of antigypsyism in populist rhetoric, where politicians frequently instrumentalize Roma issues in debates on crime and migration, reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Concluding with recommendations for stronger media accountability and antigypsyism awareness in political education (Zentralrat Deutscher Sinti und Roma 2024, 35–37), the report represents both a continuation of Markus End's earlier work and evidence of how antigypsyist discourse adapts over time.

International Definitions and the German Context

The term *antigypsyism* has become the dominant framework for describing the structural, historical, and everyday discrimination faced by Sinti and Roma.

International initiatives played a central role in consolidating the concept: the *Alliance against Antigypsyism* (2016) defined it as a specific form of racism rooted in power imbalances and social exclusion (Alliance against Antigypsyism 2016), and in 2020 the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)* adopted a working definition describing it as "a historically constructed, persistent complex of stereotypes, prejudices and discriminatory practices… that has led to the persecution of Roma, including the genocide during the Holocaust" (IHRA 2020). Both definitions stress that antigypsyism is not reducible to individual prejudice but functions as a persistent ideology of exclusion across state institutions, media discourses, and interpersonal interactions (IHRA 2020, 1–2; Antigypsyism.eu 2016).

Iulius Rostas has further argued that antigypsyism is comparable to antisemitism, rooted in European traditions of criminalization, expulsion, and forced assimilation, and present not only in right-wing extremist movements but also in mainstream bureaucratic and political structures (Rostas 2020, 18–23).

German research initiatives are closely tied to these international debates. The international framing has shaped the German debate by anchoring antigypsyism in political discourse, while German studies—many initiated or supported by the Zentralrat – have provided empirical evidence for international advocacy and significantly contributed to refining the concept.

Conclusion – Forschungsstelle Antiziganismus

Taken together, these five studies show that antigypsyism in Germany is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon. From Markus End's analysis of discursive strategies in the press, to Jugendschutz.net's documentation of online hate, to the UKA's systemic study, to MIA's case-based monitoring, and finally the Zentralrat's discourse analysis, research illustrates how antigypsyism adapts to changing contexts. While older forms of institutional discrimination persist, new layers have emerged with Roma migration and the rise of digital hate speech.

The work of the Forschungsstelle Antiziganismus at Heidelberg University, established with support from the Zentralrat, represents an additional step in institutionalizing the field (Forschungsstelle Antiziganismus 2023). By critically examining past and present antigypsyist practices and fostering Roma scholarship through initiatives like the Romani Rose Fellowship, it directly counters the legacy of pseudo-scientific racial studies by Robert Ritter and Eva Justin.

In this sense, contemporary research not only diagnoses antigypsyism but also continues the civil rights movement's work: preserving memory, exposing discrimination, and developing new epistemic tools to dismantle racism in Germany and Europe.

Art as Resistance in Germany

Introduction: Trauma, Memory, and Resistance

Artistic expression has played a crucial role in resisting antigypsyism in Germany. Viewed through the lens of trauma and cultural memory, Roma art embodies a resistance of silencing, forgetting, and ignorance. For decades after 1945, the genocide of Sinti and Roma was ignored in German society, and survivors remained unrecognized as victims of racial persecution. In this context, every testimony, song, performance, or memorial act carries an added weight: it is not only an aesthetic form but also a refusal of erasure.

This resistance is also evident in the borderless character of Roma art. Two iconic songs exemplify this dimension: *Auschwitzlied* (Auschwitz Song), composed and transmitted orally by survivors, and *Gelem, Gelem*, later adopted as the Roma anthem (RomArchive n.d.-j). Circulating across languages and borders, these songs embody resilience through transmission rather than institutions. Their persistence demonstrates that Roma art resists national frameworks. At the same time, Germany has provided a crucial stage where survivor testimonies, memorial practices, and contemporary initiatives converge.

Survivor Memoirs and Literature as Resistance

An important artistic response to antigypsyism is the body of Sinti and Roma survivor memoirs. These unique testimonies only began to appear after the official state recognition of the Sinti and Roma genocide in 1982, yet they represent foundational acts of resistance against forgetting and silencing. Philomena Franz, a German Sintizza, was among the first to publish her account of deportation to Auschwitz and survival – *Zwischen Liebe und Hass: Ein Zigeunerleben* (Franz 1985). Walter Stanowski Winter's *Winter Time* provides a direct testimony of persecution and survival, while also stressing the persistence of discrimination after liberation (Winter 2004). Alfred Lessing's autobiography *Und ich? Ein Zigeunerleben in Deutschland* similarly gives voice to his experiences within German society (Lessing 1993; RomArchive n.d.-e). Otto Rosenberg's *Das Brennglas* added another crucial account of both the Holocaust and its aftermath (Rosenberg 1998).

