

# SINTI & ROMA

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Between 1933 and 1945 Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”) suffered greatly as victims of Nazi persecution and genocide. Building on long-held prejudices, the Nazi regime viewed Gypsies both as “asocials” (outside “normal” society) and as racial “inferiors”—believed to threaten the biological purity and strength of the “superior Aryan” race. During World War II, the Nazis and their collaborators killed tens of thousands of Sinti and Roma men, women, and children across German-occupied Europe.



Bundesarchiv Koblenz, Germany.

## SINTI AND ROMA (“GYPSIES”): VICTIMS OF THE NAZI ERA

For centuries Europeans regarded Gypsies as social outcasts — a people of foreign appearance, language, and customs. In modern Germany, persecution of the Sinti and Roma preceded the Nazi regime. Even though Gypsies enjoyed full and equal rights of citizenship under Article 109 of the Weimar Constitution, they were subject to special, discriminatory laws. A Bavarian law of July 16, 1926, outlined measures for “Combatting Gypsies, Vagabonds, and the Work Shy” and required the systematic registration of all Sinti and Roma. The law prohibited Gypsies from “roam[ing] about or camp[ing] in bands,” and those “[Gypsies] unable to prove regular employment” risked being sent to forced

labor for up to two years. This law became the national norm in 1929.

When Hitler took power in 1933, anti-Gypsy laws remained in effect. Soon the regime introduced other laws affecting Germany’s Sinti and Roma, as the Nazis immediately began to implement their vision of a new Germany — one that placed “Aryans” at the top of the hierarchy of races and ranked Jews, Gypsies, and blacks as racial inferiors. Under the July 1933 “Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Defects,” physicians sterilized against their will an unknown number of Gypsies, part-Gypsies, and Gypsies in mixed marriages. Similarly, under the “Law against Dangerous Habitual Criminals” of November

*Mug shots of  
Joschka K., Sofie B.,  
and Martin B.,  
who were interned at  
the Gypsy camp at  
Halle when taken into  
police custody.  
Germany, 1940.*

1933, the police arrested many Gypsies along with others the Nazis viewed as “asocials” — prostitutes, beggars, chronic alcoholics, and homeless vagrants — and imprisoned them in concentration camps.

The Nuremberg racial laws of September 15, 1935, (“Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor” and “Reich Citizenship Law”) did not explicitly mention Gypsies, but in commentaries interpreting these laws, Gypsies were included, along with Jews and “Negroes,” as “racially distinctive” minorities with “alien blood.” As such, their marriage to “Aryans” was prohibited. Like Jews, Gypsies were also deprived of their civil rights.

In June 1936, a Central Office to “Combat the Gypsy Nuisance” opened in Munich. This office became the headquarters of a national data

bank on Gypsies. Also in June, part of the Ministry of Interior directives for “Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance” authorized the Berlin police to conduct raids against Gypsies so that they would not mar the image of the city, host of the summer Olympic games. That July, the police arrested 600 Gypsies and brought them, in 130 caravans, to a new, special Gypsy internment camp (*Zigeunerlager*) established near a sewage dump and cemetery in the Berlin suburb of Marzahn. The camp had only three water pumps and two toilets; in such overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, contagious diseases flourished. Police and their dogs guarded the camp. Similar *Zigeunerlager* also appeared in the 1930s, at the initiative of municipal governments and coordinated by the Council of Cities

## WHO WERE THE “GYPSIES”?

In 1939, 30,000–35,000 people known as “Gypsies” lived in Germany and Austria, which was incorporated into Germany in March 1938. The total population of Gypsies living in Greater Germany and all the countries occupied by Germany during the war is unknown; scholars Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon have provided the rough estimate of 942,000.

Gypsies are believed to have arrived in Europe from northern India in the 1400s. They were called Gypsies because Europeans thought they came from Egypt. This ethnic minority is made up of distinct groups called “tribes” or “nations.” Most of the Gypsies in German-occupied Europe belonged to the Sinti and Roma tribes. In Germany and western Europe generally the Sinti predominated, and the Roma in Austria, eastern Europe, and the Balkans. The Sinti and Roma spoke dialects of a common language called Romani, based in Sanskrit, the classical language of India.

For centuries, Sinti and Roma were scorned and persecuted in Europe. *Zigeuner*, the German word for Gypsy, derives from a Greek root meaning “untouchable.” In the Balkan principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, Gypsies were slaves bought and sold by monasteries and large estate holders (boyars) until 1864, when the newly formed nation of Romania emancipated them.

