

THERE ARE FOUR OF US SITTING RIGHT HERE: THE HIDDEN MINORITY

Presented to the SpheX Club of Lynchburg

By Christina Delzingaro

January 23, 2025

I come from a family of five children. When the four girls get together, things quickly devolve into true crime and ridiculous reality tv. During a recent sister visit, we stumbled across *My Big Fat American Gypsy Wedding*. This tv series revolves around the marriage customs of Romani-Americans. As we were watching, awed by the sheer number of rhinestones while at the same time uncomfortable with the negative stereotypes depicted, my niece wandered in and said “This show is nuts. There aren’t any gypsies in the U.S..” Stunned silence followed before my sister said, “there are four of us sitting right here.”

My last name, Delzingaro, is Italian and translates to “of the gypsies.” My paternal grandfather immigrated from Italy to the U.S. in 1911. While being processed through Ellis Island, his name was changed from Joseph del Zingaro (with the del separate from the zingaro) to Joseph Delzingaro. Zingaro comes from the earlier word Zingano, which is likely from a Greek term meaning “untouchable.”

When I was growing up, all the Delzingaro children in the family identified as Italian, my father’s background. My mother was a Grimes – English, Irish, Scottish – but my father’s strong personality meant that we were raised Italian American. My father told us Delzingaro meant “King of the Gypsies”. Our family nationality was Italian, but our ethnicity was gypsy. We rarely talked about the gypsy or Roma part, however, instead focusing on the food and traditions of Italy.

My niece’s comment got me thinking about just how many Roma there are in America; and why, despite our long presence in the U.S., many Americans remain unaware of the Romani people and their rich and complex history – a history marked by resilience and, unfortunately, profound suffering.

WHO ARE THE ROMANI PEOPLE

The Romani people, or Roma, are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group who traditionally lived a nomadic, itinerant lifestyle.¹ “They are not just a cultural or social entity but represent a unique amalgamation of genetic lineages, languages, and traditions, pointing to a



complex history that spans continents and centuries.”²

The Romani people are not Romanian. They did not originate in the country of Romania, although many Romani migrated to Romania in the 1300s.

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The Romani people did not originate in Egypt, although the term “gypsy” was applied to Roma by those in Europe who thought they came from Egypt. “Gypsy” is often applied to any traditionally itinerant group in Europe, from the Roma to the distinct ethnic and linguistic group of the Scottish Travelers.

In the English language, Romani people are often called “gypsies”. However, many Roma consider this to be an ethnic slur and prefer to be called “Roma”. In the United Kingdom, however, “gypsy” is the name predominantly used by the group. The Council of Europe and other organizations consider that “Roma” is the correct term referring to members of this ethnic group, regardless of their country of origin, and “Romani” should be used to refer to the language and culture.

For this presentation, I will use the term “Roma” or “Romani people”. There are distinct subgroups of Roma based in part on territorial, cultural and dialectical differences and self-designation. These subgroups are, in part, a result of castes and subcastes in India, where the Romani people originated. Some subgroups include: Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Kalderdash, Lovari, Bashalde, Afro-Romani, Ashkali, Dom, Lom and Rom populations.

Exactly who the Romani people are and where they came from is clouded by several issues. First, for most of history there was no universal name for the Romani in their own language, and no unified Romani identity or nation. Even today, not all Romani people refer themselves as Roma. For example, the Sinti. Sinti is the name of the primary group of Roma in German-speaking countries. Genetically and linguistically, the Sinti are from the same ethnic groups as other Roma subgroups and are part of the Romani diaspora. However, the Sinti do not refer to themselves as Roma.

Secondly, a history of persecution and discrimination has led the Roma to adopt a flexible cultural identity to avoid further harm. According to Carol Silverman and other historians, Roma have been persecuted for over 700 years. Since their migration from India, they have suffered economic, political, and cultural discrimination, including enslavement Wallachia (now Romania) in 1300; anti-Romani laws in Switzerland in the

