



Keeping the Memory Alive: the Roma and Sinti Holocaust

FAGiC

**National workshop
The Forgotten Holocaust**

Barcelona, 28 February 2014



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1. PRESENTATION



FAGiC organised its national workshop on February 28 at Pati Manning in Barcelona which focused on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust and the alarming today's situation in Europe of Sinti and Roma. The meeting

aimed at raising awareness about the genocide of the Roma under National Socialism and drawing attention to the continuity of prejudices about Roma before, during and after the Second World War as well as to demonstrating the link between the history of discrimination and persecution and the present situation of the Roma.

The workshop participation was very high, counting on the presence of regional and local politicians, decision makers, journalists, academics, university students and representatives of Roma and non Roma associations and organisations.

As the speakers were well recognised people and experts on the topic, the outputs and results of the workshop are highly recommended to governments, media, schools and museums.

The workshop began with the welcoming remarks by Simón Montero, President of FAGiC; Ivan Ivanov, ERIO's Executive Director; Francina Vila, Women and Civil Rights Councillor of the Barcelona City Council and president of the Municipal Council of the Roma People in Barcelona; Felip Puig, Company and Occupation Councillor of the Government of Catalonia; and Ramon Terrassa, Director General of Civic and Community Action of the Catalanian Government.

The opening was followed by panel 1, which focused on the Forgotten Holocaust. Keynote speakers included Dr. Xavier Torrens, Mr Andrzej Mirga and Mr Zoni Weisz, a



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Sinti Holocaust survivor. Just after the presentations, a discussion / debate was opened between the speakers and the assistants and participants.

Afterwards, panel 2 focused on the alarming situation of Sinti and Roma today in Europe with the speeches of Mr Saimir Mile, Mr Pedro Aguilera and Mr Juan de Dios Ramírez – Heredia. Just after the presentations, a discussion / debate was opened between the speakers and the assistants and participants. Finally, Simón Montero, president of FAGiC, concluded the workshop mentioning the main points discussed and key recommendations made by the speakers.

The speakers stressed the importance of the Holocaust and focused on recommendations to governments, media, schools and museums regarding the Roma and Sinti Holocaust and on how to include Roma history and the contemporary situation of Roma into school curricula.

Workshops and other kind of events focused on the Roma and Sinti Holocaust are very important in Spain due to the high lack of knowledge regarding Holocaust issues in general, but especially on Roma and Sinti Holocaust.

In Spain, lack of information and knowledge about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust is reported to exist even deep inside the Roma community. Therefore, FAGiC believes that the Holocaust is an important issue that everybody must know about, Roma and non-Roma people alike. It is also important to address the topic to local, regional and national governments, so they can take it into account and adopt decisions to include it into the school curricula.

2. WELCOMING REMARKS AND OPENING

The welcoming panel was formed by Simón Montero, FAGiC president; Ivan Ivanov, ERIO's Executive Director; Francina Vila, Women and Civil Rights Councillor of the

Barcelona City Council and president of the Municipal Council of the Roma People in Barcelona; Felip Puig, Company and Occupation Councillor of the Government of Catalonia; and Ramon Terrassa, Director General of Civic and Community Action of the Catalanian Government.

FAGiC's president began with a short explanation of FAGiC history, which was founded in 1991 to defend and promote the rights of the Roma people in Catalonia. He also made a short introduction about the



European project and the partners and FAGiC contribution to keep the Roma memory and history alive. As this is a history of persecutions and discriminations, Simón deemed it to be very important to join forces and fight against discrimination and prejudices.

Simón's speech was followed by Ivan Ivanov. Mr. Ivanov focused on ERIO's actions in the last years regarding Holocaust, even though the Holocaust was not an essential topic for ERIO. Mr. Ivanov also explained that the European Commission didn't know who were the Roma and Sinti ten years ago, whilst everybody knew about Gypsies. Eventually, a number of positive developments have been achieved at the European level.

According to Mr. Ivanov, it is very important to raise awareness about Roma and Sinti Holocaust to young people, both Roma and non-Roma. In underlining that they should know about it, he encouraged us all to promote its knowledge into the education systems.