Many Sinti and Roma traditionally worked as craftsmen, such as blacksmiths, cobblers, tinkers, horse dealers, and toolmakers. Others were performers such as musicians, circus animal trainers, and dancers. By the 1920s, there was also a small, lower-middle class of shopkeepers and some civil servants, such as Sinti employed in the German postal service. The numbers of truly nomadic Gypsies were on the decline in many places by the early 1900s, although so-called sedentary Gypsies often moved seasonally, depending on their occupations.

“Gypsies” is a popular, collective term used to refer to an ethnic minority whose members, in reality, belong to distinctive tribes.

## HIMMLER'S CIRCULAR OF DECEMBER 8, 1938 "COMBATTING THE GYPSY NUISANCE"

Experience gained in combatting the Gypsy nuisance, and knowledge derived from race-biological research, have shown that the proper method of attacking the Gypsy problem seems to be to treat it as a matter of race. Experience shows that part-Gypsies play the greatest role in Gypsy criminality. On the other hand, it has been shown that efforts to make the Gypsies settle have been unsuccessful, especially in the case of pure Gypsies, on account of their strong compulsion to wander. It has therefore become necessary to distinguish between pure and part-Gypsies in the final solution of the Gypsy question.

To this end, it is necessary to establish the racial affinity of every Gypsy living in Germany and of every vagrant living a Gypsy-like existence.

I therefore decree that all settled and non-settled Gypsies, and also all vagrants living a Gypsy-like existence, are to be registered with the Reich Criminal Police Office-Reich Central Office for Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance.

The police authorities will report (via the responsible Criminal Police offices and local offices) to the Reich Criminal Police Office-Reich Central Office for Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance all persons who by virtue of their looks and appearance, customs or habits, are to be regarded as Gypsies or part-Gypsies.

*SS chief Himmler's circular (left) reveals the Nazis' animosity to Gypsies and, in the final paragraph, their rationale for seeking "a final solution of the Gypsy question."*

*The document also demonstrates the Nazis' muddled thinking about "pure" versus "part" and "settled" versus "unsettled" Gypsies.*

*The regime never produced the general "Gypsy Law" of the sort which Himmler envisioned near the end of this circular.*

(reporting to the Ministry of Interior), in Cologne, Düsseldorf, Essen, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and other German cities.

After Germany incorporated Austria into the Reich in March 1938, the regime applied the Nuremberg laws to Austria's Gypsies. Two special internment camps opened, one for 80 to 400 Gypsies, in Salzburg, in October 1939, and a second, in November 1940 for 4,000 Gypsies at Lackenbach, in the Burgenland, the eastern Austrian state bordering Hungary. Conditions at Lackenbach, which existed until the end of the war, were particularly atrocious, and many individuals perished there. Both camps concentrated Austrian Gypsies for police registration and forced labor and served as assembly centers for deportations to Nazi extermination and

concentration camps.

A December 1937 decree on "crime prevention" provided the pretext for major police roundups of Gypsies. In June 1938, 1,000 German and Austrian Gypsies were deported to concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau, Sachsenhausen, and Lichtenburg (a camp for women). A year later, several thousand other Austrian and German Gypsies became inmates at Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, Dachau, and Buchenwald concentration camps. In the camps, all prisoners wore markings of various shapes and colors, which allowed guards and camp officers to identify them by category. Gypsies wore the black triangular patches, the symbol for "asocials," or green ones, the symbol for professional criminals, and sometimes the letter "Z."

Dr. Robert Ritter, a psychiatrist who directed genealogical and genetic research on Gypsies, played a key role in the identification of Sinti and Roma prior to their arrest by the police. In 1936 Ritter became head of a research unit located within the Ministry of Health and later in the Central Police Office. Ritter and his assistants, in cooperation with the Criminal Police (detective forces) and their sub-office to “Combat the Gypsy Nuisance,” moved to Berlin in May 1938, worked to locate and classify by race all Gypsies in Germany and Austria.

It was probably Ritter’s “race-biological research” that SS chief Heinrich Himmler invoked in his circular on “Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance” of December 8, 1938, recommending “the resolution of the Gypsy question based on

its essentially racial nature.”

He ordered the registration of all Gypsies in the Reich above the age of six and their classification into three racial groups: Gypsies, Gypsy Mischlinge [part-Gypsies], and nomadic persons behaving as Gypsies. Himmler, who oversaw the vast security empire that included the Criminal Police, stated that the “aim of measures taken by the State to defend the homogeneity of the German nation” included the “physical separation of Gypsydom from the German nation.”