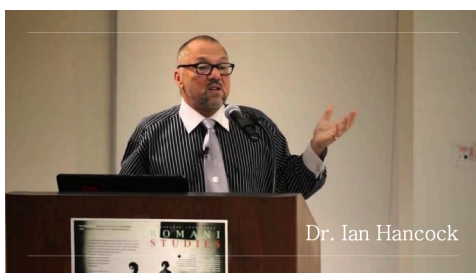
1400s; being subjected to the Inquisition as heretics; expulsion from France and England in the 1500s; anti-Romani laws in the second half of the 1500s in Portugal, Flanders, Scotland, Bohemia, Poland, Lithuanian and Denmark (which imposed the death sentence on any Romani caught in the country); anti-Romani laws in Sweden in the 1600s (where all adult Romani men were sentenced to death, while women and children were expelled); the Great Gypsy Round-up in Spain in the 1700s; systematic sterilization, medical experimentation, and mass murder during the Holocaust (known by the Roma as the Bora Porajmos or the Great Devouring); and up until recent history with mob attacks against Roma in Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary during just the past decade.³

The Great Gypsy Round-up Spain 1794 led to the arrest of most Roma in the region and the genocide of 12,000 Romani people. A majority were released after a few months, but many others spent several years imprisoned and subject to forced labor.



Another factor clouding the origins of the Roma is that the Romani language has historically been an entirely oral language, with no universally accepted written form in common use. The first example of written Romani dates from 1542, but it was not until the 20th century that writing by native Romani people arose. In the 1990s a model for a standard written language was presented to the International Romani Union, who adopted it as their official alphabet. This standard, however, has still not been adopted by the majority of Roma. Instead, many use the writing system of the country where they reside. A current trend is for Roma to use “loosely English-oriented” writing conventions online and for email.⁴

Finally, there was lack of academic research into this ethnic group until the 1970s. The recognized expert on the Romani people is Dr. Ian Hancock, a Roma and a Romani



linguist, scholar, and political advocate. Hancock is one of the founding members of the academic discipline of Romani Studies as director of the Romani Archives and Documentation Center at the University of Texas at Austin. He has represented the Romani people at the United Nations and served as a member of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council. He has published more than 350 books and articles on the Romani people and language.⁵ Hancock’s research and advocacy since 1972 have been key to furthering

the understanding of the Romani people. I relied heavily on his work in this presentation.

There is no official or reliable count of the worldwide Romani population. Many Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity in official censuses for a variety of reasons, such as fear of discrimination. Others are descendants of intermarriage with local populations, and no longer identify only as Roma or who do not identify as Roma at all.⁶ Some countries, including the U.S., do not identify Romani people as a separate ethnic group.



(Although since 2000 U.S. Census forms have been distributed in the written language approved by the International Romani Union). Many Roma identify themselves by nationality rather than heritage. This is the approach that was taken by my father's family.

It is estimated that there are currently between 10 and 12 million Roma living in Europe, making them the largest ethnic minority in that region. There is also an estimated 1 million Roma in the United States and hundreds of thousands elsewhere, in Australia, Canada, Brazil, and throughout Western Asia.⁷

ORIGINS OF THE ROMANI PEOPLE

Recent genetic, linguistic and historical research has identified the roots and migratory patterns of the Roma. Analysis of mitochondrial DNA and Y-chromosomal data has shown that the Romani have genetic markers that are predominantly found among the peoples of Rajasthan, Punjab, and Haryana in India.⁸ According to Evan Heimlich, there is linguistic and genetic evidence that the Roma originated in India as a military force to resist the eastward movement of Islam. Over the centuries, they

North India

- Haryana
- Himachal Pradesh
- Jammu and Kashmir
- Punjab
- Rajasthan
- Uttar Pradesh
- Uttarakhand

