

GENOCIDE OF THE ROMA IN THE HOLOCAUST

by Ian Hancock



Roma, commonly but inaccurately called *Gypsies*, were the only other population besides the Jews who were targeted for extermination on racial grounds in the Final Solution. They arrived in Europe about the year 1300 from India, which they had left nearly three centuries before as a military population of mixed, non-Aryan origin assembled to fight the invading Muslims. Their entry into Europe, via the Byzantine Empire, was also the direct result of Islamic expansion.

As a non-Christian, non-white, Asian people possessing no territory in Europe, Roma were outsiders in everybody's country. Romani culture also ensured - as it still does - that a social distance be kept between Roma and *gadje* (non-Roma), and thus their separateness was further reinforced.

Romani people in Germany call themselves Sinti, while *Zigeuner* is the German equivalent of "Gypsy." When the Nazis came to power in 1933, German laws against them had already been in effect for hundreds of years. The persecution of the Romani people began almost as soon as the first Roma arrived in German-speaking lands because as outsiders, they were breaking many of the Hanseatic laws which made it a punishable offence not to have a permanent home or job, and not to be on the taxpayer's register. They were also accused of being spies for the Muslims, whom few Germans had ever met but about whom they had heard many frightening stories. The dark complexions and non-Christian behavior and appearance of the Roma simply added to the prejudice which was steadily growing. In 1721 Emperor Karl VI ordered the extermination of all Roma everywhere; it was not illegal to murder a Rom, and there were sometimes "Gypsy hunts," in which Roma were tracked down and killed like wild animals. Forests were set on fire, to drive out any Roma who might have been hiding there.

By the 19th Century, scholars in Germany and elsewhere in Europe were writing about Roma and Jews as being inferior beings, and "the excrement of humanity." This crystallized into specifically racist attitudes in the writing of Knox, Tetzner, Gobineau and others. By the 1880s, Chancellor von Bismarck reinforced some of the discriminatory laws, stating that Roma were to be dealt with "especially severely" if apprehended. In or around

1890, a conference on "The Gypsy Scum" was held in Swabia, at which the military was empowered to keep Roma on the move. In 1899 Houston Chamberlaine's work *The Foundations of the 19th Century* was published, which argued for the building of a "newly shaped ... and ... especially deserving Aryan race." It was used to justify the promotion of ideas about German racial superiority, and for any oppressive action taken against members of "inferior" populations. In that same year, the "Gypsy Information Agency" was set up in Munich under the direction of Alfred Dillmann, which began cataloguing information on all Roma throughout the German lands. The results of this were published in 1905 in Dillmann's *Zigeuner-Buch*, which laid the foundations for what was to befall Roma in the Holocaust 35 years later.

The *Zigeuner-Buch*, nearly 350 pages long, consisted of three parts: first, an introduction stating that Roma were a "plague" and a "menace" which the German population had to defend itself against using "ruthless punishments," and which warned of the dangers of mixing the Romani and German gene pools. The second part was a register of known Roma, giving genealogical details and criminal record if any, and the third part was a collection of photographs of those same people. Dillmann's "race mixing" later became a central part of the Nuremberg Law in Nazi Germany.

In 1920, Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche published their book *The Eradication of Lives Undeserving of Life*, using a phrase first coined by Richard Liebich with specific reference to Roma nearly sixty years earlier. Among the groups they considered "unworthy of life" were the "incurably mentally ill," and it was to this group that Roma were considered to belong. Perceived Romani "criminality" was seen as a transmitted genetic disease, though no account was taken of the centuries of exclusion of the Roma from German society, which made subsistence theft a necessity for survival. A law incorporating the same phrase was put into effect just four months after Hitler became Chancellor of the Third Reich.

During the 1920s, the legal oppression of Roma in Germany intensified considerably, despite the egalitarian statutes of the Weimar Republic. In 1920 they were forbidden to enter parks and public baths; in 1925 a conference on "The Gypsy Question" was held which resulted in laws requiring unemployed Roma to be sent to work camps "for reasons of public security," and for all Roma to be registered with the police. After 1927, all Roma, even children, had to carry identification cards, bearing fingerprints and photographs. In 1929, *The Central Office for the Fight Against the Gypsies in Germany* was established in Munich, and in 1933, just ten days before the Nazis came to power, government officials in Burgenland called for the withdrawal of all civil rights from the Romani people.