The children of Sinti and Roma were also victims, interned with their families in the municipal camps and studied and classified by racial scientists. Between 1933 and 1939, authorities took many Sinti and Roma children from their families and brought them to special homes for children as wards

## “COMBATTING THE GYPSY NUISANCE” (CONTINUED)

Because a person considered to be a Gypsy or part-Gypsy, or a person living like a Gypsy, as a rule confirms the suspicion that marriage (in accordance with clause 6 of the first decree on the implementation of the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor...or on the basis of stipulations in the law on Fitness to Marry) must not be contracted, in all cases the public registry officials must demand a testimony of fitness to marry from those who make such an application [to be married].

Treatment of the Gypsy question is part of the National Socialist task of national regeneration. A solution can only be achieved if the philosophical perspectives of National Socialism are observed. Although the principle that the German nation respects the national identity of alien peoples is also assumed in combatting the Gypsy nuisance, nonetheless the aim of measures taken by the State to defend the homogeneity of the German nation must be the physical separation of Gypsydom from the German nation, the prevention of miscegenation, and finally the regulation of the way of life of pure and part-Gypsies. The necessary legal foundation can only be created through a Gypsy Law, which prevents further intermingling of blood, and which regulates all the most pressing questions which go together with the existence of Gypsies in the living space of the German nation.

*Translated in Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wipperman, The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945 (New York, 1991), pp. 120–21.*

# SINTI AND ROMA ~ VICTIMS OF THE NAZI ERA ~ 1933 - 1945

## DR. ROBERT RITTER: RACIAL SCIENCE AND “GYPSIES”

The research of racial scientist Dr. Robert Ritter and his associates served both as instrument and justification for the Nazi regime to isolate and eventually destroy the German Gypsy population.

By studying Gypsies, Ritter, who was a psychiatrist, hoped to determine the links between heredity and criminality. With funding from the German Association for Scientific Research and access to police records, Ritter began in 1937 to systematically interview all the Gypsies residing in Germany. To do so, he traveled to Gypsy encampments and, after the deportation and internment of Gypsies began, to the concentration camps.

Ritter developed detailed genealogies — family histories — to distinguish “pure” Gypsies from those of “mixed blood” and to root out assimilated Gypsies from the general German population. The state police aided Ritter in this by requiring genealogical registration of all Gypsies forcibly moved into special municipal camps after 1935. Believing anyone with Gypsy blood to be a danger to society, Ritter classified a “part-Gypsy” as someone with one or two Gypsy grandparents or two or more part-Gypsy grandparents, that is, someone with as little as one-eighth Gypsy blood.

Ritter’s associates included the anthropologist Dr. Adolf Würth and, until 1942, the zoologist and anthropologist Dr. Sophie Ehrhardt. Ritter’s closest associate was Eva Justin, a nurse who received her doctorate in anthropology in 1944 based on her research with Gypsy children raised apart from their families. At the conclusion of her study, these children were deported to Auschwitz, where all but a few were killed.

In a report of his research findings in 1940, Ritter concluded that 90 percent of the Gypsies native to Germany were “of mixed blood.” He described such Gypsies as “the products of matings with the German criminal asocial subproletariat.” He further char-

acterized Gypsies as a “primitive” people “incapable of real social adaptation.”

From late 1944 through 1946, Ritter taught criminal biology at the University of Tübingen; in 1947 he joined the Frankfurt Health Office as a children’s physician. While there, he employed Eva Justin as a psychologist. His collaborator Dr. Sophie Ehrhardt joined the anthropology faculty at the University of Tübingen in 1942 and continued to use Ritter’s data in her postwar research. Dr. Adolph Würth served in the Baden-Württemberg Bureau of Statistics until 1970.

Efforts to bring charges against Ritter and his associates as accessories in the deaths of the German Gypsies were discontinued. The trial of Dr. Robert Ritter ended with his suicide in 1950.



*Dr. Robert Ritter and his associate Eva Justin taking a blood sample as part of their racial research on Gypsies. Landau, Germany, 1938.*



*Eva Justin measures the head of a Gypsy woman. An associate, Sophie Ehrhardt, is on the right. Landau, Germany, 1938.*



*Prussian police escort Gypsies who are being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Germany, 1943-1944.*

of the state. Gypsy school-children who were truant were deemed delinquent and sent to special juvenile schools; those unable to speak German were deemed feeble-minded and sent to “special schools” for the mentally handicapped. Like Jewish children, Gypsy boys and girls also commonly endured the taunts and insults of their classmates, until March 1941 when the regime excluded Gypsies from the public schools.

