



Keeping the Memory Alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

TMAF

Screening/Debate

Haskovo, 21-22 December 2014

The national debate is a part of the MemoROM project supported by the European Commission's Europe for Citizens programme. The project is about remembering the Roma Holocaust and is carried out by five partners.

The aims of the project are:

- raising awareness across Europe about Roma persecution during the Nazi period and killing millions of Roma as well as other minorities during the Holocaust;
- discussing the history with key stakeholders in the society and reflecting the impact of the genocide on the current situation of Roma, particularly the consequences of the Holocaust on discrimination and hostile attitude towards Roma;
- transferring information and knowledge about unknown facts and statistics to the young generation;
- developing instruments for breaking prejudices against Roma;
- preventing the repetition of the Holocaust in the future.

Another project's aim is to create an International Remembrance Network involving experts, activists, academia and museums and through this initiative raising awareness about the Roma Holocaust and fight against discrimination and prejudices.

The national debate consisted of a projection of a DVD about the Roma Holocaust produced as a part of this project. The screening was followed by a debate. The event gathered 94 participants including students, Roma activists, NGOs, non-Roma civil society representatives, intellectuals, teachers, representatives of the local administration and media, anti-discrimination units, local municipality council and the city museum.

In parallel to the screening interpretation was ensured.

Many participants congratulated TMAF for being part of this project and bringing the debate from European to local level.

As the video was long, it was screened in two parts; first day the first half and the second day the second half; followed by debates where all participants were given the chance to speak. The most active participants were university students coming from Sofia and its region, who have been involved in the Holocaust related actions.

During the debate participants expressed their feelings that they have been touched by the survivors' stories. All people who attended the screening agreed that the Roma Holocaust should be more and more popularized. Some of the experts said that there are so many stories the society should hear about; society should know the truth about the Roma experience during the Nazi regime. The Holocaust is always officially linked with Jewish people as the largest victim group of the Nazism, but Roma should be remembered as the second largest Holocaust victim group; during the Holocaust where nearly 1,5 million people were murdered. Participants suggested that Tolerance and Mutual Aid Foundation as an organisation involved for the second year in such a project will try to create a national informal network with NGOs and experts dealing with the Holocaust. They suggested that TMAF should continue collecting information on this topic and make it public on their website and via publications. TMAF should also get in touch with Jewish organisations dealing with this issue as well as with researchers and start collecting data on the Roma Holocaust which could be used by many other people in the future. This is what they see as added value of the foundation's contribution to this project.

The debate continued with a question on the lack of written historical data on Roma, lack of consolidation around a national cause to unify Roma for their better political representation in all structures in the society. Many participants were convinced that in this way Roma will be more visible, their culture and history will be more recognized and respected and that their persecution and suffering will be known by general society. Other participants raised the issue of barriers to access politics and other key areas in order to be able to promote the Holocaust and other aspects of Roma life, history and traditions. Roma NGOs expressed their concerns that governmental offices and academic groups are not interested in Roma Holocaust and do not want to cooperate with Roma on this issue. Some politicians still think that it is a sensitive issue to talk about Roma in relation to the Holocaust and this creates an obstacle for NGOs in promoting the Roma Holocaust.

Some participants proposed the idea of a Roma Holocaust museum; this may be located in the Bulgarian capital or in Haskovo, where the debate was organised, but in that case it may not have the capacity to organise it from one side, it may have less visitors in comparison to Sofia. They agreed that together with TMAF, they could lobby for the Holocaust Roma Museum in Sofia or for a Roma museum having a Holocaust section. In this way all collected information, materials and photos can be gathered in one place and would serve as a good source of information for students and experts.

Roma civil society asked media representatives to publish the stories of the survivals from the video in the newspapers or in magazines. They encouraged media – press, TV and online media to include more information about the Roma and the Nazis. Roma

invited media to make a documentary on the topic, to engage different actors dealing with the Holocaust and if possible to screen the video in the local TV.

Local authorities found appropriate and necessary that Roma history, specifically the Holocaust, would be covered in the books, but as this is a matter of decision by the education ministry, they proposed that schools would organise open meetings with Roma to talk about the Holocaust and to present the video and the stories of the two survivals in the video.

Roma participants proposed that TMAF and other NGOs would print posters on the Holocaust and brochures and place them in different public places such as schools, cinemas, libraries, cultural centres, information and tourist centres, museums and administration buildings.

The debate continued with stereotypes and bad image of Roma caused due to the Holocaust. Participants stated that since then, Roma have always been looked at as outsiders, as marginalized, as people who do not belong to Europe, as enemies of the states and the society. All this creates anti-Roma behaviour among general society and politicians. This is why participants think that if there is a campaign fighting prejudices and stereotypes; it is needed to start with raising awareness on the Holocaust and the damages it caused to the Roma at that time and after that.

One participant proposed that the fight for recognition of the Roma Holocaust should be done together with Jewish organisations and that Roma should not be isolated in this process, although the Jewish Holocaust is well recognized.

Others suggested that TMAF with other Roma organisations should inform and raise awareness not only among general society but also within Roma communities. Roma youngsters and children do not know much about the Roma Holocaust; moreover keeping memory alive among young generations is one of the project's objectives.

Many of the participants disagreed with some of the opinions expressed by the experts in the video. It was largely debated whether Roma had different experience during the Nazi genocide than Jews. Most of the participants supported the idea that all people in the concentration camps had the same destiny and before sending them to camps, members of both groups had been killed by police and Nazi officers. One of the experts said that there is a difference in what people know and what is known among researchers and academics. As both have different information, experts have to meet and share their knowledge with society members. Many participants did not agree with a suggestion by the French expert that advocacy organisations should know everything before they start advocating. The opinion of participants was that advocacy organisations do not necessarily need to be experts in order to have all facts in hands.

Their role is to push for a research and more facts finding missions and on the other hand to push for promotion of the Roma Holocaust without going into details and for awareness raising and recognition; to argue for facts and numbers is the responsibility of historians and experts, who need to be pushed by advocacy organisations. Officials should be also pushed to ensure conditions for debate, fact finding and promotion of the Roma Holocaust.

Roma stated that these researches should not involve people belonging to nationalistic extreme right political movements as they misrepresent facts, analyse and present them in incorrect way. This is why not all analysis should be considered as correct as they may reflect personal and political interests of involved person.

Other participants stated that there are many stories which were changed - Roma were replaced by non-Roma or Jewish people, what can be demonstrated on a very popular picture of Jewish girl looking behind bars of the camp, who actually was Roma. Therefore, the best will be if Roma people would be involved in these researches and academic work.

The debate was closed with the common agreement that society should know more about the Roma Holocaust, that all societal actors should be involved in the promotion and recognition of the Roma Holocaust, and that knowledge should be given to young generation. The joint efforts to fight prejudices and discrimination were also something that all participants agreed with and that this is the basis for any integration action which aims inclusion and equal access for Roma to all fields.

Many participants asked for a copy of the video with the interviews of the Roma survivals and experts as well as for other information about the Holocaust. They all congratulated ERIO for having the bibliography on the Roma Holocaust, which they found very useful and for the informal network that ERIO has established during the project period as a good idea how to bring all experts and individuals interested in the Roma Holocaust together.