Among the survivor memoirs, a particularly significant case is Hugo Höllenreiner, a Sinto child survivor. His book *Denk nicht, wir bleiben hier!* (2005), written by Anja Tuckermann after extensive conversations with him, preserves his memory for future generations in a sober narrative tone. Höllenreiner began sharing his experiences only late in life, long held back by fear. A few years before his death, the documentary *Dui Rroma* by Iovanca Gaspar portrayed him in dialogue with the young Romani composer Adrian Gaspar, who based his first symphony, *Symphonia Romani – Bari Duk*, on Höllenreiner's testimony. The symphony sets his

words to music sung in Romanes (Dui Rroma n.d.). This transformation of testimony into contemporary composition illustrates how literature, film, and music intertwine to resist silencing and create cultural memory for future generations.

Music as Memory and Resistance

Music has been central to articulating Roma cultural memory – in Germany too.
It is a diverse scene when it comes to the composers and performers of memorial or resisting music and songs. Music has manifested as a tool for survivors and for later generations to voice their testimonies and resistance as part of processing trauma. The following diverse selection highlights different approaches.

In 1979 Rudko Kawczynski and Sinto musician Stefan "Tornado" Rosenberg met at the first international memorial rally in Bergen-Belsen, commemorating Sinti and Roma murdered by the National Socialists. Soon after, they founded Duo Z and performed political songs about discrimination in the Federal Republic and the repression of genocide, in the still-popular, often cynical singer-songwriter style of the 1960s and 1970s (RomArchive, n.d.-a).

Contemporary composers like Ralf Yusuf Gawlick and Ferenc Snétberger have been embedding the Romani experiences into memorial culture.

Ferenc Snétberger, a Hungarian Roma composer based in Germany, wrote his concerto *In Memory of My People* for guitar and orchestra in 1995 at the invitation of an Israeli colleague for the 50th anniversary of the Holocaust's end. His first orchestral composition, it drew on his Hungarian Roma roots and is performed at German and international Holocaust commemoration events.

Gawlick's oratorio *O Lungo Drom* (2020–2021) is the musical manifestation of the composer's journey of discovering his Romani cultural heritage. Adopted and raised in Germany, he only learned of his Roma origin as an adult. Dedicated to Romani Rose, the composition uses poetry and text by Sinti and Roma authors to give voice to the centuries-long persecution and discrimination of Roma people (Gawlick 2021).

Generational continuity appears in the work of Tayo Awosusi-Onutor, a singer, writer, and activist from a German Sinti family. Her mother, Anita Awosusi, published the family memoir *Vater unser. Eine Sintifamilie erzählt* (2016) and was long active in the Heidelberg Documentation Center (RomArchive, n.d.-f). Tayo continues this legacy through performances in Romanes, stating: "I've realised that I'm already making a statement just by performing" (RomArchive, n.d.-b).

Christian Pfeil, born in 1944 in the Lublin ghetto, survived with his parents and seven siblings. As an adult he ran a bar where he performed anti-fascist songs that he wrote. In the early 1990s one of his political songs was broadcast on television, after which he received death threats and his restaurant in Trier was twice vandalized. He stopped performing as a singer in public but later returned to share his story with younger generations at commemorative events (Zweitzeugen, n.d.).

Theater, Performance, and Memorial Art as Resistance

Theater has also become a crucial site of resistance. Nedjo Osman, a Roma actor and director who migrated from former Yugoslavia to Germany, created plays reflecting on Roma history and persecution. His work on Johann "Rukeli" Trollmann, the German Sinto boxer murdered under the Nazi regime, brought a forgotten life story to the stage (RomArchive n.d.-c).

Music theater productions such as *Blumen an der Karlsburg,* performed by the Dardo Balke Ensemble in 2023, wove commemoration into performance, connecting history with artistic creation (Bremerhavener Sinti-Verein 2023; Nordsee-Zeitung 2023; Politische Bildung Bremen 2023). Composer Dardo Balke served as music director of this documentary theater piece, which drew on historical documents and witness interviews to commemorate the deportations of Bremerhaven's Sinti and Roma to Auschwitz and other camps in Eastern Europe in 1940 and 1943, where almost all were murdered. The piece also addressed the coexistence of descendants of victims and perpetrators and reflected on contemporary issues. It premiered at the Stadttheater in Bremerhaven in 2023 under the direction of Ralf Lorenzen.

