

# ROMA RESISTANCE

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# RECLAIMING ROMA HISTORY



For centuries, Roma have often been portrayed only as victims in mainstream history: without a voice, without power, and excluded from telling their own stories. Since the Middle Ages, Roma communities across Europe have faced exclusion, forced assimilation, enslavement, persecution, and genocide.

But this is not the whole story.

Despite ongoing antigypsyism and oppression, Roma have always resisted. Resistance has taken many forms: open protest, everyday survival, cultural expression, solidarity, and the preservation of language, traditions, and identity. Across generations, Roma communities have defended their dignity and continued to create, adapt, and endure.

This exhibition draws upon the deep knowledge embedded within the **European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIANC)**. It challenges simplified narratives of victimhood, highlights stories of Roma resistance and restores agency to Roma history. It presents a legacy shaped not only by suffering, but also by courage, resilience, and the determination to survive and thrive.

• ROMA MEMORY •



# WHAT IS ROMA RESISTANCE?



Roma history is marked by confronting diverse manifestations of antigypsyism.

To survive, Roma communities developed many ways to resist hostile systems. Scholars working with ERIAC on the "**Re-thinking Roma Resistance**" research project identified and analyzed dozens of resistance stories and concluded that "*Roma Resistance is an active response to consciously confront historical and contemporary phenomena of anti-gypsyism, collectively and individually*".

History offers many examples. During the **Great Round Up in Spain in 1749**, Roma resisted imprisonment through escape, legal action, and collective solidarity. In Saragossa, Romani women organised escapes and revolts from the Royal House of Mercy, led by **Rosa Cortés**.

During **slavery in the Romanian Principalities**, Roma also fought for freedom. In **1843**, a Romani woman named **Ioana Rudăreasa** sued her enslaver in court to gain her freedom.

Resistance may occur not only through rebellion and armed struggle but through acts of survival, escape, maternal protection, intellectual engagement, and cultural expression.

Roma resistance is a living, ongoing process of reclaiming dignity, and a Roma future.



# WHY ROMA HOLOCAUST HISTORY STANDS APART?

The history of Roma resistance is closely connected to World War II and the Roma Holocaust. Yet for decades, Roma experiences remained absent from official Holocaust narratives. This silence was shaped by a lack of documentation, and persistent stereotypes that portrayed Roma as people without history or historical memory.

Many Roma were imprisoned in forced labour camps, ghettos, and extermination sites that never became part of wider public memory. In Auschwitz-Birkenau's "Zigeunerlager", Roma families were kept together.

Survivors such as **Roman Mirga**, as well as SS commander Rudolf Höss, described how prisoners tried to preserve family life, music, and community bonds even under extreme persecution.



Members of a French-Hungarian Romani musical band pose for a photograph with their instruments; Photograph 08741, source USHMM, 1920 - 1930, Lyon, [Rhône] France?; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Rita Prigmore

These testimonies also reveal forms of resistance. Höss described Roma prisoners as "*a source of great trouble*" because they resisted orders, protected one another, and refused submission. Historians noted that Roma victims often reacted differently to Nazi violence, resisting even at the moment of execution.

Revisiting these testimonies challenges distorted Holocaust narratives. Roma were not only victims of genocide, but also active actors struggling for survival, dignity, and humanity.



KZ Auschwitz-Birkenau, Block B 1a



# MAY 16, 1944

# THE ROMA UPRISING



DKH Helena Biele-Lock and DKH Fergal, 2014 Birkenau Camp visit.  
Photo by Ludowig Vertace, courtesy of Igitipa International Roma Youth Network

The **uprising** on **May 16, 1944** became a turning point in Roma historiography.

On that day, Roma prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau learned that the SS planned to liquidate the “Zigeunerlager”. More than 600 Roma and Sinti prisoners refused to appear for roll call and barricaded themselves inside the barracks. They armed themselves with hammers, pickaxes, shovels, and wooden planks taken from their bunks.

Faced with this collective resistance, the SS retreated. No Roma or Sinti prisoners were sent to the gas chambers that day.

Survivor testimonies, including that of **Tadeusz Joachimowski**, confirm this collective act of resistance. Hugo Höllenreiner remembered his father shouting to the SS: “We’re not coming out! If you want something, come in!” Although the “Zigeunerlager” was liquidated on the night of August 2, 1944, - when 4.300 Roma men, women and children were murdered -, the revolt of May 16 became a powerful symbol of Roma resistance. Historian **Pierre Chopinaud** describes it as the moment when “*Roma agency ruptured the architecture of silence*”.



© German Federal Archives, Koblenz, Germany

Since 2010, **La Voix des Roms** has played a pioneering role in commemorating this history through Romani Resistance Day. Since then, many Roma organizations and youth initiatives across Europe have embraced May 16 as an important day of remembrance, resistance, and civic engagement.



