



Keeping the Memory Alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

ERIO

National workshop

**“Remembering the Roma and Sinti Holocaust:
challenges and opportunities at national level”**

Brussels, 26 February 2014



Europe for Citizens
Programme

INDEX

WELCOMING REMARKS AND OPENING	3
SESSION 1 – LEARNING FROM THE PAST: THE ROMA AND SINTI DURING WWII AND CONTEMPORARY EUROPE	4
Lawrence Schram, Historian and Head of Research Department, Museum Kazerne Dossin.....	4
Gabriela Hrabanova, Policy Coordinator, ERGO Network	5
Irvin Mujic, ERGO Network	6
SESSION 2 – CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON RAISING AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION OF THE ROMA AND SINTI HOLOCAUST.....	7
Challenges on raising awareness and recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust ..	7
Solutions and/or best practices on raising awareness and recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust.....	10



Europe for Citizens
Programme

WELCOMING REMARKS AND OPENING

Marta Pinto, ERIO Policy Officer



The workshop was opened by Marta Pinto, Policy Officer at ERIO, who welcomed all the participants and invited each of them to deliver a brief introduction. Participants came from a number of organisations or bodies, dealing with Roma inclusion (ERIO, ERGO, BEGV), anti-racism (ENAR), European historical education (EUROCLIO), museums and memorial foundations (Kazerne

Dossin, Fondation Auschwitz), Jewish culture (Centre Communautaire Laïc Juif, CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe) and others. The different backgrounds represented a full asset for a fruitful debate and for drawing useful solutions.

Afterwards, Ms Pinto introduced the MemoROM project, outlining its purpose, outputs, partners and duration. The project was launched in 2013 under the Europe for Citizens programme and will last until the end of 2014. Its main objective is to raise awareness on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust through the creation of a network. This will in turn contribute to increase intercultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma. Partners have been chosen among Roma-related organisations in four countries, namely Bulgaria, France, Germany, and Spain, ERIO being both the coordinator and the responsible organisation for Belgium.

The project's main outputs include:

- a documentary on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust with interviews with survivors, experts and academics;
- an International Remembrance Network formed by organisations, Roma activists, institutions, associations and museums working on, or interested by the Roma and Sinti Holocaust;
- 5 national workshops to collect recommendations and joint actions to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust at national level and to enlarge the International Remembrance Network;
- 5 national debates to raise awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust;



Europe for Citizens
Programme

- a final conference to disseminate results and to enlarge the International Remembrance Network;
- a project website.

Ms Pinto also illustrated the network's forum and its contents and invited the guests to register and join it. The main target groups for the forum are scholars, academics, Roma activists and other experts in the field of the (Roma) Holocaust.

Concluding the opening speech, the ERIO Policy Officer opened the first session of the workshop, aiming at outlining the Roma and Sinti experiences during WWII and their consequences for today's Roma and Sinti.

SESSION 1 – LEARNING FROM THE PAST: THE ROMA AND SINTI DURING WWII AND CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

Laurence Schram, Historian and Head of Research Department, Museum Kazerne Dossin

Laurence Schram represented Kazerne Dossin, a former assembly camp during WWII and today a Belgian museum and 'place of remembrance' dealing with the national Holocaust experience. Founded in 1995 as a site specifically focused on the Jewish deportees, Kazerne Dossin has also integrated the Roma and Sinti dimension starting in 2012.



In fact, between the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, some 351 Roma and Sinti were gathered from Northern France and from Belgium inside Kazerne Dossin. The whole Roma and Sinti population of the assembly camp was then deported in a single transport to the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In Kazerne Dossin, Roma and Sinti lived in even more terrible conditions than the Jews. They had no right to receive parcels from outside and they had to rely on the very meagre rations provided by the Germans. Roma and Sinti were forced to sleep on dirty straw mattresses, they were rarely sent to the showers and the hygienic conditions of



Europe for Citizens
Programme

their internment rooms were appalling. Often, during the daily little break, they were beaten and harassed while some of them were obliged to play traditional music.

In January 1944, Roma and Sinti were all deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was the largest transport of Roma and Sinti across Europe. In Birkenau, they were interned in the so-called “Familienlager” (family camp), where they would be put in families and not divided as the Jews. Living conditions were all the same awful. Since they were not exploited for the forced labour, Roma and Sinti received less food rations than those assigned to slave-workers, which were already meagre. The terrible health situation led to the spread of typhus and other diseases. One particular disease was the Noma infection, which had disappeared from Europe by the beginning of the XX century. All this contributed to the decimation of this vulnerable population. Out of 351 deportees from Kazerne Dossin only 33 survived.

