

Remembrance and Beyond

THE ROMA AND SINTI DURING THE HOLOCAUST AND TODAY

By ROMANI ROSE



The deportation of the Remscheid Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz, March 1943

PHOTO/STADTARCHIV REMSCHIED

ROMA AND SINTI, who make up the largest minority in Europe today with some 10 million to 12 million members, share with the Jews the terrible experience of disfranchisement, persecution and systematic extermination in Nazi-occupied Europe. Half a million members fell victim to the Holocaust, an experience that is burned deep in the collective memory of the Roma and Sinti minorities, but which is still barely acknowledged by the majority in their countries of nationality. As a consequence of the Holocaust, the international political system is extremely sensitive to the various forms of anti-Semitism, whose rise we have observed with great concern in recent years. In contrast to this, there is neither an awareness of the historical dimension of the crimes of genocide committed against our minority nor of the present-day racism that Roma and Sinti are subjected to in many countries.

In the minds of many people, Roma and Sinti are still associated with homeless “nomads”. This contrasts with the historical fact that members of this minority group have been integrated in and are citizens of their respective countries of nationality for many centuries, particularly in Europe. Therefore, most of the European Governments have recognized Roma and Sinti as national minorities who, in addition to the national culture of the majority, also

cultivate their own cultural identity, including their traditional language, Romany. The terms “Roma” and “Sinti” are authentic proper names meaning “person”. Those of eastern European descent are called “Roma” and those of central European origin are referred to as “Sinti”. On the other hand, the foreign term “gypsy” is regarded by most minority members as discriminatory.

Since the end of the cold war and the opening up of central and eastern European countries in 1990, the living conditions of the Roma and Sinti minority have drastically deteriorated as a result of nascent racism. However, racist-motivated violence and discrimination against Roma and Sinti have significantly increased in a large number of countries in western Europe. As *The New York Times* correctly observed in a commentary in March 1996, members of the minority are today subjected to marginalization and racism to an extent that corresponds to the situation of African-Americans in the United States up until the mid-1950s.

A notable cause for the continued marginalization and discrimination of Roma and Sinti is the structures of prejudice and racist clichés, which have been substantially influenced by the misanthropic racial ideology of the National Socialists and the associated fascist regime. In view of these ideological lines of continuity, it is hardly

surprising that Roma and Sinti minorities are not only socially disadvantaged to a considerable extent but are also repeatedly the victims of open violence. The authorities in eastern and western Europe have recorded a drastic increase in racist violence against minorities by neo-Nazis; however, such attacks increasingly emanate from the security forces themselves. Only rarely can the perpetrators expect consistent prosecution and conviction by the police and legal authorities. As an example, the police officers responsible for the obviously racist-motivated murders of two Bulgarian Roma in 1996 were not punished by competent authorities; only after a judgement of the European Court of Human Rights in 2005 was the Bulgarian State obliged to investigate the racist background to this crime. The Court issued a similar adjudication in a comparable case, also in Romania; in all probability, however, the perpetrators will escape criminal prosecution appropriate to a State governed by the rule of law.

The reported forced sterilization of Roma women, several hundred cases of which have been documented in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in recent years, represents a particularly serious case of human rights violation. This practice was in general use under the communist regimes and has been continued independently by many doctors in the now democratically organized States. Although the protests of human rights organizations and well known personalities, such as United States Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton—the Commission on Security and Cooperation of the American Government also dealt with these cases in August 2006—have contributed to public awareness of these human rights violations, they have unfortunately not led to any effective countermeasures. This practice is all the more monstrous, as the forced sterilization of thousands of Roma and Sinti was an integral component of the policy of genocide in the National Socialist State.

The expulsion of more than 100,000 Roma from Kosovo as part of the so-called ethnic cleansing campaign, particularly during the Kosovo war in 1999, is a tragedy whose extent is hardly known. Members of the minority still live under the constant danger of racist incursions by militant Albanian nationalists. For years now, we have protested the continuation of the forcible deportation of Roma refugees from Kosovo. Another serious case of human rights violations of Roma and Sinti is the accommodation of civil war refugees in various camps in Kosovo, which is under the United Nations mandate. Since 1999, well over 500 members of the minority have been living in these camps, which were constructed by the UN administration on the site of a former lead mine in Mitrovica. As a result of investigations by the World Health Organization (WHO), it has been known since 2000 that the inhabitants of the camps suffer from life-threatening heavy-metal poisoning and that children and pregnant women are particularly affected.



