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## The Understudied History of Roma and Sinti During the Holocaust

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## The Understudied History of Roma and Sinti During the Holocaust

The Holocaust is one of the most horrific chapters in human history, characterized by the systematic persecution and extermination of millions of people, including Jews, Roma and Sinti, Afro-Germans, Poles, homosexuals, people with disabilities, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. During World War II, the Holocaust tragically claimed the lives of over half a million Romani people, who endured brutal persecution by the Nazis and its allies<sup>1</sup>. Despite the documented accounts and testimonies available in Holocaust archives, the story of the Roma and Sinti remains primarily marginalized within the broader Holocaust narrative and research.

### Persecution and Extermination

The National Socialist Party launched a ruthless campaign against Roma and Sinti, fueled by racial ideology. The Nazis intensified this persecution by passing the *Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor* in 1935, which deprived Jews, Roma and Sinti of German citizenship, fundamental rights, and the right to intermarry with Germans. In addition, Roma and Sinti became the subject of research at the *Berlin Institute for Research on Racial Hygiene and Population Biology*, which aimed to conduct pseudoscientific research aimed at categorizing "Gypsies" and examining perceived links between ethnicity and crime<sup>2</sup>. These communities bore the brunt of this persecution, with over 94% of them falling victim to forced sterilization under the Nazi-imposed 1933 *Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases*.

Furthermore, on December 12th, 1938, Heinrich Himmler issued a decree titled 'Combating the Gypsy Plague,' mandating the registration of all Roma and Sinti individuals and the issuance of new identity cards. Subsequently, in 1940, the Nazis initiated deportations of Roma and Sinti from Germany and Austria to ghettos and camps established in Poland under German

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Kenrick, "The Genocide of the Gypsies: What We Now Know and What We Still Don't Know," in Rainer Schulze, (ed.) *The Holocaust in History and Memory*, vol 3, (2010), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, „The Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz”, in Sławomir Kaprański, Maria Martyniak, Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (eds.), *Voices of Memory*, vol. 7, Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust, 2011), pp. 13-15.

occupation<sup>3</sup>. In January 1943, the Nazis established the Zigeunerlager, a family camp designed for Romani individuals within Auschwitz II-Birkenau<sup>4</sup>

The forced sterilization of Roma and Sinti women during the Holocaust is a tragic chapter in history that has left lasting consequences that continue to reverberate in contemporary society. The consequence of this tragedy of violations of human and women's rights is the continued mistreatment of Roma and Sinti women in European healthcare systems. Roma and Sinti women's deep-seated distrust of healthcare institutions can be traced back to forced sterilizations and the deep trauma and suffering that Roma and Sinti women have experienced for decades. Moreover, the violation of the reproductive rights of Roma and Sinti women had far-reaching consequences for their communities. Forced sterilizations disrupted family planning and left long-lasting social and psychological scars and trauma. It is important to note that these violations did not end with the fall of the Nazi regime, as sterilization continued throughout the post-war period and continued to affect Roma and Sinti women. To date, Romani women continue to advocate for recognition and compensation for forced sterilization, as is the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia<sup>5</sup>.

### **Lemkin's Contribution**

Raphael Lemkin played a crucial role in ensuring that the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti would be recognized during post-war legal trials. Even though prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials listed "Gypsies" as victims of genocide, international organizations established by the Allies did not classify Roma and Sinti as a separate legal category<sup>6</sup>. This marked a significant omission in recognizing the Roma and Sinti. While the prosecutors frequently used broad terms such as "racial persecution" and "crimes against humanity" during the trial, Romani people were primarily listed among victim groups, mirroring their treatment in the genocide definition<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, „The Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz”, in Sławomir Kapralski, Maria Martyniak, Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (eds.), *Voices of Memory*, vol. 7, Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, „The Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz”, in Sławomir Kapralski, Maria Martyniak, Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska (eds.), *Voices of Memory*, vol. 7, Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust, 2011), p. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> See: Gwendolyn Albert, Zdeněk Ryšavý, Czech Health Ministry scandalously rejects compensation to woman whose Romani origin is listed as the reason for her sterilization, <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-health-ministry-scandalously-rejects-compensation-to-woman-whose-romani-origin-is-listed-as-the-reason-for-her-sterilization>, (accessed October 29th, 2023); Gwendolyn Albert, The Czech Republic's compensation process for compensating those who were forcibly sterilized is failing, activist Gwendolyn Albert tells the OSCE human rights conference, (accessed October 29th, 2023); Body and Soul. Forced Sterilization and Other Assaults on Roma Reproductive Freedom in Slovakia, 2003, [https://reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/bo\\_slov\\_part1.pdf](https://reproductiverights.org/sites/crr.civicactions.net/files/documents/bo_slov_part1.pdf), (accessed October 29th, 2023);

<sup>6</sup> Ari Joskowitz Ari Joskowitz, *Rain of Ash. Roma, Jews and the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2023), p 59.

<sup>7</sup> Ari Joskowitz Ari Joskowitz, *Rain of Ash. Roma, Jews and the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2023), p 110.

## Challenges to Recognition

Despite being victims of the Holocaust, the Roma and Sinti communities have faced challenges in gaining recognition, particularly within Holocaust education<sup>8</sup>. While many European education systems include comprehensive Holocaust history in their curriculum at different academic levels, they often fail to address the experiences of Roma and Sinti adequately<sup>9</sup>.