Francina Vila, the next speaker, emphasised the need of knowing about the Holocaust, for Roma and non-Roma people alike. She said it is important to promote the work



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that FAGiC is doing regarding the Holocaust memory and also to promote the Roma culture into society. The Barcelona Municipal Council is aware of these needs and that's why it is going further in creating a local strategy for the Roma inclusion. Mrs Vila also stressed the importance to put words into actions, as well as enhancing the empowerment of the Roma people. The solution is not waiting for answers from the public administrations, because answers will not always arrive. The very grassroots communities must find the answers by themselves and for this is why Roma must be prepared and empowered. She concluded wishing that Roma and non-Roma write together their history and culture.

The last speaker was Felip Puig, representative of the Government of Catalonia. Mr. Puig remarked the need to know about what happened during the Holocaust. He also stated that we cannot forget about it and we must discuss and reflect about issues as discrimination, racism, equality of treatment, etc. so that facts like those are not repeated again.

So, the Government of Catalonia acknowledges the importance of education and the importance of recognising diversity in education. Issues such as the Holocaust should also be included in the school curricula, but maybe more time is needed to get there. At the same time, the Government of Catalonia emphasises the need to work all together, both the civil society and the public administration. The situation in Catalonia is not perfect, still Roma are better off here than in many other countries. This is something – stated Mr. Puig – that we should feel proud about. One further element of pride was the recognition by the Catalanian Parliament of the genocide and persecution of the Roma people in 2007.

3. PANEL 1: THE FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST

The first panel was centred on the main focus of the project that is, the Roma and Sinti Holocaust, and was formed by well recognised experts on the topic such as Dr Xavier

Torrens, Mr Andrzej Mirga and Mr Zoni Weisz. All of them talked about the importance of the Holocaust and especially the Roma and Sinti genocide.



The first speaker of this panel was Dr. Xavier Torrens, professor of Political Science at University of Barcelona, as well as sociologist and expert on Holocaust education. He was also the curator / commissioner and author of texts of FAGiC's

exhibition on the Roma genocide. Dr. Torrens is one of the main experts in Spain on Holocaust education. Dr. Torrens emphasised the importance of the workshop, especially in a city as Barcelona and in a country as Spain, because it is important to take the genocide of Roma out of invisibility and to raise awareness about it especially today.

Dr. Torrens focused his speech around the term Holocaust. Even if it seems a silly question, many people don't know what the Holocaust is. Academically, the Holocaust is understood to be only the Nazi genocide of the Jews and Roma/Sinti. According to Torrens, the term Holocaust is used widely in Spain and many persons including professors and teachers are confusing victims of Holocaust with victims of the Nazi camps, even if it is not the same. The Holocaust is the genocide of Jews and Roma under the Nazi regime, whilst the genocide is an extermination or mass murder. In deep, genocide is the kind of extermination/destruction that has the intent to commit mass murder to a community or people with the **deliberate** attempt to destroy an ethnic, religious or national group. Therefore, all genocides are exterminations, but not all exterminations are genocides. According to Torrens, it is important to talk and speak out about all the Nazi victims, but not as Holocaust victims if not as victims of Nazi camps.



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Once the concept of the Holocaust was clarified, Mr. Torrens asked a second question: is the genocide of Roma the forgotten Holocaust? According to Torrens, it is true that the Roma and Sinti Holocaust has been forgotten, but we cannot use the term “forgotten” to compare the Roma and Sinti Holocaust with the “Shoah” because both Holocausts underwent some kind of oblivion.

The Jewish Holocaust has not been forgotten in Holland and Germany, but it has been forgotten in Spain. On the contrary, Torrens said that the Roma Holocaust has been forgotten, invisible and voiceless due to many factors and events.

In Spain, many people have only watched or know about four films: The Schindler’s list, The Pianist, La vita è Bella (Life is Beautiful) and The Boy with the Striped Pyjamas. The majority has not even read a book or watched a documentary. This is because the Holocaust is not yet part of the school curricula in our country. There are individual initiatives or joint actions, but it does not exist in the national education law. The Holocaust is not taught at the university level, a part from some History faculties and still it is not taught properly.