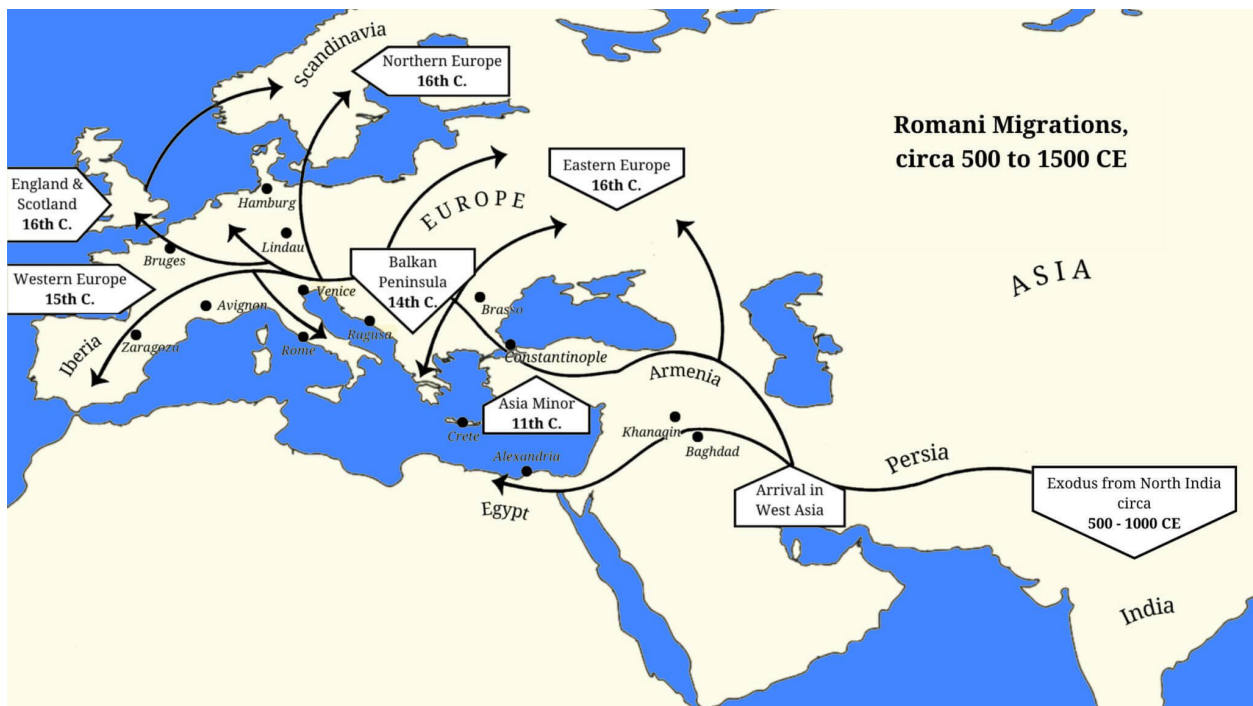


moved westward into Europe and northern Africa, adapting the language and culture of those countries during their migrations.⁹

The Romani language itself is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The Rom linguist W. R. Rishi gives the etymology of *Rom* from the Sanskrit *Rama*, with meanings that include "one who roams about." The number of Persian, Armenian, and Greek terms in the various Romani dialects reflect their migrations, just as those related to Sanskrit and Hindi point to their common origin in India.¹⁰

EARLY MIGRATION

The Roma's initial migration was north towards the Punjab region around 250 BC. By as early as 70 AD, Indian traders, most likely Romani, migrated into Egypt. In the 400s, Romani musicians were taken by Bahram V from India to Persia. In the 700s, Romani migrated to what is now a part of Turkey.¹¹



In the eleventh century some Romani people moved north through Kashmir and west into Persia. After a couple generations they moved on to Armenia, then fled Turkish invaders by entering the Byzantine Empire. By the thirteenth or fourteenth century they reached the Balkan Peninsula. During this period, they incorporated Serbian and Romanian terms into their language. Then they split into smaller groups that dispersed throughout Europe and absorbed the cultural and linguistic influences of their host

countries, developing differences in dialects that persist among Roma subgroups today.¹²

Roma were initially welcomed in their new countries as skilled artisans and entertainers. However, as they moved further into Europe, they encountered increasing hostility. In the 1300s, Romani people migrated to what is now Romania, where they were then enslaved. By the 15th century, Roma were present in most European countries, where they often lived on the margins of society and where they were often enslaved.¹³

ROMANI IN ITALY

The Romani people began arriving in Italy around the 15th century. The Sinti, a subgroup of the Roma, entered Italy from the north, while other Romani groups migrated from the Balkans and settled in southern and central Italy. These were my Italian ancestors.

The Roma in Italy have faced discrimination and marginalization since they first arrived in the country, and which continues today. In the late 1980's and into the 1990s half of the regions in Italy had adopted laws aimed at the "protection of nomadic cultures" through the construction of camps where Roma were segregated. The Italian government's description of Roma as "nomads" reinforces the popular but incorrect idea that Roma are not Italians and do not belong in Italy. A survey in 2008 found that 68% of Italians wanted all Roma expelled from the country.¹⁴



Despite this, Roma in Italy have maintained their distinct cultural identity, including their language, traditions, and social structures. It is estimated that there are about 150,000 Romani people in Italy with about half holding Italian citizenship. The largest Romani communities are found in Rome, Milan and Naples. My father's family comes from Naples, where they settled in the 1500s.