The struggle for official recognition of the Roma and Sinti Genocide, perpetrated by the Nazis and their allies, commenced in the 1960s, with key leadership provided by German Sinti and Roma activists. Commemorative events like rallies and hunger protests were crucial in drawing attention to the genocide<sup>10</sup>. Despite these efforts, some German files related to the Nazi genocide against the Roma and Sinti remain lost<sup>11</sup>. The Federal Republic of Germany officially recognized these crimes as racially motivated in 1982<sup>12</sup>. However, the struggle for recognition of the Roma and Sinti continues to persist to this day. Roma and Sinti receive only marginal mention in mainstream Holocaust exhibitions, museums, and other sites of memory, textbooks, and research.

## Archival Challenges

The dominance of Jewish Holocaust institutions, such as the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation, in preserving Roma and Sinti Holocaust testimonies raises concerns about narrative control and potential biases. Ari Joskowicz's study of testimonies from Roma and Sinti survivors highlights concerns about the accessibility and ownership of historical archives related to the Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. Joskowicz emphasizes the prominent role of Jewish Holocaust institutions, positioning them as the primary repository for Roma and Sinti Holocaust testimonies. The author's analysis of the coexistence of Jewish Holocaust institutions containing collections devoted to Romani history raises queries regarding who has authority over Roma and Sinti Holocaust archives and the stories they present, emphasizing the importance of

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<sup>8</sup> See: Bromley, P., Russell, S.G. *The Holocaust as history and human rights: A cross-national analysis of Holocaust education in social science textbooks, 1970–2008*. *Prospects* 40, 153–173 (2010); Barry van Driel (2003) “Some Reflections on the Connection between Holocaust Education and Intercultural Education”, *Intercultural Education*, 14:2, 125-137.

<sup>9</sup> The Representation of Romain European Curricula and Textbooks. Analytical Report, a joint report commissioned by the Council of Europe to the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in partnership with the Roma Education Fund 2020  
<https://repository.gei.de/bitstream/handle/11428/306/COE%20-%20The%20Representation%20of%20Roma%20-%20web%20version.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y>

<sup>10</sup> A. Mirga-Kruszelnicka, E. Acuña C. and P. Trojański *Introduction in Education for Remembrance of the Roma Genocide. Scholarship, Commemoration, and the Role of Youth*, edited by Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Esteban Acuña C. and Piotr Trojański, Cracow 2015, pp. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> D. Gress, *Sinti and Roma in the Federal Republic of Germany*  
<https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/sinti-and-roma-federal-republic-germany/> (accessed May 5<sup>th</sup> 2021).

<sup>12</sup> *The National Socialist Genocide of the Sinti and Roma. Catalogue of the permanent exhibition in the State Museum of Auschwitz* edited by Romani Rose. 2003. Heidelberg: Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti and Roma. p. 9.

narrative control and the possibility of biased or incomplete representations when one community's history is housed within another's archival holdings<sup>13</sup>.

Scholars searching archives for information about Roma and Sinti often come across interviews with Jewish survivors that mention "Gypsies", necessitating searches using different terms such as "Roma" or "Roma" rather than "Roma" and/or "Sinti". Some interviews can be insensitive, asking uncomfortable questions about Roma and Sinti. A notable example is the question about Roma "tribes", which reveals the interviewer's limited knowledge of Romani culture. This question has arisen in several interviews and has been observed to make Romani individuals uncomfortable, as it often leads to confusion about the interviewer's intended meaning. This confusion is understandable because Romani people are not organized into tribes like some indigenous groups but rather into distinct ethnolinguistic sub-groups. Additionally, it's worth noting that some interviewers, when speaking with Holocaust survivors, have used the term "Gypsy," which may be considered inappropriate or offensive by certain members of the Roma and Sinti communities.

Another significant issue concern involves the testimonies of Roma and Sinti survivors. Those accounts were collected many decades after the war, presenting challenges for survivors in recalling every detail of their wartime experiences and what they witnessed. Additionally, the passage of time has tragically resulted in the loss of many Holocaust survivors, underscoring the crucial importance of documenting these testimonies to preserve the memory of their suffering and resilience. Furthermore, it's noteworthy that a high percentage of Roma and Sinti survivors have never received any Holocaust compensation.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the Roma Holocaust remains an under-researched and overlooked chapter in history, particularly when it comes to the experiences of various groups of the Roma and Sinti communities, including women, LGBT people, people with disabilities, and others. This omission raises the importance of intersectionality, highlighting the interconnections between Nazi and racial discrimination against Roma and Sinti. To fully understand the consequences of the Holocaust, it is necessary to acknowledge and address the intersecting forms of marginalization of the Roma community.

Comprehensive research is needed to fill research gaps on the persecution and post-war experiences of Roma and Sinti survivors. It is also essential to promote the contribution of Roma scholars to creating knowledge about the Holocaust. Furthermore, it is necessary to include education on the persecution of Roma and Sinti in school curricula to increase awareness and understanding of this often-overlooked history.

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<sup>13</sup> Ari Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash. Roma, Jews and the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 11.

Although there are over 200 memorials across Europe that commemorate the Roma and Sinti who were murdered during the Holocaust<sup>14</sup>, many mass graves of Roma and Sinti remain unmarked or undiscovered. It is crucial that governments work with local Roma and Sinti communities and Holocaust researchers to take collective action to respectfully commemorate these victims.

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<sup>14</sup> *Na bister. Nie zapomnij. Do not forget.* Natalia Gancarz (ed.), (Tarnów, Komitet Opieki nad Zabytkami Kultury Żydowskiej w Tarnowie, 2020), p. 46.

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