# ROMA IN THE PARTISAN MOVEMENT

Roma resistance was embodied by countless heroes whose bravery has only recently been acknowledged. Beyond surviving the horrors of the Holocaust, many Roma joined partisan and antifascist movements across Europe.

**Josef Serinek** escaped from the **Lety** concentration camp and later led a partisan group in the Czech Moravian Highlands. **Anton Facuna** fought in the **Slovak National Uprising** and became respected by both Roma and non Roma communities. Across Europe, Roma groups provided food, information, and shelter to antifascist fighters, often at the risk of collective reprisal.



Josef Serinek, courtesy of Miroslav Broz



Documentary by Vera Lacková, *How I Became a Partisan*, 2021

**Jan Yoors**, living among Roma in France, described how Roma smuggled arms and people, raided ration depots, and transmitted BBC news.

Others joined established resistance forces. **Antonín István** in the Czech lands, **Alexandru Ilie** in Romania, and others across Yugoslavia and Greece took up arms against fascist occupation.

Although few monuments commemorate their bravery, oral histories and local memory preserve the legacy of these fighters.



# ESCAPE AS RESISTANCE



Raymond Gurême, 2019. Photo by Adèle Muskat. Courtesy of Freatat - Centre du Voyage and Méditerranéenne Julio Navarro

Throughout Nazi-occupied Europe, Roma men, women, and children risked their lives to escape deportation, imprisonment, and death. The testimonies of Roma victims: **Vilém Bock**, **Marie Kristofová**, and **Hans Braun** tell stories of daring flight from camps and convoys. **Raymond Gurême** escaped from multiple internment sites before joining the French Resistance. **Irma Valdová-Krausová**'s life was saved when, during a moment of chaos, she snuck into a Nazi vehicle transporting twins to another camp.

The **Documentation and Cultural Centre for German Sinti and Roma** recounts the miraculous escape of **Vinzenz Rose** from Neckarelz concentration camp, aided by his brother and a Polish truck driver.

After his deportation to a concentration camp in Transnistria, **Vasile Stratan**'s courage and bravery helped him to organize the escape of 34 Roma from the camp. **Radu Alexandrina**, one of the Holocaust survivors, recalls his bravery and the maneuvers he undertook to escape the camp.

These narratives challenge the presumption of Roma passivity and reveal a vital counter-history of resilience, cunning, and refusal.

Portrait of Vinzenz Rose, courtesy of Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma



Archival document, Vasile Stratan, Courtesy of researcher Adèle Muskat



# RESISTANCE THROUGH CARE



A woman takes care of her child in a Roma camp in Würzburg, Germany (1945). US-SMM, courtesy of Film Programme

Bravery does not require guns. Sometimes, the biggest acts of courage happen quietly.

Figures such as **Iosif Tiefel**, who smuggled food and shelter to Roma and Jewish families in Mukachevo, and **Alfreda Markowska (Noncia)**, who rescued and raised more than 50 Roma and Jewish children, exemplify this defiant spirit.

**Noncia** was part of a group of young people who escaped persecution by the Nazis and went into hiding. While hiding in the forest, she witnessed the Nazi crimes: she came across mass graves of entire families of murdered Roma, burned villages and surviving children who had no one left. She took them with her and tried to find relatives. If she couldn't find anyone, she kept them with her and looked after them.



Alfreda Markowska, Photo by Chad Evans Wyatt

Individuals like her defied the logic of extermination with the simple yet radical act of saving lives. Their stories- once marginalized - now stand central to the understanding that Roma resistance was multifaceted: fighting with arms, words, art, and most importantly, with the preservation of human dignity.

The **Re-thinking Roma Resistance** research project has helped to document and illuminate in total 40 of these stories of courage, demonstrating Roma opposition to injustice.



# SURVIVAL AS RESISTANCE

What if resistance isn't always visible?  
What if it is not heroic, but silent?

For Roma mothers who stole food for their children, like **Ilona Raffael** from Hungary, or those who dirtied their bodies to avoid abuse and violence in Transnistria, survival itself was a form of resistance. We are recovering stories of women resisting annihilation through bodily protection, emotional labor, and collective care.



Roma prisoners in a concentration camp in Transnistria, courtesy of the Academy of Sciences of Moldova

Songs, language preservation, and healing rituals performed during the Holocaust also sustained Roma identity. **Donald Kendrick** and **Károly Bari**'s collection of concentration camp songs reveals a repertoire that encoded pain, loss, and protest into art.