Mr. Torrens called for a strong alliance between the Roma and Jewish communities in Catalonia and Spain. Also, experts working on the topic are needed to give the final impetus to introduce the Holocaust into the school curricula. This should be included from a historical point of view, but in a present-day perspective. The Holocaust should be used not only to know and learn about the past, but also to learn and to fight against the prejudices still existing in 2014 against the Roma people.

According to a survey submitted to teenagers between 12 and 16 years old in Spain, Roma people are the most rejected group in Spain, followed by Muslim or people with Arabian origin and thirdly by the Jewish community. These three groups were the most



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rejected also in the Middle Age in the Iberian Peninsula. That's why teaching the Holocaust is so important.

Key events and personalities to be taught include:

- the expulsion of the Roma from Spain. People know about the expulsion of the Jews and Muslims, but do not have a clue about the Roma.
- the big raid against all Roma in Spain in 1749, the first attempt to exterminate the Roma people in Spain.
- the police raid against Roma in Germany (1933)
- the Decree against the Gypsy Plague in 1938
- the Gypsy Clean-up Week in 1938
- Himmler's Auschwitz Decree
- Doctor Mengele, Chief Doctor of the Gypsy camp (Zigeunerlager), about which many people don't know about.
- the Roma women rebellion on May 16th, 1944 in Auschwitz to save the lives of their children.
- the Roma total extermination in August 2, 1944. 2014 is the 70th Anniversary, so it is very important to know about it.

These issues and many others must be explored in order to build the memory, especially the memory of the Roma and Sinti people. For this purpose, Mr. Torrens called for a joint alliance to introduce the topic as a cross – curricula and subject in the schools.

The second speaker was Zoni Weisz. Few words can describe him, he is a Sinti Holocaust survivor and an expert on the topic. Zoni shared with all the participants his personal story. He explained in details how he and his family went into hiding once the deportation began, but the SS soldiers found them. They brought the whole family to a train station where the train to Auschwitz was supposed to stop. At the same time another ordinary train was about to leave on the other side. When Zoni saw the train's

man (another train) taking his hat off, he started to run and as he looked back, he saw his family for the last time. All died in Auschwitz.

Zoni was only 7 years old as he lost everything he loved. After the escape, he began a period of hiding. He hid in a milk factory under a milk tank but would keep on hearing the soldier's boots. That was a terrible period full of fears. For him, the period after the



liberation was the worst, as he didn't know anything about his family. He didn't know whether they had survived or not. After years of waiting, they still didn't come back. They were all murdered by the Nazis.

After the war, there was no agency or organisation to help the survivors, especially the Roma and Sinti survivors. The Dutch government didn't do anything. Help only came from the own community.

The difference between the Jews and the Roma was the creation of organisations. The Jews started to create organisations and agencies to ask for compensations and commemorations, but the Roma couldn't read. That's why **education and personal development are the best way for a better future**. Many good things happened since then. Roma and Sinti have now a memorial as Holocaust victims in the heart of Berlin. Mr. Weisz had also the opportunity to stand and speak in front of the German parliament, to show that the Roma are here and they also suffered from the Holocaust. This, as he stated, was a great chance to speak and to build memory about it. Mr. Weisz emphasised the alarming situation of Roma and Sinti today in Europe. He said there is still a long way for Roma and Sinti to be full citizens, especially in Eastern



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European countries, but one must confront the governments and give the opportunity to young people to have a normal life. **For Zoni the key word for a better future is EDUCATION, EDUCATION AND EDUCATION.**

The third speaker of the panel was Andrzej Mirga. He is former ODIHR Senior Adviser on Roma and Sinti Issues, a Polish Roma, ethnologist and Roma activist and a well-recognised expert. Mr. Mirga focused his speech on two main questions: where are Roma regarding teaching, recognition and commemoration of the Holocaust? Why keeping memory alive and for who?

Regarding the first question, Mr. Mirga said that many positive things happened in the last 30 years. According to Mr. Mirga, one of the problems Roma people had was the lack of Roma writers, Roma historians and personalities of the kind after the Second World War. Jewish people had famous personalities such as Anna Frank and many others. Roma and Sinti didn't have those kind of personalities, even though Zoni could be such a leader. Also, there is a need for a story-telling from the inside, as the only accounts so far are made by Jewish writers. That's why during the Nuremberg trials no Roma was there to testify as a witness. Roma people were not mentioned in the final sentence, because at that time there was no documentation or files about it. Also, all Roma were killed and the camp in Auschwitz was destroyed. In many other camps, Roma were not mentioned because they were killed without any registration and so no evidence was available about it. The files were discovered after 1947, when the Nuremberg trials already ended.