ROMANI IN THE UNITED STATES

While it was previously believed that the first Romani group arriving in North America came at the beginning of the 19th century, according to the Roma Council, the first

Romani people actually arrived in the Americas as enslaved people with Christopher Columbus on his third voyage in 1498.¹⁵

Ian Hancock's research indicates that the first Roma to arrive in North America from Britain did so in the 17th century.¹⁶ Legislation in Britain beginning in the 1590s was aimed at banishing the gypsies. By an Act of Queen Mary, any Gypsy who remained in England longer than one month could be hanged; an Act of Queen Elizabeth expanded the capital laws to include not just gypsies, but also those who presented themselves as gypsies. "In 1628 eight men were hanged for violating these laws, and their female companions were deported to Virginia."¹⁷

Roma Persecution in Britain	
1530	– King Henry VIII orders all Gypsies to leave within 16 days
1584	– Queen Mary I makes it a crime to be a Gypsy, punishable by death
1577	– 6 people are hanged in Aylesbury for mixing with Gypsies
1592	– 5 Gypsies are hanged in Durham
1596	– 9 Gypsies executed in York
1650s	– Forced deportation of Gypsies into slavery in North America and the Caribbean begins

During this period, Christian churches of Europe attacked "gypsy fortune-tellers," prompting deportations. But deporting Roma was complicated. Sending the Roma "home" was not an option since the "home" of the Roma in India was unknown to the Western world until at least the eighteenth century.¹⁸ A solution was to deport Roma to the Americas. By the end of the seventeenth century, every European country with holdings in North and South America followed the practice of deporting Roma to the Americas, often as enslaved people.¹⁹

The Romanichal, the first Romani group to arrive in North America in meaningful numbers, came to America from Britain around 1850. However, significant Romani immigration to the United States did not begin until the late 19th century. This wave of immigration was largely driven by the abolition of slavery in Romania in 1864, which freed many Roma who had been enslaved there.²⁰



Members of the Ištvanović family at Ellis Island in 1904
photographed by Augustus F. Sherman

Over time, the Romani population

in the U.S. has continued to grow, with additional waves of immigration occurring following the Holocaust.²¹ More recently, the collapse of Communism brought more Eastern European Roma to the United States.²²

Almost all Roma in the United States originated from some part of Europe, although there are a few small groups from elsewhere, such as parts of Asia. In addition to the Eastern Europeans who make up the largest group, there are two other large groups of Roma in the United States: the Baschalde (from Slovakia and Hungary) and the Romungre (from Hungary and Transylvania). There are also some Horchanay, who are historically Muslims from the South Balkans, and a small population of Sinti, who came from Northern Europe where they were targets of the Nazis. There are also Bosnian and Polish Roma present in the United States. In addition, there are the Kalderash from Russia and Machwaya from Serbia. There are also a few small groups of Ludar who emigrated from Romania. One of the most recent immigrations of a Roma group is that of the Lovara, which arrived in the 1990s.²³

An accurate estimate of the number of Roma Americans is difficult to achieve. In the United States, “where ethnic [Roma] often hid their identity to prevent discrimination, many people are still unaware that [Roma] are a true ethnic group with a distinct language and culture.”²⁴ Estimates of the total population of ethnic Roma in the United States range from fewer than 100,000 to one million,²⁵ with significant communities in Southern California, the Pacific Northwest, Texas, Louisiana, Florida and New Jersey.

BARO PORAJMOS



One of the darkest chapters in Romani history is the Baro Porajmos, also known as “The Great Devouring.” During World War II, the Nazi regime targeted the Roma and Sinti for extermination alongside Jews and other groups. It is estimated that at least 220,000 and perhaps as many as 1.5 million Roma were murdered by the Nazis in concentration camps and mass executions. While much smaller in numbers than the 6 million European Jews, the 3 million Soviet prisoners of war, and nearly 2 million Poles who died under the Nazi regime, the percentage of Romani killed during the Holocaust may be in excess of 70% of their European population.²⁶

As mentioned previously, persecution of the Roma was prevalent across all of Europe by the 16th and 17th centuries. For example, a 1545 declaration by the Holy Roman Empire declared that killing of Roma would not be considered murder. “In the 18th century, the Holy Roman Empire stepped up the persecution to include mass hangings, floggings, and banishment, perhaps the first recorded genocide that the Roma faced.”²⁷

