



Keeping the Memory Alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

ERIO

*“The untold story: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust”*

Screening/Debate

On 12 December 2014 in Brussels, the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) organised a national debate as part of the MemoRom project which aims at raising awareness of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust in order to fight discrimination, prejudices and stereotypes about these communities. Implemented in five different countries with the support from the European



Commission, the purpose of the project is to promote tolerance, mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma.

Roma have a history of persecution. They are being oppressed and discriminated against for centuries and their persecution reached a climax throughout the Nazi regime during which they were subjected to genocide and deprived of their civil rights. But the suffering of Roma and Sinti communities during WWII is mirrored today by persistent practices of discrimination and acts of violence against these populations across Europe. Xenophobic sentiments are exacerbated by the more and more visible presence of far-right extremism across the continent which tends to worsen with the current economic crisis. While they constitute the largest ethnic minority in Europe, the Roma alarmingly remain the most hated and discriminated against on a daily basis. While the history of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust remains relatively unknown and unrecognised, it is urgent to address the prevalent anti-Gypsyism by mobilising all efforts to raise awareness about Europe's darkest period to avoid its repetition.



On 12 December, the national debate which gathered students, teachers, members of Roma and non-Roma NGOs consisted in the projection of the documentary produced on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust as part of the project. Participants then had the chance to discuss their impressions about the documentary with Zoni Weisz, a Sinti Holocaust Survivor, who

was the guest speaker of this event.

The screening of the interviews of two Sinti Holocaust survivors, Zoni Weisz and Rita Prigmore, constituted an unforgettable experience for the participants who faced up to the harsh reality of anti-Gypsyism before and during the war. The power of testimonies also made them realise how current discriminatory practices were not that different from what was already happening in the past, such as the sterilisation of Roma women and the systematic stigmatisation of Roma and Sinti communities.

Rita Prigmore was born in 1943 in Germany and was, with her twin-sister, submitted to medical experiments by Dr. Haider, disciple of Dr. Mengele. Symbols of the cruelty of the Nazi ideology and regime, such experiments aimed to reproduce the “perfect” Aryan race with blond hair and blue eyes. While her sister died out of these terrible tests, Rita managed to survive but faced continuous health problems during her life. Once she discovered the cause of these health problems, she started procedures to obtain compensation from the German state but only managed to get a small pension while the German Government never acknowledged the facts.

Zoni Weisz was only a child when his family was deported. Thanks to the help of a policeman, Zoni and his aunt’s family managed to escape and did not get on the train that would have driven them to Auschwitz with the rest of Zoni’s family. When the war ended, Zoni was brought to his grandparents and was forced to change his name. Having lost his family, he also lost



his identity when he had to give up his Sinti name. It took him a long time to find the courage to talk about his personal experience, even with his family as he wanted to protect them. Many survivors did the same because it is a trauma for them. And yet, as Zoni Weisz repeated it, it is necessary to talk about it, to be aware of it, in order to fight against current hateful articles and discourses.

During the discussion which followed the screening of the documentary, in addition to interesting explanations about the Romani language, the Roma and Sinti culture, history and traditions, several key-points have been raised by the participants and Zoni Weisz. They can be summarised as follows:

- **The world has not learnt enough from its past:** there is a continuation of discriminatory and violent practices towards the Roma and Sinti, a continuation of excluding policies and decisions which completely affect Roma life and limit their opportunities. Roma and Sinti are discriminated against on a daily basis, and yet they are an important part of the European culture and heritage.
- **Roma and Sinti must fight for their rights at a political level.** Integration is a two-side process. According to Zoni Weisz, younger generations have a great role to play. Roma must speak up for their rights as this is the only way to impact the future and to be freed. This has a lot to do with education and Roma mediators are very important to help Roma children and their families.
- **Need for a self-emancipation process:** Roma and Sinti often hide their identity and do not often claim publicly their belonging to Roma communities. This problem of low self-confidence and low self-esteem stems from the fear that they might be discriminated against and marginalised if they reveal their ethnicity. According to Zoni Weisz, Roma must present themselves as successful people. Many of them are successful and it should not be a shame for them to say who they are.
- **The important role of education:** it is a necessity to teach the society and especially the younger generations about what happened during WWII. Teaching the history of Roma and Sinti Holocaust will definitively help the fight against anti-Gypsyism and increase people's tolerance and respect towards one another. Just as anti-Semitism has become unacceptable in the public debate, the recognition of anti-Gypsyism as being a reality in today's Europe could contribute to make it inadmissible. However, several obstacles still remain: lack of academic materials on the topic, lack of flexibility of most school programs, lack of survivors' testimonies (or lack of accuracy of such testimonies), etc. More information is also needed to be made available to the general public and to the Roma on the suffering and resistance of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust.
- **Importance of intercultural dialogue:** Discussions can break prejudices and stereotypes. Discussions are all about getting to know each other and accepting others' differences. Everyone has prejudices but they should not reflect in negative and hateful behaviours.

The final conclusive words would be that there still is a long way to go but that the most important point is to value our freedom!