

Concentration Camps

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Forced Labour | “Gypsy” Camp Lackenbach | Ghetto Lodz and Extermination Camp Chelmno | Concentration Camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau | Persecutions in German-Occupied Territories

➤ Following a comparatively short period of increasingly tightening measures directed towards them, from 1938 on the Roma in the German Reich, German-occupied territories and associated countries suffered deportation, detention and murder. By 1945 roughly one out of four Roma living in pre-war Europe had fallen victim to Nazi persecution.

THE NUMBER OF VICTIMS

The number of Roma victims of the Holocaust remains a field of controversial debate between historians and minority activists. Previous estimates of 500,000 Roma, who allegedly fell victim to Nazi persecution, were certainly exaggerated and have so far not been confirmed by scientific research. Up to date, concrete historical documentation has been unearthed for about 50,000 victims within the German Reich and German-occupied territories, and another roughly 50,000 victims in countries governed by fascist satellite governments of the Reich. Many of the available sources and archival materials being incomplete and inconclusive, the overall number of estimated Roma victims can be put at a minimum of 250,000.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS, EXTERMINATION CAMPS, GHETTOS (1936-1945)

(based on Vossen 1983, p. 87; Tcherenkov / Laederich 2004, p. 161)

III. 1



INTRODUCTION

The fierce persecution of Roma by German Nazis – and other fascists – had its roots in three distinct features of European thought and policies in the first half of the 20th century. Traditional anti-“Gypsyism”, a complex mixture of social prejudices – such as the idea that “Gypsies” were carriers of dangerous diseases and prone to stealing children whenever possible – was widely ac-

cepted throughout Europe. In the early 20th century this was combined with a rabid form of racism, which believed so-called “anti-social behaviour” to be a hereditary trait of certain groups of population. The third crucial feature of persecution mechanisms – introduced by the German Nazis after their ascent to power in 1933 – was the system of so-called “preventive fighting of crimes”, which enabled the authorities to arrest and imprison everybody,

whom they considered to be “potentially dangerous” to society, even if they had not committed any crime or misdemeanour.

The harsh economic climate of the interwar years in Europe further contributed to the growing friction between Roma and non-Roma in many European countries. Especially in Central and Eastern Europe many Roma lived either as itinerant artisans or as agricultural labourers. During the so-called “De-

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III. 2 Interior of a barrack of the “Gypsy Camp” in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The inscription on the ceiling reads: “Sei ehrlich” (“Be honest”).

(from Nečas 1999, p. 96b)

Paula Nardai, a Romni from Oberwart, Austria, recalls the fate of her family at Auschwitz-Birkenau:

“My father was there, my mother, my eighteen-year-old sister, me and my nine-year-old brother. And my other brother, too, who was older, who had been working in Kiel. My mother – a month, I can say, a month she survived. My father, they beat him on the head so terribly that he turned blind. There was a barrack which they called ‘Lazarett’ (sick bay) – if they put you there, you never came out again. They beat him blind. They did away with him, we didn’t see him again. My sister went into the kitchen, they took her to peel potatoes. And my little brother, it was the first time that he had to work. I was away, I left him home in the barrack, I went away in the morning, at the ‘Außenkommando’ (outer squad) I was at work, and when I came home, what do I see? The child is not there. I say to the others: ‘Where is the child?’ – ‘They have taken him out.’ They took the children and carried them to the gas chambers. And I was not allowed to go out any more. I could not go out to ask anyone, because I was not allowed to leave the Barrack at finishing time. Only ‘zum Abzählen’ (for counting) – over.”

III. 3 (from Romani Patrin 2/1998, p. 10)

pression” of the late 1920s and early 1930s many Roma lost these traditional forms of income and fell prone to public welfare and health care. However, most of the villages and towns were reluctant to shoulder this financial burden – claiming that the “Gypsies” did not belong to their populations – and tried to push them off onto other municipalities. German and Austrian police forces started to register the Roma in so-called “Zigeunerlisten” (“Gypsy” lists) and to take their photographs and fingerprints well before the Nazi ascent to power, lists which later should turn out to be fatal for most persons thus registered.

These factors formed the background for the increasing persecution of so-called “Gypsies” after the Nazi ascent to power in 1933. Already in 1933 Roma were forced to undergo sterilisation and in 1935 a special law forbade intermarriages of “Gypsies” and “Aryans”. Between 1936 and 1938 the two central institutions of “Gypsy” persecution were created, the so-called “Rassehygienische Forschungsstelle” (Research Centre for Racial Hygiene) and the “Reichszentrale für die Bekämpfung des Zigeunerunwesens im Reichskriminalpolizeiamt” (Reich Centre for Fighting the Gypsy Plague within the

Reich Office of the Criminal Police). Local authorities were not only supporting these policies against Roma but often urged the central institutions to speed up and intensify the measures, like e.g. in a notorious pamphlet by the Nazi “Gauleiter” of Burgenland, Thobias Portschy. In 1938 Heinrich Himmler – the commander of the SS (“Schutzstaffel”, Protective Squadron) and Reichs-chief of the German police – decreed to “solve the Gypsy question” according to “racial principles” and in 1939 signed a special decree forcing all Roma to give up travelling and remain in the city where they were staying at the moment.