Police raid against Roma and Sinti protesters in Trebisov, Slovakia, February 2004

PHOTO/PICTURE ALLIANCE

The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) is responsible for the camps and after a worldwide protest constructed an alternative camp for the Roma refugees in the spring of 2006. However, this camp is only a few metres away from the existing ones. As a result, the health of the inhabitants is still under threat and no long-term solution of the situation is in sight.

Politically responsible people still deny the existence of racism and discrimination against Roma and Sinti, especially in the countries of central and eastern Europe. Members of the minority are mostly described as a “social problem” and therefore have only themselves to blame for their marginalization and frequently appalling living conditions. Instead of effectively protecting the Roma minorities from discrimination and racism, many politicians contribute to the dissemination of stereotypes and stir up antiziganistic, as well as anti-Semitic, feeling in the population. In addition, the media plays an important role in the characterization of racist stereotypes, particularly through the portrayal of criminals as “Roma” or “Sinti”, or other such discriminatory terms in press or television reports. Moreover, the World Wide Web is increasingly being used by right-wing extremists as a platform for the dissemination of hate propaganda against Roma and Sinti, as well as Jews; and there is no internationally effective legal provision against this. At the same time, the denial of the Holocaust is a central component of the neo-Nazi ideology.

The extreme right-wing propaganda is directed at people, who frequently have inadequate water supply, electricity, heating or sewage system and who have to live on demarcated housing estates. Reforms of the social systems, such as in Slovakia or the Czech Republic, have further intensified the existing poverty of members of the Roma and Sinti minorities and worsened the prospects of their right to self-determination. In addition, the discriminatory practice of sending Roma children to special schools for the mentally handicapped or concentrating them in special Roma classes,



An exhibition on "The Holocaust against the Roma and Sinti and present-day racism in Europe", at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, January 2006

which have worse facilities, is a scandal that has deprived the largest minority in Europe of its long-term future. Extensive studies provide documentary evidence of these practices in many European States. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that the rate of unemployment of Roma and Sinti has also dramatically increased since the collapse of the socialist economy, in which minority members were mostly employed as industrial workers, and is as high as 90 per cent in many regions. Roma and Sinti have de facto virtually no opportunity to find an apprenticeship or a job in many places. In such social exclusion, deeply-rooted patterns of prejudice play a role that should not be underestimated.

Educational attention to historical facts of the extermination policy perpetrated against the Roma and Sinti in the National Socialist State, including its ideological and social assumptions, is urgently required to combat antiziganism and to subdue the traditional clichés about this minority. It must be an important component of ongoing strategies against racist-motivated violence and marginalization. A new exhibition by the Documentary and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, titled "The Holocaust against the Roma and Sinti and present-day racism in Europe", is dedicated to this objective and will open at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 30 January 2007 as part of the International Holocaust Memorial Day.

Roman Herzog, the former German Federal President, in a speech on 16 March 1997 about the extent and historical importance of the crimes against humanity committed against the Roma and Sinti, said: "The genocide of the Sinti and Roma was carried out from the same motive of racist mania, with the same deliberation, with the same intention of a planned and final extermination as the genocide of the Jews. They were systematically murdered in complete families from the very young to the very old over the entire sphere of influence of the National Socialists." The objective of the exhibition is to embed in the collective memory of

the nations of the world, a crime of genocide, which has been suppressed for decades, and to raise awareness among political decision-makers of the particular historical responsibility they bear towards the Roma and Sinti minority.

In addition, the consistent implementation of international protective provisions—in particular the "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities" and the "Charter for Regional or Minority Languages" of the Council of Europe—and an extension of the protection of minorities through new legal arrangements are required for an improvement in the protection of the Roma and Sinti from racism and discrimination. In conjunction with other international organizations, the United Nations has created an extensive system of conventions for the protection of human rights that are binding under international law. However, their effectiveness is based on the complete ratification, application and monitoring of international legal obligations, something that is still not the case in many countries. Extended legal steps against racism and discrimination are also necessary—a requirement supported by the United States Government within the framework of the conferences of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This applies especially to the prohibition of discriminatory practices in media law and the dissemination of racist demagogic slogans on the Internet.

Building equal opportunities for Roma and Sinti minorities requires the establishment of humane living conditions. National governments must make clear their political will and support for the promotion of these minorities through the implementation of adequate infrastructure projects. The United Nations and other institutions, such as the European Union, must also make a considerable contribution to such programmes. Members of the minority and their own organizations should be included, from the planning to the implementation of an infrastructure for such projects, to a far greater extent than has thus far been the case. Only if we systematically resist racism and discrimination will majority and minority groups be able to coexist peacefully, with equal rights in all countries of the world. □

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