



1. Remembering the Nazi Persecution of Roma and Sinti



Close-up of a "Gypsy" couple in the Belzec concentration camp, 1 July 1940. Belzec, Poland.

Photo Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



UN Photo

Andrzej Mirga

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Andrzej Mirga has served as expert on the Committee of Experts on Roma and Travelers of the Council of Europe (former Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies, since 1996), and as its chair (2003-2005). He was also a member of Poland's Common Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities (2005-2006) and at the High-Level Group on Labour Market and Disadvantaged Ethnic Minorities (European Commission, 2005-2007). Mr. Mirga was a guest speaker at the Holocaust Memorial Ceremony held in the United Nations General Assembly Hall on 27 January 2010. He made a statement on the persecution and murder of the Roma and Sinti under the Nazi regime.

The Legacy of the Survivors: Remembering the Nazi Persecution of Roma and Sinti — a Key to Fighting Modern-day Racism

by *Andrzej Mirga*

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On 27 January 1945 the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp was a salvation for 7,000 camp prisoners that managed to survive torture, starvation, diseases, medical experiments, executions and gas chambers. There were no Roma and Sinti among those survivors. Half a year before the liberation, on the night of 2 August 1944, the remaining 2,897 Roma women, old men and children from the so called “Zigeunerlager” (Gypsy camp) established by Himmler’s decree in December 1942, who by then already suffered all possible atrocities, were killed in gas chambers. Around 23,000 Roma and Sinti altogether were detained in Auschwitz, some 13,000 from Germany and Austria and others from countries under the rule of the Third Reich or collaborating with it. Between April and July 1944 about 3,500 Roma and Sinti were transferred to other camps.

Some of them survived the ordeal of persecution, but 85 per cent of those originally transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau were eventually exterminated.¹

For many decades Roma and Sinti survivors of Nazi persecution were silent and rarely voiced their stories or reported their experiences and observations. And because remembrance depends on people's memories, survivors' testimonies, research, historiography and official recognition, the Roma and Sinti suffering went largely unnoticed. After 1945 many countries did not acknowledge and condemn their racial persecution; furthermore, they for decades pursued discriminatory practices against Roma and Sinti, including in the restitution process.

Roma and Sinti struggled for recognition and a righteous place among the victims of the Nazi regime. Only in the early 1980s, Germany officially recognised that the extermination of the Roma and Sinti was based on 'racial' grounds.² Only in 1994, Roma and Sinti themselves started to commemorate their genocide in Auschwitz on 2 August, the date of liquidation of the "Zigeunerlager", with the participation of state officials and the international community. Only in 2001, the State Museum of Auschwitz opened a permanent exhibition on the Roma and Sinti genocide.³

Symbolic personalities and their stories, like that of Anne Frank which encapsulates the experience of the Holocaust, are remembered for generations. Roma and Sinti still have to uncover such personal evidence symbolising the experience of persecution. The story of "Unku" or Erna Lauenburger, a German Sinti girl could be one of such telling stories symbolising Roma and Sinti genocide. Erna, a model for the title heroine of the children's book "Ede and

1 "Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies)", United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Available from: <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005219>.

2 "Institutionalisation and Emancipation", Project Education of Roma Children in Europe, produced by the Council of Europe.

3 "Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum Timeline", Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum. Available from: <http://en.auschwitz.org>.

Unku” by Grete Weiskopf-Bernheim (pseudonym: Alex Wedding), was born in 1920. The book was published in 1931. The writer was Jewish, her book was therefore banned by the Nazis in 1933. Erna was “racially” registered in 1939 and was classified as a “gypsy of mixed race” in 1941. She was deported from the detention camp in Magdeburg directly to Auschwitz on 1 March 1943 with her family and died there that same year. Out of the 11 Sinti children mentioned in this book, based on real life-stories, only one child survived the persecution.

The memory of the Holocaust cannot fade away as the suffering of millions should not go in vain. And yet, humanity is confronted time and again with the evil of genocide. Is it possible to avoid that? The survivors teach us not to collaborate with those who espouse hatred, but actively resist it and oppose it.

Racist ideologies have not vanished in our world; still there are groups in societies who are ready to preach such ideas and act based upon them. Those who suffered during the Nazi era, including Roma and Sinti, cannot forget that racist ideologies were the root cause of their persecution at the time, and that is also why they feel particularly threatened today by extremist or neo-Nazi groups. These groups, no doubt at the fringe of society, are not afraid to go out to the public and praise Nazi ideology, recall its symbols and slogans, and organise rallies and marches to celebrate the Nazi past. And, sadly, they continue to attract followers.

Remembering the Holocaust is key to fighting modern day racism and intolerance. It means a commitment to value the human being, its dignity and rights. Remembering is not enough; laws which protect the dignity and rights of human beings have to follow. That was the logic of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

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and that's the logic of ensuring the principles of equality and non-discrimination within basic laws or constitutions. In the same way, law enforcement tools must be applied effectively to prevent or punish violent manifestations of racist and extremist ideologies.

Recognising the danger of hate speech, aggressive racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, jointly with other international organisations, has repeatedly called for strengthening efforts to promote tolerance and non-discrimination. Such efforts should in particular be targeted at the younger generations in order to build up their understanding of

the need for tolerance and the importance of reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

With respect to the Roma and Sinti survivors, their narratives about persecution under the Nazi regime should become a legitimate part of main Holocaust narrative and teaching – and serve as a universal reminder of what should never happen again.

The other legacy of survivors is about teaching the Holocaust. It is an obligation but at the same time a challenge, especially after nearly 65 years have passed since the end of World War II. It requires involvement of specialised institutions to develop teaching curricula and institutionalise them. We are living in a new world; it offers new tools to keep the memory, to learn and teach about the past. In this regard it is a sign of hope that the Auschwitz Museum has been visited by over 47 million people since its establishment and that a million visitors come to see it every year. With respect to the

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In many European countries Roma and Sinti were issued special “Gypsy” identification cards during the interwar years, papers which they were required to carry always on them and which later facilitated their arrest and deportation to forced labour and concentration camps.

Photo Credit: Archives of Vas County, Hungary



Katalin Barsony, Executive Director of Romedia Foundation, speaks at a side event on Roma at the OSCE’s annual human rights conference, Warsaw, 5 October 2011.

Photo Credit: OSCE/Jens Eschenbaecher

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Discussion questions

1. For several decades Roma and Sinti persecution during the Second World War was not recognised. What happened to the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust?
2. What was the basis for Nazi discrimination against the Roma and Sinti?
3. As stated in Mr. Mirga's paper, Germany only officially recognised that the extermination of the Roma and Sinti was based on 'racial' grounds in the beginning of the 1980s. Why did their persecution go unnoticed for such a long time?
4. What is the danger of hate speech, aggressive racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism? And why is it essential for international organisations such as the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), to promote tolerance and non-discrimination?
5. Why is Holocaust education an important tool today?