In September, 1935, Roma became subject to the restrictions of the Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, which forbade intermarriage between Germans and "non-Aryans," specifically Jews, Roma and people of African descent. In 1937, the National Citizenship Law relegated Roma and Jews to the status of second-class citizens, depriving them of their civil rights. Also in 1937, Heinrich Himmler issued a decree entitled "The Struggle Against the Gypsy Plague," which reiterated that Roma of mixed blood were the most likely to engage in criminal activity, and which required that all information on Roma be sent from the regional police departments to the Reich Central Office.

Between June 12th and June 18th 1938, *Gypsy Clean-Up Week* took place throughout Germany which, like Kristallnacht for the Jewish people that same year, marked the beginning of the end. Also in 1938, the first reference to "The Final Solution of the Gypsy Question" appeared, in a document signed by Himmler on December 8th that year.

In January, 1940, the first mass genocidal action of the Holocaust took place when 250 Romani children were murdered in Buchenwald, where they were used as guinea-pigs to test the efficacy of the Zyklon-B crystals, later used in the gas chambers. In June, 1940, Hitler ordered the liquidation of "all Jews, Gypsies and communist political functionaries in the entire Soviet Union."

On July, 31st 1941, Heydrich, chief architect of the details of the Final Solution, issued his directive to the Einsatzkommandos to "kill all Jews, Gypsies and mental patients." A few days later Himmler issued his criteria for biological and racial evaluation, which determined that each Rom's family background was to be investigated going back three generations. On December 16th that same year, Himmler issued the order to have all Roma remaining in Europe deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau for extermination. On December 24th, Lohse gave the additional order that "The Gypsies should be given the same treatment as the Jews." At a party meeting on September 14th, 1942, Justice Minister Otto Thierack announced that "Jews and Gypsies must be unconditionally exterminated." On August 1st, 1944, four thousand Roma were gassed and cremated in a single action at Auschwitz-Birkenau, in what is remembered as *Zigeunernacht*.

Determining the percentage or number of Roma who died in the Holocaust (called the *Porrajmos*, "paw-RYE-mos" in Romani, a word which means "the Devouring") is not easy. Much of the Nazi documentation still remains to be analyzed, and many murders were not recorded, since they took place in the fields and forests where Roma were apprehended. There are no accurate figure either for the prewar Romani population in Europe, though

the Nazi Party's official census of 1939 estimated it to be about two million, certainly an underrepresentation. The latest (1997) figure from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Research Institute in Washington puts the number of Romani lives lost by 1945 at "between a half and one and a half million." Since the end of the Second World War, Germany's record regarding the Romani people has been less than exemplary. Nobody was called to testify in behalf of the Romani victims at the Nuremberg Trials, and no war crimes reparations have ever been paid to Roma as a people. Today, neo-Nazi activity in Germany makes the Roma its prime target of racial violence.

The United States too, did nothing to assist Roma during or following the Holocaust. Only ten percent of the hundreds of millions of dollars made available by the United Nations for the survivors, and which the U.S. Government was given the responsibility of disbursing, was set aside for non-Jews, and none of that found its way to the Romani survivors, who number today about 5,000. Roma were not mentioned anywhere in the documentation of the U.S. War Refugee Board, which was able to save the lives of over 200,000 Jews. When the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council was established in 1980, no Roma were invited to participate, and it only has one Romani member today. Roma are barely a part of its Museum even now, being located in a corner on the third-floor set aside for "other victims."

Further reading

Hancock, I., (1989). "Gypsy history in Germany and neighboring lands: A chronology leading to the Holocaust and beyond," in David Crowe and John Kolsti, eds., *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe*, Armonk: E.C. Sharpe, pp. 11-30.

Donald, K. & Puxon, G. (1972). *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies*. London: Sussex University Press.

Excerpted from *Encyclopedia of Genocide* (1997) by Israel W. Charny (ed.)