As Roma scholar **Ethel Brooks** writes, "*even unspoken knowledge, passed silently through generations, is part of our resistance story.*"



Bundesarchiv, Image 101-022-2910-10A,  
Photo by Horster Oskar Barch

Listen to  
**Aušvicate hi kher baro**  
performed by  
**Dr. Petra Gelbart!**



# FIGHTING FOR RECOGNITION



Commemorative rally of the hunger strike in Dachau, 1980.  
Photo courtesy of Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma

After World War II, the suffering of Roma communities was largely excluded from public memory. No Roma testimonies were included in the Nuremberg Trials, and Roma survivors were denied recognition and compensation for decades. The formal recognition of the Roma Holocaust came very late: only in **1982** did **Germany officially acknowledge the Nazi persecution of Roma and Sinti as genocide on racial grounds.**



Delaine Le Baix's performance at the unfinished Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered Under National Socialism, Berlin, 2012.  
Photo © Nihad Nino Puljić

The **Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered under National Socialism** in Berlin, inaugurated in **2012** after decades of activism - including hunger strikes and public campaigns -, became an important site of European remembrance.

Other key memorial sites include **Lackenbach** in Austria, and **Lety** in the Czech Republic. These places were not simply granted by institutions. They were achieved through protest, testimony, and legal struggle.

The presence of Roma bodies in public space - marching, remembering, commemorating, testifying - is itself a political act of resistance.



# CULTURE AS RESISTANCE

From the rise of Roma civil rights movements in the 1950s to campaigns for recognition of the Roma Holocaust, arts and culture became central tools of Roma resistance and political struggle. Figures such as **Ceija Stojka**, **Zoni Weiss**, and **Žarko Jovanović** used cultural production to preserve memory and strengthen Roma political agency.

In 1943, **Margarete “Ceija” Horvath Stojka** (1933-2013) and her family were sent to the Rossauer Lände prison in Vienna and from there to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. At the end of the 1980s, she was one of the first members of the Roma and Sinti community to publish her memoirs. She also began to paint and draw, and through her art, she transmitted the painful events of her past. She fought against the prevailing ignorance about the Nazi crimes against the Sinti and Roma.



An important example of the connection between art and activism is the work of the **Romane Kale Panthera** group. **Tamara Moyzes**, **David Tišer**, and **Věra Duždová Horváthová** placed stickers on pork products in Czech supermarkets reading: *“Made from pigs raised on the graves of Roma victims of the Holocaust.”* The action protested against the pig farm built on the site of the former Roma concentration camp at **Lety**. The pig farm was finally demolished in 2022, and a memorial to Roma and Sinti victims has been built on the site.



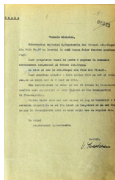
# THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES...



Dikh He Na Sister, Look and Don't Forget, 2014, Birkenau Camp Visit, Photo by Marlon Neményi, courtesy of terripe International Roma Youth Network

The Holocaust did not begin with the camps. It began with words, ideologies, and laws. Across Europe in the early 20th century, fascist movements promoted exclusionary nationalism, racial pseudoscience, antisemitism, and anti-Roma propaganda.

In Romania, the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael, founded in 1927, used religious rhetoric to marginalize Jews and Roma alike. **These ideologies did not disappear after 1945.** They mutated and continued to manifest through segregation, forced evictions, police violence, and coercive sterilization policies. In Sweden, the forced sterilization of Roma women continued into the 1960s. In Czechoslovakia, Roma women were unlawfully sterilized between 1966 and 2012.



Arhivele Naționale ale României prin Centrul de Cercetări Culturale și Sociale Române Rodimata, Courtesy of Adrian-Nicolae Furtună

Violence and exclusion remain part of Europe's present. Between 2008 and 2009, a series of neo-Nazi attacks in Hungary murdered six Roma, including a five-year-old child in Tatárszentgyörgy. In Pata-Rât near Cluj, Romania, Roma families were relocated beside a garbage dump, becoming a painful symbol of environmental racism and segregation.

Across Europe today, far-right populism, hate speech, and anti-Roma scapegoating continue to threaten democracy and human dignity.



# ...WITH YOU

The memory of May 16 and August 2, 1944 reminds us that even in the face of overwhelming violence, the assertion of dignity and humanity becomes an act of resistance. It stands as a powerful testament to the perseverance and courage of Roma communities, past and present.



8 April, International Roma Day parade, Berlin, 2018, Photo © Nihad Nino Pullja

Resistance does not always have to be heroic. It can take shape through everyday acts: holding your head high in a humiliating situation, helping others, sharing resources, speaking Romani outside the home, learning your history, or taking pride in your identity. Small acts of courage and solidarity can grow into powerful social movements.

**“Na Dara!” (“Have No Fear!”)**, as human rights activist and sociologist **Nicolae Gheorghe** (1946–2013) often said.

In 1971, at the First World Romani Congress, Roma leaders envisioned a shared Romani future built on dignity, unity, and self-determination. Honouring that legacy remains as important today as ever.

This exhibition is not only about the past. It is also about the choices we make in the present.

**What are your everyday acts of resistance?**