The Nazi genocide of Roma, which took place in the Third Reich from 1935 to 1945, had origins as early as the 1880s. Romani people had lived in Bavaria, which in 1918 would become a part of Germany, for generations. Known as Sinti, they lived a nomadic life, moving from community to community within Bavaria. In 1885, the Bavarian government passed a law tightening the distribution of licenses to itinerant traders, largely the Roma and Sinti. The law also incarcerated undocumented Roma.²⁸ In 1899, Bavaria established its Intelligence Service Regarding the Gypsies, which issued identification cards, prevented the Roma and Sinti from using public services, and implemented general surveillance of the Roma and Sinti.²⁹ This law directed local police to compile reports on Roma, including their travel patterns, as well as information relating to births, marriages and deaths.

The Intelligence Service Regarding the Gypsies published the *Zigeuner-Buch* (Gypsy Book) in 1905, which outlined all the laws and rules applicable to Roma and Sinti, listed the names of thousands of them, and promoted the criminalization of building fires or setting up camps.³⁰ Personal information on Roma and Sinti in Germany was collected for 30 years prior to the Nuremberg Laws, providing the Nazis with a cache of data to utilize in the upcoming genocide.

By the 1920s, roughly one million Roma lived in Europe. Some Roma



A Roma family poses for a photo in front of their caravan

Halle, Germany. Circa 1935-1939
German Federal Archives

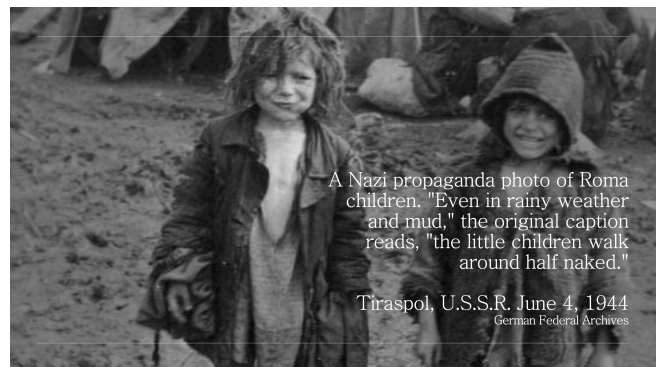
were nomadic, living in caravans and traveling between localities. These Roma were engaged with selling horses or handcrafts, as well as fortune-telling and entertaining. Other Roma were more stationary, living in cities and holding a variety of jobs from farming to medicine. In 1926, the Law for Combating of Gypsies, Travelers, and the



Work-Shy was enacted in Germany. The law specified that “gypsies” could only travel with wagons and caravans if they had permission from the police. Such permission, if granted, could only extend to a calendar year and could be revoked at any point. The law also prohibited moving from site to site with school age children; limited where Roma could make encampments; banned them from having firearms; and

required additional licenses to possess horses, dogs or other animals. “Perhaps the most draconian aspect of the legislation was that any [Roma] over sixteen years of age who was unable to prove regular employment could be sent to workhouses for up to two years...on the grounds of public security.”³¹ This law remained in effect in Germany until American occupation authorities overturned it in July 1947.

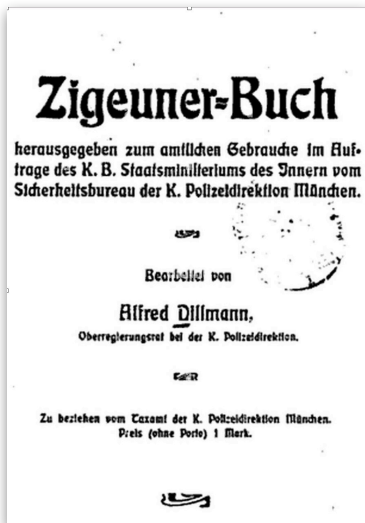
According to the National WWII Museum, which I relied on heavily for information regarding the Roma during the Holocaust, when the Nazi regime took over in 1933 in Germany, little changed right away for the Roma and Sinti. They were already subject to travel restrictions, investigations by the police, and imprisonment under the laws enacted since 1885. In early 1934, however, the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases was enacted. This law legalized and encouraged forced sterilization for people who were considered likely to have children with a “defect” of some sort, including mental or physical disabilities, that the Nazi regime considered damaging to the “German race”. Between 1934 and 1945, over 300,000 people were forcibly sterilized by the Nazis, including 2,500 Roma. Many did not survive the procedure.³²



A Nazi propaganda photo of Roma children. “Even in rainy weather and mud,” the original caption reads, “the little children walk around half naked.”