Considered as criminal and asocial because of their particular way of life, Roma and Sinti were targeted rather by police and administrative measures than by legislative rules. These, according to Ms Schram, were not only implemented by the Nazis but also by the local police authorities in Europe. This proves the widespread racial repression that the European Roma and Sinti went through during WWII.

Moreover, they could benefit only rarely from the help of the French or the Belgian states once the war ended. Official recognition was also a great challenge. Only a few months ago, France recognised the deportation of the French Roma and Sinti during WWII, which local people and police also contributed to.

Gabriela Hrabanova, Policy Coordinator, ERGO Network

Gabriela Hrabanova contributed to detail the background and other aspects of the Roma Holocaust through her personal and professional experiences. First of all, she pointed out that negative attitudes towards Roma were already in place way before WWII. Indeed, the situation of Roma and Sinti in Europe, she stated, has not much changed since their genocide.

While anti-Gypsyism has its roots in the XV century, it became institutionalised and much more visible during the Nazi regime. Roma and Sinti were targeted as “subhuman” and were therefore seen as a danger for the purity of the German blood. Back then, they were divided into different groups according to the degree of “purity” of their blood. Those who had pluriethnic origins, the so-called *Mischlinge* (crossbreed) were indeed considered to be the worst, as they had “corroded” the German race.

Linking past events with today's reality, Ms Hrabanova then moved to speak about remembrance. Though the suffering was the same for every victim of the Nazi regime,



it is true that different groups relate differently to their memories. Roma and Sinti, unlike Jews, tend(ed) to forget, mainly because of their lack of organisation and of confidence in the mainstream society.

Concerning terminology, Ms Hrabanova made the difference between the term Roma, used by this population itself, and the term Gypsy, which came from the

outside, that is from non-Roma, and derives from ancient Greek *Athínganoi*. This wording, in targeting a nomadic way of life different to that of the mainstream society, nowadays designates different groups that have little to do with each other.

Irvin Mujcic, ERGO Network

Against general trends among the Roma and Sinti communities concerning remembrance of the Holocaust, Mr Mujcic brought forward some interesting examples of upcoming young engagement in this respect.

In particular, he mentioned that each year, TernType organises a remembrance day on 2nd August; the last one was attended by over 400 young people. This shows a positive change in the younger Roma generations, which, according to Mr Mujcic, are more willing to acknowledge and commemorate their own past than older Roma.

Mr Mujcic then recalled two characters linked to the Roma Holocaust. One was a German Sinti boxer, who died on 2nd August. The second was a Polish Roma woman, who managed to save some 50 lives, between Roma and Jews. Both put up resistance against the practices of the Nazi regime.

Concluding his intervention, Mr Mujcic evoked the rebellion inside the Gypsy camp in Auschwitz (after which the Roma and Sinti were exterminated at once) and called for a new Roma resistance in Europe.

SESSION 2 – CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON RAISING AWARENESS AND RECOGNITION OF THE ROMA AND SINTI HOLOCAUST

The second session was conceived to allow participants to discuss key challenges in raising awareness on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, and, hence, to suggest appropriate solutions. The audience was then divided into two workgroups, in order to assure the largest participation within the debates. Every single



participant was encouraged to bring his/her own contribution to the discussion. One person was designated to keep track of the debates in each group and report them to the others afterwards. Once the workgroups ended their debates, they gathered together again and presented the key challenges and solutions identified.

A. Challenges on raising awareness and recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

Challenges relating to the lack of written history

One major challenge in raising awareness on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust is the lack of systematic and written testimonies. This involves the number of the victims, which can only be approximately evaluated since many Roma and Sinti were not registered, moved across the borders and frequently changed or hid their identity for obvious reasons. Written testimonies are also largely lacking because of the sheer widespread illiteracy among Roma communities.

Challenges relating to historical archives

Historical archives, that are to be found mainly within local communities, are too often left abandoned. No systematic research work is done in order to inquire the documents and make truth emerge; still archives do exist and are now largely available to the public.

Manipulation of archives is one further element hindering a deep and truth-oriented investigation. This issue, seems to be more relevant in Eastern European countries. The manipulation involves both the pure erasing of names and their alteration.