Still, many positive things happened especially in Eastern Europe. For example, post-communist Poland started to commemorate the 2nd of August in 1991. From that year on, Roma people commemorate with politicians and the Jews the genocide of the Roma. In those moments, it feels like there are not two genocides, but only one.



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A second positive and important development is represented by the publication of the State Museum in Auschwitz in 1993. The Museum published a memorial book, over 1000 pages in three languages with all the names of Roma registered in the Zigeurlager. These are more than 20,000 including names of victims from Spain. Roma from 11 countries were registered in this book.

In 1999, the BBC made a movie/documentary titled “the Forgotten Holocaust”. It was the first kind of documentary published at that time with the testimonies of survivors.

Since then, Germany invited Zoni to speak in the Bundestag and also to the commemoration monument for Roma and Sinti Holocaust victims. Since several years, the younger generation is getting more involved in the Holocaust issue, for instance going to Auschwitz to commemorate the 2nd of August.

Mr. Mirga said that Roma are getting some recognition and that this must be followed to take the next step. The question is how can Roma keep the memory alive when there are still few alive witnesses and how the coming of far-right groups can be challenged. All these questions are to be summarised in the general question that Mirga wanted to address: why keeping the memory alive and for who?

According to Mr. Mirga, keeping the memory alive would be primarily meaningful for Roma, because it part is their identity. As for contrasting anti-Roma sentiments, an issue was raised about the efficacy of teaching and learning in changing people’s mind. This would be the **key issue**, also for the future.

The “how” question should be answered by teaching, promoting dialogue and tolerance and using the memory of the Holocaust as a reminder and a warning against replications. At the same time, reality continues to display racism, xenophobia, etc. and this is the key question, for which nobody has a clear answer yet, especially in times of crisis and difficulties.

Mr. Mirga concluded by saying that we have to think about the good things we have achieved, as this means that it is possible to change things, although we have a long way to go. Mr. Mirga also paid tribute to Zoni and all the other Roma activists.

4. PANEL 2: THE ALARMING SITUATION OF SINTI AND ROMA TODAY IN EUROPE

This panel was made up of by Mr. Pedro Aguilera, former Spanish member of ECRI and Roma activist, Mr. Saimir Mile, President of La Voix des Roms and representative of ERGO and Mr. Juan de Dios Ramírez – Heredia, President of Romani Union and founder of the International Romani Union.



The first speaker, Pedro Aguilera, focused on his experience as a member of ECRI – European Commission against Racism and Intolerance. He was lucky to visit many countries and to speak to many political parties, activists, racists, etc... He stated that the

current situation has nothing to do with the 1930s and people cannot talk about genocide without knowing what it means, still that we can talk about anti-Gypsyism. Mr. Aguilera was part of the working group defining the term anti-Gypsyism. In defining it from a historical point of view, they argued that the Holocaust happened in a specific period of history, but anti-Gypsyism has been present since centuries ago. This is visible for instance in Spain with the pragmatics against the Roma and also in Romania, where Roma people were enslaved until 19th Century.

Mr. Aguilera argued that we are currently living a crisis in values, not only financial and economical. Coexistence problems bring us to alarming situations as for example in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, where Roma women are being sterilised and nothing



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happens. The same applies to an Ostrava sentence that charged the Czech government for segregation in schools and for creating special schools. Mr. Aguilera stressed the importance to introduce the Roma culture in schools all over Europe, as “People don’t love what they don’t know about”. Also, Roma should stop complaining about the situation and doing nothing, they should start being more active in issues concerning them. Issues as the raising of the far-right parties are very worrying and the whole society has something to do about it. In light of forthcoming European elections in May, Mr. Aguilera underlined the importance to vote. As the major decisions are currently being taken in the European Parliament, he called all Roma and all the people in general to vote and therefore avoid the far-right parties to get into power.