Tiraspol, U.S.S.R. June 4, 1944
German Federal Archives

The Nazi Party specifically targeted the Roma, and reports and letters written by leaders including Henrich Himmler specifically called for the execution and extermination of the “gypsies.”³³ The Nazis viewed the Romani people as “racially inferior” and a threat to



the purity of the “Aryan race”. “According to Nazi racial theory, the Romani were classified as ‘asocial’ elements and a ‘racial problem’... The Romani were seen as dangerous outsiders because of their perceived nomadic lifestyle and cultural differences, making them a target for extermination.”³⁴

In 1935 the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor was enacted. The first of the Nuremberg Laws, this law denied Jews their citizenship, banned marriages between members of “foreign races” and Germans, and took away political rights of so-called non-

Germans. Passed in September, the laws were expanded in November 1935 to include Roma and Sinti.³⁵ Like the Jews and other “undesirables,” Roma were forced to wear symbols to denote their identity. The Roma symbol was a brown inverted triangle.³⁶



As noted earlier, there is no clear definition of who is Roma, and that was true in 1935 as well. In order to define exactly who was Roma and, therefore, who was subject to the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German



Honor, Nazi authorities established the Research Institute for Racial Hygiene, headed by Dr. Robert Ritter, a German physician and prominent eugenicist. Ritter used this new agency to conduct research on German Roma and Sinti. He and his assistants traveled around the country visiting “gypsy camps,” where they conducted interviews, drew people’s blood, and measured their heads.³⁷

In 1938, the Office of Racial Hygiene stated that “all Gypsies should be treated as hereditarily sick; the only solution is elimination. The aim should therefore be the

elimination without hesitation of this defective element in the population.”³⁸ In the same year, anti-Roma policies were consolidated under the Reich Central Office for Combatting the Gypsy Nuisance. Shortly after this agency was established, its powers were strengthened with the passage of the decree, “The Fight Against the Gypsy Plague” issued by Himmler, which specified racial categories of Roma, established by Ritter. ³⁹ The decree begins:

*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. ... [I]t 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.*⁴⁰

In addition to classifying Roma, the decree also paved the way for the first special internment camps for Roma and Sinti to be established. The Nazis required Roma and Sinti to register for forced labor and to relocate to central areas. One of these sites was Lackenbach, the largest camp for Austrian Roma, which held over 2,000 people at its peak.⁴¹



Romani Women at Lackenbach, the largest camp for Austrian Roma

After the invasion of Poland by Germany in 1939, German army leadership raised concerns that Roma, particularly traveling Roma, were spies and risked spreading information about the German military’s movements in Poland and other occupied countries. The Security Main Office issued guidelines, stating that Roma should not have freedom of movement, and until they were able to be deported, they should be housed in special collection camps, which had already begun to be established across Germany.⁴²

Roma were considered a threat to national security by Allied forces, as well. In France, Roma and other people considered to be “nomadic” were seen as outsiders who might reveal military movements to the Germans. The French authorities tightened restrictions on traveling Roma. And then when France fell to the Germans in 1940, the Nazi regime was concerned that the French Roma might reveal German military movements to the

Allies. Germany further tightened restrictions on Roma in France and sent them to collection camps. During Nazi rule in occupied France, more than 3,000 Roma and “nomadic” people were incarcerated.⁴³



In 1940, Nazi authorities started arresting Roma and Sinti in major German cities and deporting them. In May 1940, over 2,000 Roma were deported to internment camps in occupied Poland. Deportations of Roma and Sinti from Germany and occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia to Poland continued through the autumn of 1941, when 5,000 Austrian

Roma were deported to Lodz Ghetto. Several hundred died from typhus there. In January 1942, the surviving 4,400 Roma in Lodz were sent to the newly established Chelmno death camp, where they were gassed.⁴⁴

Further deportations of Roma occurred in 1942, including 2,000 Roma who were sent to Bialystok prison in January and February. In April and June 1942, hundreds more Roma were arrested in Germany and deported to the Warsaw Ghetto. When the ghetto was emptied after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the surviving Romani prisoners were deported to Treblinka death camp, where they were killed.⁴⁵



