

The Nazi Genocide of the Sinti and Roma

by Romani Rose¹

I would like to talk about some central aspects of the persecution of our minority in the 'Third Reich', although I will restrict myself largely to the fate of the German Sinti and Roma. I will then address some conceptual considerations regarding the educational dissemination of the history of the Holocaust and the use of historical sources that are also essential for the work of the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg. Finally I will make a few comments on the current politics of remembrance in Europe.

For German Sinti and Roma the year 1933 was a historic turning-point as it was for the German Jews. Germany saw the establishment of a dictatorship that declared racial ideology as the basis of state action and propagated a 'new racial order' of society as a primary goal. This 'racially' grounded policy, at the end of which stood systematic genocide, differed radically from all previous forms of persecution and can in no way be considered as a mere continuity of national 'gypsy policy'. The Holocaust against the Sinti and Roma, which nearly half a million people fell victim to, thus represents a fundamental turning-point in the many hundred-year old history shared by minority and majority society.

Sinti and Roma have been living in Germany for more than 600 years. However, the documents handed down from the end of the Middle Ages, in which Sinti and Roma usually appear as the objects of state measures, give a one-sided and distorted picture. Parallel to the policies of exclusion and discrimination there have always been, at local and regional level, various forms of friendly and normal coexistence between minority and majority population.

This normalcy of coexistence was systematically destroyed with the National Socialist assumption of power. From the very beginning the Nazis declared Sinti and Roma to be a 'foreign race' that was to be excluded from the 'national community' and ultimately 'eradicated'. Like the Jews, 'gypsies' were beyond all legislation, their

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very right to existence questioned. The first high point of the systematic deprivation of rights came with the 'Nuremberg race laws' which were applied to Sinti and Roma and to Jews alike.

Already in the mid-thirties Sinti and Roma families were being interned in special concentration camps that were erected in many German towns. Later these camps served as collection points for the deportations of Sinti and Roma to the death camps in occupied Poland. At the same time, the minority was being systematically excluded from virtually all areas of public life. Even before the beginning of war Sinti and Roma were subjected to debarment from employment, excluded from military service, their children refused entry to schools. The declared aim of the National Socialists was the 'racial isolation' of all Sinti and Roma from the 'German-blooded' population. A host of special regulations restricted their lives ever more tightly.

As in the case of the Jews, the Nazis' specific defamation of the Sinti and Roma relied on the exploitation of deep-lying prejudices to justify their 'race policy' and to ensure the acceptance of the population as well as the co-operation of the administration. The language of the hate articles directed against them did not differ in any way from the tirades of hate against the Jews in 'Der Stürmer', for example. Terms such as 'eradication' or 'extermination' were used as a matter of course when talking about the 'gypsy question'.

In order to turn the 'final solution of the gypsy question' he had announced in his edict of 8 December 1938 into reality, Heinrich Himmler commissioned the 'Racial Hygiene Research Office', headed by Dr Robert Ritter and already in existence in Berlin since 1936, with the complete registration of the minority. This was a crucial prerequisite for the implementation of genocide. The immense trouble to which Ritter and his apparatus went in order to leave no gaps in the genealogical registration of the German Sinti and Roma (including extensive anthropological examinations) is evidence of the importance by which the Nazis measured the 'gypsy question' - regardless of the fact that Sinti and Roma in Germany were a small minority in terms of numbers. The fanatical 'race researchers' were trying to track down the last 'gypsy' or so called 'gypsy of mixed blood' until the end of the war in order to hand them over for extermination.

The National Socialist 'race policy' took on a new dimension with the launch of the Second World War in September 1939. The initial military successes of the Wehrmacht allowed the National Socialist authorities to deport all those of 'foreign race' from the Reich into the newly occupied territories. From the beginning German Sinti and Roma were included alongside the Jews in the deportation plans of the SS leadership.

The way for the deportations was also prepared by Himmler's so-called Detention Decree of 17 October 1939, according to which 'gypsies' were no longer allowed to leave their home areas under threat of internment in concentration camps. A few months after the first deportations of Jewish people from the Reich, the first families of German Sinti and Roma, numbering 2,500, were deported to occupied Poland in May 1940. Most fell victim to the inhumane forced labour and mass shootings in the ghettos and concentration camps erected there.