The second speaker, Saimir Mile, reminded all the assistants and participants about the Roma evictions in France. He mentioned the Sarkozy time, but he affirmed that the current socialist government under the Interior Ministry (Manuel Valls) is evicting more Roma families than before and that this is alarming. Mr. Mile stated that Roma people must vote, must be active and should participate in political life. Roma people also have to think about what kind of participation they should have in order to produce an effective impact on policies concerning them.

Mr. Mile also talked about the project title “Keeping the Memory Alive”. He thinks that it is very enthusiastic, although Roma people may not be yet at that stage. Keeping the memory alive is difficult when they don’t recover it. Roma are still recovering part of their memory and that is why they don’t know anything about it. Keeping Memory Alive would be possible if memory was complete and clear for next generation to know about it. But many old Roma people don’t know about their history, young people have to explain it to them, because they managed to study. On the contrary, people will not know about the 2nd of August, even worse, about the 16th of May. So, firstly it is important to recover Roma history and the genocide is just one part of it.



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Mr. Mile claimed to be convinced, after Zoni's speech that Roma people must be active and must stop standing as victims, because this doesn't work anymore. When Zoni went to the Bundestag he showed people that Roma and Sinti are still here. The Nazis couldn't exterminate them completely. This should be, according to Mr. Mile, their own energy, their thirst for life and their resistance. Recalling the Roma resistance in Bikernau, he affirmed that Roma don't have the right anymore to present themselves as victims.

Mr. Mile said that Roma do not exist because they were oppressed, they exist because they resisted. So, if one wants to fight against current discrimination and prevent it, Roma must be active on policies concerning them and be prepared for the future. Education is a good way to start and knowing their history is the key to bring change in society.

The last speaker was Mr. Juan de Dios Ramírez-Heredia, well known Roma activist worldwide. Juan de Dios used a physical principle to describe the current situation of Roma and Sinti in Europe, according to which "there is no effect without cause".

This was applied to the emergence of the Nazi regime. As Mr. Juan de Dios stated, the Germans didn't go to sleep one night being pacific and intelligent people and woke up the next morning being murders. From the financial crisis that affected Germany, little by little the idea that Jews were the perpetrators of the crisis emerged and this was disseminated in radios, press, etc... One lie, if repeated 1000 times, becomes truth and that happened at that time.

Juan de Dios referred also to an article in a Catalonian newspaper regarding a survey in France according to which Le Pen will win the European elections. Juan de Dios said that currently, there are 52 MEPs from the far-right, but these surveys foresee that they will gain some 100 seats this year. The fact that the far right can get power from democratic mechanisms is a very worrying issue.



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Mr. Juan de Dios remarked that the future of our people is in our hands. We must be revolutionaries about what is happening to us otherwise we will see a tragedy hitting us day by day, but with a big difference: after that, we cannot complain anymore, because we are currently aware.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

During their speech, speakers addressed several recommendations to different target groups: on the one hand to politicians, government, media, academics, etc... and on the other hand to the Roma and Sinti community.

The main recommendations to governments, academics, museums and media include:

- Introducing Roma culture in schools and in society. Roma people are part of society, so their culture must be reflected into the national culture.
- Introducing the Holocaust in school curricula, not only to know about the past but also to fight discrimination and stereotypes against Roma today.
- Making Roma memory and history data accessible to experts and to the main community.
- Commemorating the 2nd August as the International Day of the Roma Genocide / Holocaust.
- Disseminating the importance of the Holocaust into society.
- Recognising the Roma genocide and persecution.
- Finding ways to draw Roma representatives into these processes.
- Disseminating existing texts on the Roma genocide among society and to translate them into national languages.

The main recommendations to Roma and Sinti community include:



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- Being active in policies concerning Roma and stop having a victim's attitude.
- Studying, as education is the key word for a better future.
- Participating in political life by using the right to vote in the next European elections.
- Building a strong alliance with the Jewish community and experts on the Holocaust to introduce the Holocaust into the school curricula.
- Giving room to young people so that they can be dynamic actors for social and cultural change.
- Finding tools to recover the Roma memory and transfer it to the younger generations.
- Using knowledge and historical facts to fight against discrimination and prejudices.

All speakers agreed that society must work together as one, Roma and non-Roma alike, otherwise it will not be a unified process.