Meanwhile, on the Eastern Front, the *Einsatzgruppen*, special killing units under the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), rounded up and executed Communists and Roma in the Soviet Union in 1941. By the time German troops were pushed out of the Soviet Union in 1944, they had killed around 30,000 Roma.⁴⁶



In December 1942, Himmler issued an order to deport Roma in the occupied western countries and protectorates. Roma from Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, the Netherlands, Belgium, and northern France were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz.⁴⁷

The first Romani transport to Auschwitz arrived on February 26, 1943. There, the

Roma were forced to build their own barracks.⁴⁸ The *Zigenunerlager* (Gypsy Family Camp) was unique in that it allowed Romani families to remain together, unlike the general practice in Auschwitz, where families were immediately separated.⁴⁹ Between 23,000 and 24,000 Romani and Sinti people were transported to Auschwitz from various parts of Europe through the summer of 1943.⁵⁰

The prisoners at Auschwitz, including the Roma and Sinti, were subjected to medical experiments by Dr. Josef Mengele. Mengele was especially interested in Romani twins for his experiments. The experiments were barbaric and frequently lethal. Mengele deliberately infected children with diseases, performed surgeries without anesthesia, amputated healthy limbs, and sewed twins together to create conjoined twins.⁵¹

The physical conditions in the Gypsy Family Camp were no better than conditions for others imprisoned at Auschwitz. With over 23,000 Romani people in the Gypsy Family Camp, the overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, insufficient food, and a lack of medical care resulted in many deaths. Typhus, tuberculosis and dysentery were rampant.⁵² By the end of 1943, 70 percent of the prisoners in the Gypsy Family Camp had died from illness or been killed by the Nazis.⁵³

On the night of August 2, 1944, the approximately 4,200 Roma remaining in the Gypsy Family Camp were rounded up and sent to the gas chambers.

“*Zigeunernacht*” or “Gypsy Night” is one of the most tragic events of the Holocaust and is largely forgotten.⁵⁴

Roma advocates are working to increase awareness of Gypsy Night and have established August 2nd as Roma Genocide Remembrance Day. However, only about 30 countries recognize this day. The U.S. does not officially recognize Roma Genocide Remembrance Day.

August 2, 1944:
Over 4,000 Roma and Sinti men, women and children were murdered in the gas chambers.

January 27, 1945 at 3pm, Soviet soldiers reached the camp and found only one Roma among the survivors.



While over 20,000 Roma were murdered at Auschwitz, many hundreds of thousands of Roma were killed during the Bora Porajmos, or the “Great Devouring”, across German-occupied Europe and the Soviet Union.

The total number of Roma reported killed during the Holocaust varies

widely, ranging between 220,000 and 1.5 million, depending upon the source. Dirk deKlein sets the number at between 220,000 and 500,000 murdered during “the Great Devouring.”⁵⁵ Dr. Ian Hancock of the University of Texas suggests “... of the estimated 20,000 Romanies in Germany in 1939, fully three quarters had been murdered by 1945. Of the 11,200 in Austria, a half were murdered. Of the 50,000 in Poland, 35,000. In Croatia, Estonia, the Netherlands, Lithuania and Luxembourg, almost the entire Romani populations were eradicated.”⁵⁶ Eve Rosenshaft, Professor Emerita of German Historical Studies at the University of Liverpool, estimates that “about 70 percent of German, 80 percent of Austrian, and as many as 90 percent of Czech Sinti and Roma perished. Of territories subject to German occupation and domination, Poland lost around 45 percent, Ukraine 75 percent, Estonia 90 percent, Latvia 60 percent, and the remaining Soviet Union 35 percent of their Romani populations as a direct result of the persecution.”⁵⁷

One reason the numbers of Roma killed is hard to calculate is the relatively late recognition of the Roma genocide. The Bora Porajmos is known as the “forgotten Holocaust,” as the experience of the Roma under the Nazis is often neglected, minimized or unacknowledged. There have been few recorded and archived testimonies directly from Roma and Sinti. Historical documents are currently being revised to correctly identify Roma and Sinti victims previously identified as Jewish.