FORCED LABOUR

Starting in 1938 and 1939, the “Reich Office of the Criminal Police” ordered about 3,000 men and women, who were capable of carrying out hard physical labour, to be deported to concentration camps. Himmler needed these prisoners for the development of an SS-controlled industry. Berlin was convinced, that the Roma were not gainfully employed anyway. But this was wrong.

After the annexation of Austria by the German Reich the Roma were forbidden to continue some of their traditional occupations, e.g. such as performing music in public. Because of the war-induced boom in the arms industry many Roma found work in factories, on building sites and in the agricultural sector. Even the Styrian “Gauleiter” Uiberreither criticised the consequences of these deportations, but supported them out of racist motives: “Although these are correctly employed Gypsies, who are neither unwilling to work nor

have previous criminal offences and in no way constitute a burden to society, I will order their internment in forced labour camps out of the consideration, that a Gypsy – as somebody who stands outside of the Volksgemeinschaft (the people’s community) – is ever and always asocial.”

In 1940 Himmler ordered another group of about 2,500 Roma (mainly Sinti) from the territory of the German Reich to be deported to the General Protectorate in today’s Poland.

III. 4 “Einweisungs-Übersicht” (“Internation overview”) of the ghetto Lodz of November 13, 1941, listing five transports with “overall 4,996 living, 11 dead Gypsies”, adding that “the 11 dead Gypsies died during the train transport”.

Barbara Richter, a Czech survivor of the camp at Auschwitz:

“I was kept six weeks at the police station and then sent to Auschwitz (arriving there 11th March, 1943). Two Gypsies tried to escape but were caught, beaten and hanged. Later my family was released from Lettig because the Richters were a well-established family in Bohemia. My mother came to Auschwitz voluntarily. Once I was given twenty-five blows with a whip because I had given some bread to a new arrival. One day I saw Elisabeth Koch kill four Gypsy children because they had eaten the remains of some food. Another time we stood for two hours in front of the crematorium but at the last moment we were sent back to the barracks. I was given lashes a second time for taking bread from a dead prisoner. Three times they took blood from me. Dr. Mengele injected me with malaria. I was then in the sick bay with my uncle. Some Gypsies carried me to another block just before all the patients in the sick bay, including my uncle, were killed.”

III. 5 (from Crowe 1995, p. 51)

Anlage II

Litzmannstadt, den 13. 11. 1941.

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S. Ak. - Nord.
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Einweisungs-Übersicht
(Zigeuner)

Kgl. Nr.	Flanz-Bezirk	Ankunftszeit	Ankunft		Ausladen	
			Tag	Zeit	Beginn	Dauer
1	5.11.41	11.00	5.11.41	16.55	5.11.41	25 Min.
2	6.11.41	11.00	6.11.41	17.50	7.11.41	50 Min.
3	7.11.41	11.00	8.11.41	18.50	9.11.41	50 Min.
4	8.11.41	11.00	9.11.41	01.30	9.11.41	10 Min.
5	9.11.41	11.00	9.11.41	15.25	9.11.41	10 Min.

Anzahl der eingewiesenen Zigeuner:

1. Transport von Hartberg	998 Lebende, 2 tote Zigeuner
2. " " " Piratenfeld	1 000 Zigeuner,
3. " " " Matfersburg	1 000 " "
4. " " " Roten Shum	952 Lebende, 8 tote Zigeuner
5. " " " Obermarkt	1 006 " , 1 toter "
5 Transporte	insgesamt 4 996 Lebende, 11 tote Zigeuner.

Die 11 toten Zigeuner starben während des Bahntransportes.
Geplek der Zigeuner: durchschnittlich 30 kg.

“GYPSY” CAMP LACKENBACH

On November 23, 1940, the “Gypsy Camp Lackenbach” was set up in the buildings of a former manorial farm. The camp was administered by the headquarters of the criminal police in Vienna, the costs were divided between the district administrations of Bruck an der Leitha, Eisenstadt, Lilienfeld, Oberpullendorf, St. Pölten and Wiener Neustadt and the communal administration of the City of Vienna in proportion to the number of prisoners coming from the respective districts. The interned Roma had to live under the most primitive conditions

in the barns and stables of the former manorial farm and were used as forced labourers in various local enterprises. Under “normal” conditions, the number of people interned in Lackenbach varied from 200 to 900 persons, about a third of them being children. The peak number of 2,335 prisoners was reached on November 1, 1941. Out of the 4,000 Roma interned in Lackenbach about 2,000 were deported to the ghetto in Lodz and to the extermination camp at Chelmno in the autumn of 1941. Only a few hundred Roma survived to see the liberation of Camp Lackenbach by Soviet troops in April 1945. In spite of the unbelievable bad standards of living, hygiene and alimentation, the Roma