Europe for Citizens
Programme

Challenges relating to Roma and Sinti cultural taboos

The lack of testimonies, both oral and written, is also due to cultural taboos specifically related to the Roma and Sinti communities. The most resistant one is the so-called “death-taboo” for which it is improper to talk about dead people, especially when concerning relatives.

Challenges relating to the reliability of survivors

One further challenge in the field of testimonies is the reliability of survivors. Let alone the fact that many of them are by now dead, the ones remaining are often very old and perhaps ill. Their memory is not always precise and can on the contrary lead to unintentional falsified realities. This undermines the veracity and credibility of their testimonies, which should conversely be one major asset for raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust.

Challenges relating to a lack of Roma and Sinti awareness

The constraints outlined above make the transfer of memory really difficult, if not impossible. This is one of the main reasons for the low level of younger Roma awareness about the genocide. Indeed, in the rare occasions of lessons about the Roma Holocaust, Roma kids are largely taken aback. Nevertheless, opposing trends about the younger generation were documented by some of the participants.

Challenges relating to a lack of Roma and Sinti participation in events

Lack of Roma and Sinti participation in remembrance events has been denounced as a key challenge to foster memory bearers within these communities. Scarce involvement is mainly due to their mistrust in this kind of events, which sometimes are believed to be a stratagem to identify and file them.

Challenges relating to a lack of Roma and Sinti organisation after the WWII

After the WWII, unlike Jewish communities, Roma and Sinti lacked a strong organisation for denouncing this tragedy and obtaining both public acknowledgment and some form of compensation from national authorities. This element is due to the sheer little number of Roma and Sinti that survived, to the high fragmentation of these communities, as well as to a general mistrust in non-Roma authorities.

Challenges relating to terminology

Issues were raised about terminology, in trying to find a balance between the need to disseminate information about the Roma and Sinti genocide and the respect for all different sensibilities. Terminology relates in the first place to the event itself:



Europe for Citizens
Programme

genocide, Holocaust, Porrajmos, Samudaripen - all of them bear a distinct meaning and are differently deemed by Roma and non-Roma alike. In the second place, terminology relates to the victims when talking about the Holocaust: some of the participants declared to prefer using the name that Nazi gave to the deportees (i.e. "Zigeuner") while others strongly opposed this view and claimed for an alternative terminology (i.e. Roma or Sinti).

Challenges relating to stereotypes

Widespread stereotypes about Roma and Sinti are also relevant to the dissemination of the genocide, as these cause suspicions and unwillingness to address this issue among non-Roma.

Challenges relating to the media role

Media discourse about Roma and Sinti is too often biased, partial and problem-oriented. This key challenge is verified also in the lacking interest in positive experiences or in remembrance events. This second aspect is, for the purpose of this workshop, all the more important. Hence, not only Roma and Sinti Holocaust remembrance events are quite rare, but their media coverage is also largely missing. This dramatically contributes to lacking awareness about the genocide within mainstream society.

Challenges relating to funds

Appropriate funding is crucial for disseminating information and raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Costs involve the collection of testimonies and their dissemination, the organisation of events, the transports for Roma to attend them etc. All this is often on the shoulders of NGOs and/or Roma and non-Roma activists, lacking adequate resources to face this issue.

Challenges relating to a lack of recognition

One point of discussion concerned the lack of recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust among mainstream society. This means not only that this historical event is often completely unknown to the general public, but also that someone fails to acknowledge the facts or tends to underestimate them.

Challenges relating to lack of education

The educational field represents a key challenge for raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. In fact, this historical event is often not treated within ordinary school curricula because of a number of reasons, including lack of teaching materials,

lack of space for teachers to bring up the topic and difficulty in changing books and/or curricula themselves.

Challenges relating to the “competition of suffering”

Evoking the Roma and Sinti Holocaust within overall extermination practices headed by the Nazi regime can sometimes lead to the so-called “competition of suffering” with other victim groups. Although this competition is by no means our goal, raising awareness about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust without hurting different sensibilities constitutes a real challenge.

Challenges relating to the segregation of Roma and Sinti communities

The persistent segregation of Roma and Sinti communities, often marginalised inside camps, either authorised or not, or at the outskirts of cities and towns in Europe, represents one major challenge insofar that it prevents cultural dialogue between Roma and non-Roma communities.