Memorial art stands at the intersection of activism and aesthetics. Dani Karavan's Berlin memorial to the murdered Sinti and Roma (2012) offers a permanent national site of remembrance (Stiftung Denkmal n.d.-a). It also stages the poem *Auschwitz* by the Roma musician and poet Santino Spinelli from Italy, alongside *Mare Manuschenge,* a single-note violin piece composed by Romeo Franz, a Sinto musician, composer, and politician from Germany. The music is played continuously at the memorial. Karavan described its symbolic meaning: *"dem Klang einer einsamen Geige allein geblieben von der gemordeten Melodie, schwebend im Schmerz."*

Romy Rüegger, a contemporary artist, writer, and researcher, directly addresses antigypsyism in her video performance *Approaching Ultra Light.* Her art is based on archival research and interviews with non-sedentary groups in Switzerland, southern Germany, and Alsace. By tracing the continuities of persecution through administrative categories, her work confronts both past and present forms of antigypsyism while creating new forms of belonging (ERIAC n.d.-b).

Contemporary and Transnational Perspectives

In the 1990s and 2000s, Roma artistic resistance in Germany diversified further, reflecting demographic changes brought by migration. The *Roma Armee* production at Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theater (2017) assembled Roma actors from across Europe in a powerful performance against antigypsyism (ERIAC n.d.-a).

A striking case is the Roma rappers Kefaet and Selamet Prizreni, well known in Germany's underground hip-hop scene. Deported to Kosovo in 2010 under a German–Kosovo repatriation agreement, they continued to rap in German, the language of their upbringing. Their music turned deportation into resistance, exposing the contradictions of belonging and exclusion. Their five-year struggle to return to Germany was documented in *Trapped by Law* (2015), a film by Roma director Sami Mustafa, which highlights art as a form of political defiance and survival (Weiterdenken 2015).

Berlin-based institutions such as the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) have become hubs for international Roma artists. Exhibitions by Delaine Le Bas, including her *Romani Embassy* project, expand the role of Roma art in Germany.

The context of EU enlargement has further facilitated mobility, enabling Roma artists to collaborate and perform across borders. This borderlessness reinforces that Roma art is not confined to one national context but circulates transnationally, with Germany as a key site of performance, exhibition, and remembrance.

Conclusion

Roma artistic resistance in Germany is diverse in form – memoirs, music, theater, performance, and memorial art – but united in function: resisting forgetting, silencing, and stereotyping. Survivor testimonies, political songs, contemporary compositions, theater productions, and memorial installations all carry the same message: Roma voices cannot be erased – Roma voices are resistance.

Since the 1990s, artistic resistance has become increasingly transnational and pedagogical, mirroring the transformation of the civil rights movement as it shifted from a citizenship-based argument to the broader framework of antigypsyism. The borderlessness fostered by European integration has further amplified this trend, enabling Roma art to educate diverse publics and to intervene directly in the structures of prejudice.

In this sense, Roma art in Germany, just like everywhere else, must be understood as an art of resistance: not only preserving cultural memory, but also dismantling stereotypes and claiming space within the German and European cultural sphere. Every Roma artistic act – whether a memoir, a performance, or a song – is therefore both a cultural contribution and a

political refusal of antigypsyism. And as Timea Junghaus, art historian, curator, and executive director of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, phrased it: *"Roma resistance is not a footnote in history. It is a living, ongoing process of reclaiming dignity, agency, and a Roma future"* (Junghaus 2019).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined antigypsyism in Germany through its historical continuities, the struggles of the civil rights movement, recent scholarship, and artistic resistance. Germany not only inflicted deep trauma on Sinti and Roma through centuries of persecution and genocide, but also maintained silence about this history, leaving both Roma communities and the wider society without recognition or the tools to confront it.

From the earliest presence of Sinti and Roma in German territories, rejection and exclusion shaped their experiences. These patterns of hostility were never openly acknowledged or addressed; instead, they remained buried, only now surfacing more widely through recent scholarship and public discourse. This failure to process the past meant that antigypsyist hostility resurfaced in ever new forms, ultimately culminating in the genocide under National Socialism.

The recognition of the Sinti and Roma genocide in 1982 marked a turning point, made possible by persistent activism that broke decades of denial. Since then, research initiatives have documented how antigypsyism continues as a structural problem, adapting to new contexts such as migration debates and digital hate. At the same time, Roma art – whether memoir, music, theater, or memorial practices – has transformed trauma into testimony, resistance, and cultural memory. These acts function as self-help and as collective reflection: they both preserve dignity and warn against repetition.

Taken together, the historical, political, and artistic perspectives show that antigypsyism in Germany is not only a legacy of unprocessed trauma but also a continuing threat, especially amid the resurgence of far-right movements today. Yet they also demonstrate that Roma resistance – through activism, research, and art – creates the tools to confront this legacy, foster self-understanding, and prevent its recurrence. In this sense, every act of Roma resistance is both remembrance and survival, ensuring that history is not silenced and that a different future remains possible.

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