Following the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, local Roma were murdered by the death squads of the SS, systematically and in whole families. This applied to the other occupied territories of eastern and south-eastern Europe as well, where in Serbia particularly the Wehrmacht was involved in the mass shootings. Numerous pieces of evidence for the policy of systematic murder of Roma can be found not only in the documents remaining from that time, but also in the records of the preliminary investigations and proceedings against Nazi perpetrators.

Sinti and Roma were among the first victims along with the Jews of the assembly-line mass killings in the extermination camps erected in occupied Poland. A few weeks after the systematic deportation of Jews from the Reich territory had begun, 5,000 Austrian Sinti and Roma were deported to the Lodz ghetto in November 1941, where a 'gypsy ghetto' was set up immediately beside the Jewish one. In January 1942 the surviving internees of the Lodz 'gypsy ghetto' were taken to Chelmno extermination camp, where they were suffocated in gas trucks immediately after their arrival.

Himmler's Auschwitz decree of 16 December 1942 ultimately triggered the last phase in the destruction policy: the deportation of more than 22,000 Sinti and Roma from

eleven countries in Europe to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Almost 90% of the men, women and children in the so called 'gypsy camp', fell victim to terror, hunger and disease or were murdered in the gas chambers. Some 3,000 of the people were deported for 'extermination through work' to concentration camps in the Reich territory before the 'liquidation' of the 'gypsy camp' on the 2nd/3rd of August 1944 - when the SS drove the last 2,900 survivors into the gas chambers in a single night.

The existing source material makes it clear that the 'race policy' directed against the Sinti and Roma did not culminate in systematic extermination by chance, as many years was maintained. Although the concept of the 'final solution' came about only gradually, the 'racial policy' included the notion of physical extermination from the very beginning. Even the projects of a 'territorial final solution' of the 'Jewish question' and the 'gypsy question' having been considered for a short time consciously included the mass murder of the deported people.

The Nazi genocide of the Sinti and Roma was grounded in the desire of the highest representatives of the SS state for their extermination, and was not in any way simply the result of agencies acting on their own initiative. This becomes clear by the very fact that Heinrich Himmler and the so called 'Reich Security Main Office' under the leadership of Reinhard Heydrich took over management of the 'solution to the gypsy question'. However, only the interaction of many different functionaries from all areas of society allowed the genocide of the Sinti and Roma to become frightful reality.

Although these facts were known for a long time, in the Federal Republic of Germany it took almost four decades, until 1982, to recognize politically the genocide of the Sinti and Roma. Until then the Nazi policy of extermination directed against our minority was largely ignored or, at most, relegated to a mere footnote of history.

On the Jewish side it was a matter of course after the end of the war that the crimes committed against the Jews would be comprehensively documented. Jewish institutions did their best to ensure that the Holocaust against the European Jews was brought to public attention and can never be forgotten. From the beginning the overriding aim of the civil rights movement of the German Sinti and Roma has been

to create a centre that would look back on and reappraise our history – in particular that of the genocide – and anchor it in the collective memory. We understood this task to be an indispensable contribution both to democratic self-understanding and to the political culture of the Federal Republic of Germany. It needed to be shown that prejudices and state discrimination which are founded directly on the racial prejudices and thought structures of the National Socialists continue to this day and maintain their hold on the image of our minority in the public.

This task was assumed by the Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, established in Heidelberg in 1990. After several years of documentary work and research, in 1997 the Centre opened the world's first – and to date unique – permanent exhibition on the Holocaust against our minority. Another important result of the Centre's work was the setting up of a permanent exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, realised in strong cooperation with national and international memorial sites and other national Roma and Sinti organisations. Since August 2001 the dimension of the Roma and Sinti genocide is documented in Block 13 of the former „Stammlager“ F.