Challenges relating to the internal divisions of the Roma and Sinti communities

The high communitarian fragmentation within Roma and Sinti communities hinders homogeneous and strong support to the awareness-raising process on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. Depending on different cultural sensibilities and/or historical experiences, some groups may not be willing to join other communities in remembering this tragedy.

B. Solutions and/or best practices on raising awareness and recognition of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

Solutions and/or good practices relating to a lack of written history



The lack of written history should be addressed by collecting the memories of the few survivors still alive, as well as from their family members.

In order to avoid unreliable testimonies, historians should be called on to sift the information also in the light of the broader context. As bearer of this kind of expertise, this group of academics appears the best



Europe for Citizens
Programme

placed to achieve this work.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to archives

Historians are also much needed when it comes to investigate local and national archives, as well as to sift once again the stored information in order to avoid manipulated realities to be disseminated.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to a lack of Roma participation in events

One main solution that was proposed in order to tackle this issue concerns the prior involvement of Roma testimonies/activists within remembrance events. This will help restore a sufficient level of confidence in Roma communities towards this kind of happenings.

More practical issues are also to be taken into account, such as how to contact Roma participants that do not have a legal address, nor an email account, or how to assure their arrival to the event (maybe through organised transportation).

Solutions and/or good practices relating to terminology

As for the historical event, participants gave a number of different options, including Holocaust, Porrajmos, Samudaripen etc. None of them is free of shortcomings. As stated by Ms Schram, the term Holocaust (first popularised by an American TV series on the life of a Jewish family in Germany during the WWII) refers to a “voluntary sacrifice through fire”, which does not seem to apply to the forced extermination of Roma. Porrajmos and Samudaripen, according to Mr Mujcic, do not fit the Romani language, as the first one is a later semantic invention and the second one is not used by Roma people. Proposals were made as to use the more generic term “genocide”, but that would sap the historical peculiarity of the event.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to stereotypes

Proposed solutions for this issue involve the inclusion of learning modules on Roma culture and history in schools, in order to oppose stereotypes and raise awareness among non-Roma children. On the teachers’ side, ad hoc formation programmes should be conceived in order to tackle the widespread lack of education in this respect.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to media

Media interest towards this issue should be fostered through programmed action. This means, for example, addressing press releases and summaries to the local newspapers when organising remembrance activities, or mobilising renowned personalities to deliver ad hoc statements.



Europe for Citizens
Programme

Solutions and/or good practices relating to local authorities

Local authorities should be one of the main targets for raising awareness on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust. This is because these are the best placed when it comes to organise exhibitions and, more broadly, to reach people. Within the Belgian context, a proposal was made as to target those municipalities (Verviers, Tournai...) that had a first-hand experience of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to education

Possible solutions to challenges relating to education have been found in: a) an increased cross-border learning on Holocaust, going beyond national narratives on memory; b) fostering visits to memorials and concentration camps, as direct contact with stories and places makes people better realize the things that happened; c) innovative methods when teaching the Roma and Sinti Holocaust in order to prevent students' lack of interest (otherwise, the inclusion of such modules inside school curricula could even be counterproductive), for example including testimonials of survivors; d) designing (new) educational material on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust.

Moreover, taught stories should not only take up the perspective of "victims" but also the resistance of Roma and non-Roma against the National Socialist Regime, showing that resistance and individual action is important and can have a positive impact, even in the smaller scale. More generally, proposals were made as to provide alternative stories relating to the Roma and Sinti Holocaust to students.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to the "competition of suffering"

Competition of suffering could be addressed by connecting existing resources and organizations/stakeholders, as networking and joining of forces help to build solidarity between communities.

Solutions and/or good practices relating to the segregation of Roma and Sinti communities

Social marginalisation of Roma and Sinti communities and a lack of intercultural dialogue could be tackled by giving positive examples of solidarity between Roma and non-Roma today. The goal would be to make both Roma and non-Roma "multipliers" raising awareness about the Roma genocide and Roma discrimination today.



Europe for Citizens
Programme

Other solutions and/or good practices

Proposals were made as to set up a **truth commission** whose focus would be to investigate past crimes committed against Roma and Sinti in the context of the Holocaust and to spread more adequate accounts on history.

Further suggestions concerned the **criminalization** of the trivialization of the Holocaust and of the Holocaust denial. Sanctions should be more efficient and accompanied by systematic public condemnation of speeches of the kind.