As was the case for Jews, the outbreak of war in September 1939 radicalized the Nazi regime’s policies towards Gypsies. On September 21, 1939, a conference on racial policy chaired by Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Main Office in Berlin, discussed the removal of 30,000 German and Austrian Gypsies to occupied Poland, along with the deportation of

Jews. The “resettlement to the East” followed by the mass murder of Sinti and Roma in reality closely paralleled the systematic deportations and killings of Jews. The deportations of German Gypsies, including men, women, and children, began in May 1940 when 2,800 Gypsies were transported to Lublin, in occupied Poland. In early November 1941, 5,000 Austrian Gypsies were deported to the Łódź ghetto and from there to Chełmno, where they were among the first to be killed by gassing in mobile vans beginning in late December 1941 and January 1942. Similarly, in the summer of 1942, German and Polish Gypsies imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto were deported to Treblinka, where they were gassed. German Gypsies were also deported to ghettos in Bialystok, Cracow, and Radom.

During the war, some minor differences of opinion arose at the highest levels of government regarding the “final solution to the Gypsy question.” Himmler toyed with the idea of keeping a small group of “pure” Gypsies alive on a reservation for the ethnic study of these racial “enemies of the state,” but the regime rejected this idea. In a decree dated December 16, 1942, Himmler ordered the deportation of Gypsies and part-Gypsies to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At least 23,000 Gypsies were brought there, the first group arriving from Germany in February 1943. Most of the Gypsies at Auschwitz-Birkenau came from Germany or territories annexed to the Reich including Bohemia and Moravia. Police also deported small numbers of Gypsies from Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, France, Belgium, the

Netherlands, and Norway.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, officials set up a separate “Gypsy family camp” for Gypsies in Section B-IIe of Birkenau. From the wooden barracks, the gas chambers and crematoria were clearly visible. During the seventeen months of the camp’s existence, most of the Gypsies brought there perished. They were killed by gassing or died from starvation, exhaustion from hard labor, and disease (including typhus, smallpox, and the rare, leprosy-like condition called Noma.) Others, including many children, died as the result of cruel medical experiments performed by Dr. Josef Mengele and other SS physicians. The Gypsy camp was liquidated on the night of August 2–3, 1944, when 2,897 Sinti and Roma men, women, and children were killed in the gas chambers. Some 1,400

*The story (right) is told on one of the Museum I.D. cards distributed to visitors entering the permanent exhibition.*

## KARL STOJKA: VICTIM OF THE NAZI ERA

Karl was the fourth of six children born to Roman Catholic Gypsy parents in the village of Wamperdorf in eastern Austria. The Stojkas belonged to a tribe of Gypsies called the Lowara Roma, who made their living as itinerant horse traders. They lived in a traveling family wagon, and spent winters in Austria’s capital of Vienna. Karl’s ancestors had lived in Austria for more than 200 years.



*1933–39: I grew up used to freedom, travel and hard work. In March 1938 our wagon was parked for the winter in a Vienna campground, when Germany annexed Austria just before my seventh birthday. The Germans ordered us to stay put. My parents converted our wagon into a wooden house, but I wasn’t used to having permanent walls around me. My father and oldest sister began working in a factory, and I started grade school.*

*1940–44: By 1943 my family had been deported to a Nazi camp in Birkenau for thousands of Gypsies. Now we were enclosed by barbed wire. By August 1944 only 2,000 Gypsies were left alive; 918 of us were put on a transport to Buchenwald to do forced labor. There the Germans decided that 200 of us were incapable of working and were to be sent back to Birkenau. I was one of them; they thought I was too young. But my brother and uncle insisted that I was but a dwarf. I got to stay. The rest were returned to be gassed.*

Karl was later deported to the Flossenbürg concentration camp. He was freed near Rötze, Germany, by American troops on April 24, 1945. After the war, he returned to Vienna.

*Stojka’s story is more fully told in The Story of Karl Stojka: A Childhood in Birkenau (Washington, D.C., 1992), a catalogue published by the USHMM.*



*Gypsies arrested by German military police in the occupied Soviet Union and photographed for propaganda purposes. Most Gypsies rounded up by Germans after the invasion of the Soviet Union were killed in mass shootings. U.S.S.R., 1942.*

Süddeutscher Verlag Bilderdienst, Munich, Germany.

surviving men and women were transferred to Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps for forced labor.

After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, special SS squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) and units of the regular army and police began shooting Gypsies in Russia, Poland, and the Balkans, at the same time they were killing Jews and Communist leaders. Thousands of Sinti and Roma men, women, and children are believed to have been killed in these actions, often carried out under the pretext that the victims were “spies.”

