Concentration Camps

Gerhard Baumgartner

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.

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 accepted 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-
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.

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.
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 administrations. 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”, 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]

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)
After intensive discussions concerning the so-called “Gypsy Policy” Himmler ordered the deportation of all “ziegen­nerische 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]

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 Northern 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.

Bibliography