



## 9. The Fate of the Roma during the Holocaust: The Untold Story



*A group of Roma and Sinti detainees, awaiting instructions from their Nazi captors, sit in an open area near the fence in the Belzec concentration camp.*

*Photo: Courtesy of United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*



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László Teleki is the Special Envoy of the Hungarian Prime Minister, the Co-President of the Roma Affairs Inter-Ministerial and Member of the Hungarian Parliament. *The Fate of the Roma during the Holocaust: The Untold Story* is based on the remarks he made at the opening of the exhibit entitled "Roads to Death, the Pharrajimos in Hungary" that was opened by the Permanent Mission of Hungary to the United Nations in observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust in January 2009. From 2000 to 2002, he was the President of the National Alliance of Roma Organizations, and from 2002 to 2006 he was Deputy Minister of Roma Affairs for the Prime Minister's Office.

# The Fate of the Roma during the Holocaust: The Untold Story

by *László Teleki*

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The fate of the Roma or “Gypsies” during the Holocaust is not well known despite the fact that they were targeted for extinction by National Socialist Germany. The Nazis took many steps they thought necessary to solve their so-called “Gypsy problem”. Like the Jews, the Roma suffered discrimination, persecution, arbitrary internment, forced labour and murder under the Nazi regime.

The Roma, who originated in India, followed their own culture and traditions and lived quite differently than the Europeans. The Roma suffered because this lifestyle was judged unfairly as “a nuisance”. Also, many Europeans believed that the Roma did not belong among them because Europe was not their homeland, despite the fact that the Roma had been living peacefully there for years. Furthermore, as a result of Nazi racial policy towards minorities, the Roma were considered to be a threat to the concept of “Aryan racial purity”.

Nazi treatment of the Roma was prejudicial and discriminatory from the start of the regime. Roma were deprived of their rights and property, prohibited to marry “Aryans” or even each other, as

they were deemed to be inferior by law. By 1938, they began to be arrested and held in guarded or closed camps. Some collection camps became forced labour camps. Many Roma were deported to already existing concentration camps. Most Roma still living in the German Reich in December 1942 were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the camp, they found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy, were tattooed with a “Z” for “Zigeuner” and were required to wear a brown or black triangle to single them out.

*Today we would like to tell our story [...] because the deaths of Roma men, women, and children become sacrifices only if we understand the “why” and don’t shut our eyes to the “how”.*

The Roma in the “Gypsy camp” at Auschwitz-Birkenau were crowded into a few barracks where hundreds died from malnutrition, epidemics, medical experiments, forced sterilization and forced labour. Auschwitz was only one of the places where the Roma were systematically gassed and murdered. In other parts of Eastern Europe, the Roma were shot to death.

The Roma holocaust, or “Pharrajimos” in Hungarian, is one of the greatest losses suffered by mankind so far. However, the general public has come to learn about this loss much later and to a much lesser degree than of that of the Shoah, the atrocities committed against the Jews, our kindred people in suffering.

Today we would like to tell our story, through educational programmes, public events and exhibits, because the deaths of Roma men, women, and children become sacrifices only if we understand the “why” and don’t shut our eyes to the “how”.

We want everybody to know and understand that nearly one-fourth of the European Roma community<sup>1</sup>—among them many

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1 Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (historians can only estimate the toll because exact numbers are unknown).

young people—perished during the Second World War for no reason at all. There was not one Roma who wanted to take up arms.

Most of the murdered are left mouldering, nameless, in mass graves at abandoned forest sites and in fields, after they were killed by gunshot, mines, hunger, disease, lethal gas, fire, or poisons used during inhuman experiments. Some were buried while still alive after having been cruelly beaten. We remember them and their senseless deaths, and everybody remembers them as they accompany the victims on the road to their deaths.

In reflecting on the Pharrajimos in Hungary, inevitably some questions arise:

Why didn't the Hungarian intellectuals say anything between the two World Wars, when the first thoughts and actions were conceived urging persecution?

Why weren't they given homes, and why were large numbers of Roma raided from 1941 on?

Why were the Roma families rounded up from 1943 on?

Why were they taken away in forced marches, in cold and dark freight cars, from Székesfehérvár, Miskolc, Nagykanizsa, Körmend, Eger, Budapest; from the prison of the fortress of Komárom, why were they taken to Theresianum, Dachau, Matthausen, Saarbrüchen, Bergen-Belsen, Auschwitz-Birkenau and other German labour and death camps?

Why were they killed in December 1944, in the vicinity of Barcs in Somogy County, in Kerecsend, Andornaktálya, and Eger in Heves County, in Székesfehérvár in Fejér County, in Piliscsaba in Pest County, in Várpalota and Inota in Veszprém County? And so on, and so on ...

It is impossible to give a morally acceptable answer to any of the above. But the silence of half a century is not an answer either,

just because there are few documents or photographs that remain of these senseless deaths.

We learned about it for the first time from the memories of old Roma and of Jewish inmates who suffered with them and who lent them a helping hand in the camps. During the fiftieth anniversary of the Auschwitz-Birkenau bloodbath, we visited the site of the horror where more than 3,000 Roma men, women and children died. All those present at the death camp that day, including myself, understood the significance of this terrible era, its immeasurable loss, and that the best part of us had perished there.

That was the time when we began to track down the broken branches of our family trees and our clans, the missing families. It was then that we started to put questions to the oldest people amongst us, who as small children lived through those days.

That was the time when we understood: the majority of the victims of our people remain nameless today, the only real sense their sacrifice makes is to remind us. And remembering has remained our obligation forever.

***THE GYPSIES WERE TAKEN AWAY***

*“The many Gypsies were taken away,  
Large, deep ditches to dig on the way.  
The ditch slowly deepens, work without rest,  
‘Till water has bubbled up from its depth.”*

— from the poem by  
*Choli Daróczy*

Yes, indeed, the ditch of forgetfulness and negligence has also been deepening. This is a very dangerous process. Just think about it! It was because of negligence, because many people did not take it seriously in time and they just did not care, that Nazism could reach a point when it became unstoppable by the little people. By that

time it could only be overpowered at the expense of a destructive and costly war.

It is our obligation to remember not only the Hungarian Roma victims, but all of the families of the European Roma. On the roads to death there were no borders, not national or geographical ones, as the Roma were taken to the death camps. Many Roma women and men set off to forced labour and many perished several hundreds of kilometres away from home, behind barbed wires. Hundreds of children became orphans, but they survived, thanks to luck, or helpful Jewish, Hungarian or Slovak women.

Our mourning is eternal and limitless, but not friendless and aimless. Its aim is to say with you as loud and as decidedly as possible: NEVER AGAIN.

#### Discussion questions

1. In what ways was the *Pharrajimos* similar to the *Shoah* of the Jews?
2. Why were the Roma considered to be inferior by the Nazis?
3. How were the Roma identified in the camps?
4. Why might the Nazis have found it necessary to single out each of the prison populations in the camps?
5. What might have been done to help prevent the persecution and killing of the Roma?