I would now like to turn to the consequences arising from what has just been said for the educational dissemination of the history of the Holocaust, not only in the form of exhibition projects but also in school textbooks. From our standpoint the following points are of central importance: As for the Jewish victims, so must the genocide of the Sinti and Roma be made visible in its historic uniqueness: as an attempt at the total extermination of our minority on the basis of its sole existence. Sinti, Roma and Jews were the only groups of victims who, from the very young to the very old, were 'racially' registered, deported and murdered, and this with the assistance of a modern, functioning state apparatus. Like the Holocaust against the Jews, this policy of the systematic extermination of our minority represents a break in civilisation that defies all historical comparisons.

Furthermore, the reality of the Holocaust cannot be reduced to a reconstruction of the historical events that relies solely on the files handed down from the perpetrators. It is precisely in the case of the Sinti and Roma that there is often no awareness that Nazi documents reflect the perspectives of the murderers. The uncritical equalisation

of these documents with the supposed reality of the life of our minority has in the past often led to the defamation of the victims by their murderers being accepted without reflection. Racist prejudices were passed on and reinforced with the appearance of supposed 'objectivity'.

It is essential that the reality of the life of the Sinti and Roma is being separated from the anti-gypsy clichés which have for centuries taken root in the collective consciousness of the majority society and were exploited by the National Socialist propaganda. It is therefore vital that the contemptuous documents of the perpetrators, in which Sinti and Roma appear as mere objects, are compared and contrasted with the reports and authentic testimonies of the survivors. These particularly include the old family photographs, which give an insight into the personal circumstances of the people and show the diversity of ways in which Sinti and Roma were involved in the life of society before the Nazis excluded them from all areas of public life. The relationship between these two levels - normality and the everyday life of the minority on the one hand, and terror and persecution on the other - reveals at the same time that the abstract documents of the bureaucratically organized extermination stood for countless destroyed lives and human destinies.

Finally, I would like to say some words on the current politics of remembrance in Europe.

The defence of that which constitutes the core of the European ideal – the absolute validity of human rights and the dignity of every individual – is, and remains, closely linked to the memory of the victims of Nazi terror. This applies equally to Germany and the European community of values. Historical memory also includes the awareness that a large proportion of German society and the state institutions of the so-called 'Third Reich' were involved in this crime. The industrial mass murder, for which the name Auschwitz stands as a symbol, could only be implemented with the help of a modern, functioning state apparatus. It is therefore essential not only that we commemorate the victims, but that we also clearly mention the guilt of the perpetrators and their agents of murder from administration and science.

Coming to terms with the Nazi crimes against our minority in the former German occupied states, or those allied with Hitler's Germany, likewise needs to include discussion of the question as to what role was played by the state institutions of these countries and the local authorities in the persecution or deportation of Jews and Roma. As far as the states of the former Eastern Bloc are concerned, it is legitimate and necessary to also investigate and critically analyse the crimes of the Communists, including their role in the oppression and persecution of the Roma. This investigation and critical analysis needs to be applied to the expulsions at the end of World War II and during the early post-war period, too. Until the fall of the "Iron Curtain" in 1989, countless people in Eastern Europe suffered under the Communist-dominated dictatorships. The memory of these decades is an important part, not only of the Eastern European countries' culture of remembrance, but also of the European culture of remembrance as a whole.

However, this should not lead to a one-sided focus or even to a relativisation of the genocide of the Sinti and Roma, as well as the Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. The historically and politically motivated equalisation of Stalinism and Nazism not only levels the basic differences between the two dictatorships, but also blurs the historical causalities. The war of extermination, unleashed by Hitler's Germany and the mass crimes of the Nazi regime, were the critical prerequisites for the European post-war order: such correlations cannot just be suppressed. It is not a question of measuring the amount of suffering or of counting the victims, and it is certainly not about creating a hierarchy of victims, but it is about the necessary historical contextualisation. A simple equalisation of such varied systems as National Socialism and Stalinism, or of such crime complexes as the Nazi genocide policy and the Stalinist mass expulsions which took place towards the end of the Second World War, is absolutely unacceptable.

In a democratic and pluralistic society, there must be open and fair discussion about the right way to remember. Historical memory cannot be imposed by decree, nor degraded to a mere instrument of historical and political interests. This also applies to the shaping of the European culture of remembrance which needs to include the very different historical experiences of the individual nations.