imprisoned in Camp Lackenbach were compelled to forced labour. They were rented out to various enterprises such as forest domains, agricultural manors, farms, brickyards, and a silkworm farm, or were ordered to work on public road building projects. Their wages were handed over to the camp administration, the Roma themselves only received “pocket money”. The slightest breach of camp discipline was severely punished by beatings, endless roll-calls and the withdrawal of food. In 1942 the disastrous living conditions led to an epidemic outbreak of spotted fever which killed many of the camp’s inmates. Between 1940 and 1945 in total 237 people lost their lives at Camp Lackenbach.

GHETTO LODZ AND EXTERMINATION CAMP CHELMNO

On October 1, 1941, Heinrich Himmler decreed the deportation of 5,007, mostly Austrian, Roma to the ghetto at Lodz (“Litzmannstadt”). The costs of these deportations were split between the “Reichssicherheitshauptamt” (The Reich Security Main Office) in Berlin and regional social welfare administra-

tions. Persons to be deported were selected according to whether they were unable to work, those “who did not burden the social welfare” were allowed to remain. Whole families were being deported together, among them 2,689 children, comprising more than the half of the total number of deportees. 613 of the deportees died during the first weeks in Lodz from spotted fever. In December 1941 and January 1942 all the Roma still alive by then were transferred to the

extermination camp at nearby Chelmno and were gassed there. In March 1942 the office of the criminal police Graz ordered all requests of concerned relatives to be forwarded to the “Reichssicherheitshauptamt” (The Reich Security Main Office), and to discourage further requests with the argument, that in the case of all persons “resettled” to Lodz no visiting rights were granted. At this time all Austrian Roma deported to Lodz were already dead. [III. 4]

CONCENTRATION CAMPS AT AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU

After intensive discussions concerning the so-called “Gypsy Policy” Himmler ordered the deportation of all “zigeunerische Personen” (“Gypsy-like persons”) into concentration camps. The camp book of the so called “Gypsy Camp” at Auschwitz-Birkenau registered 10,649 female and 10,094 male

prisoners, many of them children. Two thirds of the imprisoned Roma had been arrested in Germany and Austria, over 20 percent came from Bohemia and close to 6 percent from Poland. Every day sick and weak prisoners were dying and repeatedly large numbers of sick prisoners were sent to the gas chambers, among them a large number of German and Austrian Roma on May 12, 1943. By the end of 1943 70 percent of the prisoners of the “Gypsy Camp” had already

perished. Towards the end of July 1944 all inmates of the “Gypsy Camp” at Auschwitz-Birkenau, who were still thought to be able to work, were transferred to other concentration camps and compelled to carry out forced labour in factories and industrial plants. On August 2, 1944, the SS-troops surrounded the “Gypsy Camp” and the following night all remaining prisoners in the “Gypsy Camp” were murdered in the gas chambers. [Ills. 3, 5]

PERSECUTIONS IN GERMAN- OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

During the German occupation of the western regions of the USSR in 1941 thousands of Roma were killed in mass liquidations together with Jews and communist functionaries. In the same year, troops of the German “Wehrmacht” (military) killed thousands of Roma in Serbia and at the same time German police forces murdered countless Roma in Poland.

Between 1944 and early 1945 thousands of Slovak and Hungarian Roma were killed or deported to concentration camps. Roma especially from Southern and Western Hungary were arrested by Hungarian fascists and on death marches driven to the central camp at Csilla near the city of Komárom in Nor-

thern Hungary, from where the survivors were deported by the German SS. Many surviving Hungarian Roma were killed by German troops and Hungarian fascists in early 1945, when they succeeded in briefly recapturing territories, which had already been occupied by the advancing Soviet troops. In Slovakia the government set up a so-called “Gypsy Camp” at Dubnica nad Váhom where around 800 people were interned under terrible conditions and later killed or deported.

In Romania and Croatia the persecution of Roma under the fascist satellite governments of the German Reich was equally hard and cruel. Estimates of victims of the Croatian concentration camp at Jasenovac vary considerably, but the overall number of Croatian Roma, who fell victim to the Holocaust, must be put at at least 25,000. Equally

problematic are the various estimates of Roma victims among the 25,000 Romanian Roma deported to Transnistria, most of which probably did not survive. Figures for deportations to Transnistria from Bulgaria are even more vague. On the one hand research about these tragic events has for decades been neglected, while on the other hand the number of victims of these fascist regimes used to be irresponsibly exaggerated by Communist propaganda after 1945.

The fate of Roma in German-occupied Italy has only marginally been researched so far, as well as the fate of Roma and Sinti from the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. For German-occupied Denmark, Norway, Greece and Bulgaria historians – so far – have not found any documentation of systematic deportations and liquidations of Roma.

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