In western and southern Europe, the fate of Sinti and Roma varied from country to country, depending on local circumstances. Across German-occupied Europe, Gypsies, like Jews, were interned, killed, or deported

to camps in Germany or eastern Europe. The collaborationist regime of Vichy France interned 30,000 Gypsies, many of whom were later deported to Dachau, Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, and other camps. In Croatia, members of the local fascist Ustasha movement killed tens of thousands of Gypsies, along with Serbs and Jews. In Romania in 1941 and 1942, thousands of Gypsies were expelled, alongside Jews, to Transnistria (western Ukraine) where most of the deportees died from disease, starvation, and brutal treatment. In Serbia, in the fall of 1941, German army firing squads killed almost the entire adult male Gypsy population, alongside most adult male Jews, in retaliation for German soldiers killed by Serbian resistance fighters. In Hungary, Germans and Hungarian collaborators

began deporting Gypsies in October 1944.

The unreliability of pre-Holocaust population figures for Sinti and Roma and the paucity of research, especially on their fate outside Germany during the Holocaust, make it difficult to estimate the number and percentage who perished. Scholarly estimates of deaths in the Sinti and Roma genocide range from 220,000 to 500,000.

After the war discrimination against Sinti and Roma in Europe continued. In the

Federal Republic (West Germany) the courts agreed to compensate Sinti and Roma for racial persecution only for deportations which occurred in 1943 and later. They did not push the date back to 1938 until the early 1960s. Today, with the rise of strident nationalism in many of the eastern European nations and unemployment throughout Europe, Sinti and Roma continue to face widespread public prejudices and official discrimination.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

### VISIT THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION

*The "Science" of Race* (4th floor): eye and hair color measurement instruments; posters showing different "racial types"

*"Enemies of the State"* (4th floor): wooden wagon; traditional clothing, ornaments, and a violin; photos on video monitor

*Prisoners of the Camps* (3rd floor): black triangular patch; metal working tools, musical instruments, and cooking utensils

*Killing Centers* (3rd floor): photos on "Medical Experiments" monitor

*Children* (2nd floor): photos "In Ghettos and Camps" and "After Liberation" video monitors

### VISIT THE WEXNER LEARNING CENTER (2nd Floor)

From the MENU choose TOPIC LIST. From the alphabetical list of topics, choose "GYPSIES (ROMA): From discrimination to genocide."

From the MENU choose ID CARD. Type in the following numbers to read about the experiences of Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) who were persecuted during the Holocaust: 1221, 1264, 6332, 6342, 6352, 6361, 6373.

## MUSEUM HOLDINGS

### LIBRARY

Extensive holdings on Sinti and Roma in English, German, and French.

### COLLECTIONS

Documents relating to the treatment of Gypsies in Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, and Belarus.

Documents relating to the confiscation of property belonging to some 250 Berlin Gypsies and their evacuation to Auschwitz.

Documents relating to the Gypsy internment camp in Frankfurt-am-Main, 1930–42.

Fojn-Felczer collection of Nazi legislation against Gypsies.

Lists of Gypsies deported from Hohenasperg to Lublin, May 1940; of Gypsy children transported from the St. Josefspflege orphanage at Mulfingen, Germany, to Auschwitz, 1942; of Gypsies transported from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, August 1944.

Hundreds of photographs depicting prewar life, "racial" registration by German police and racial scientists, deportation, prisoner mug shots, and imprisonment in internment, labor, and concentration camps.

Four videotaped interviews with Sinti and Roma.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Burleigh, Michael, and Wolfgang Wippermann. *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (New York, 1991). See especially pp. 113–27.

Crow, David, and John Kolsti. *The Gypsies of Eastern Europe* (Armonk, N.Y., 1991).

Fraser, Angus. *The Gypsies* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

Hancock, Ian. *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution* (Ann Arbor, 1987).

Kenrick, Donald, and Grattan Puxon. *The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* (New York, 1972).

Klamper, Elisabeth. "Persecution and Annihilation of Roma and Sinti in Austria, 1938–1945," *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* 5, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1993), 55–65.

Milton, Sybil. "The Holocaust: The Gypsies," in William S. Parsons, Israel Charny, and Samuel Totten, eds., *Genocide in the Twentieth Century: An Anthology of Critical Essays and Oral History* (New York, 1995), pp. 209–64.

Müller-Hill, Benno. *Murderous Science: Elimination by Scientific Selection of Jews, Gypsies, and Others: Germany, 1933–1945*, translated by George Fraser (Oxford, 1988).

Tyrnauer, Gabrielle. *Gypsies and the Holocaust: A Bibliography and Introductory Essay* (Montreal, 1989).

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. *The Story of Karl Stojka: A Childhood in Birkenau* (Washington, D.C., 1992).

Yours, Jan. *Crossing: A Journal of Survival and Resistance in World War II* (New York, 1971).



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW Washington, D.C. 20024-2150