An example is Anna Maria Steinback, who was called Settela by her family. On May 19, 1944 Settela was put on a train to Auschwitz along with 244 other Roma. Right before the doors were closed, Settela looked out from the train. A Jewish prisoner was shooting a movie on the orders of a German camp commander and captured this image of Settela. Three months later Settela was dead – gassed at Auschwitz concentration camp, along with her mother, brothers and sisters.

For decades Settela’s face was an icon of Jewish children in the Holocaust. Her name unknown, she was simply called “the girl with the headdress”. But in 1994 a journalist, Aad Wagenaar, discovered her true identity. Settela wasn’t Jewish, she was Roma; it was just assumed she was. Even in the 1990s the genocide of the Roma people was largely unknown.

Settela Steinbach

In May 1944, Settela and her family were labeled as “gypsies” and forced to board a train headed to Auschwitz. A Nazi filmed Settela looking out from the train that was headed to the concentration camp. Settela and her family were probably gassed to death on the night of August 2-3, 1944.

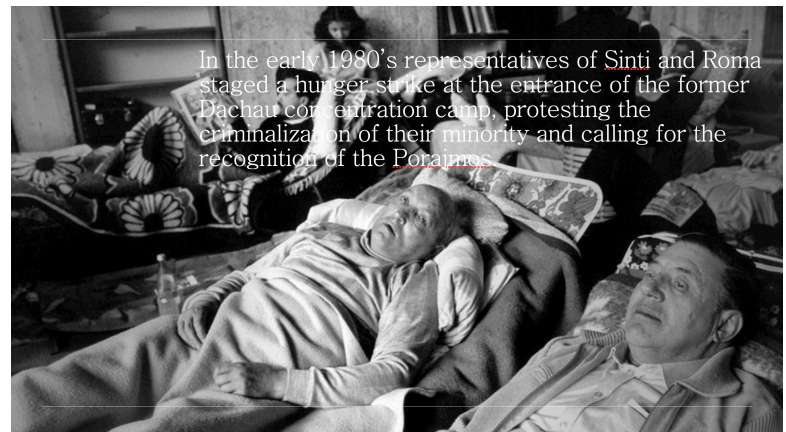


In the last 20 years, much research has been conducted to help accurately record the Bora Porajmos. At the opening of Berlin's memorial for Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust in 2012, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "far too little attention has been paid for far too long."⁵⁸

Some historians still maintain that Nazis did not target Roma for racial reasons, as they did the Jews, but rather because they were criminals. German courts used this argument for decades to deny reparations to Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust. "Compensation claims were denied to Roma and Sinti in Germany in the 1950s on the grounds that 'gypsies were persecuted under the National Socialistic Regime *not* for any racial reason, but because of an asocial and criminal record."⁵⁹ The German government finally acknowledged the Roma and Sinti persecution in 1965. In 1982, for the first time, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt finally called the mass killings of Roma a genocide.⁶⁰ The U.S. Congress did not acknowledge the genocide of the Romani people by the Nazis until 2022.

Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered under National Socialism, Tiergarten Berlin—bearing official statements acknowledging the genocide.

Courtesy of Vasatkiya1 via Wikimedia Commons.



In the early 1980's representatives of Sinti and Roma staged a hunger strike at the entrance of the former Dachau concentration camp, protesting the criminalization of their minority and calling for the recognition of the Porajmos.

ROMA IN THE U.S. TODAY

When Roma came to America, they did not settle as one. They did not create neighborhoods of Roma, unlike the Chinese or Hungarian immigrants. "Instead, they formed pockets based on language, nationality, or some other identifier."⁶¹ Like my family. Kayla Webley notes that "while the divide may have hampered [Roma] identity, it may have helped them fold into society."⁶²

And folding into society was necessary. Roma coming to the United States hoped to escape the racial prejudice, including enslavement, they had endured in Europe. However, since their first arrival in America the Romani people have suffered enslavement, social oppression and legally codified discrimination.

In debating the 14th Amendment in 1866, Senator Edgar Cowen, Republican of Pennsylvania, asked "Is the child of the Chinese immigrant in California a citizen? Is the

child of a Gypsy born in Pennsylvania a citizen If so, what rights have they?" His principal concern was that the 14th Amendment could make it no longer possible to restrict the civil or political rights of those who, like the "gypsies", acknowledge no allegiance, either to the State or to the General Government." Ultimately, Cowen's argument did not prevail, and birthright citizenship was extended to the Roma.⁶³

Examples of codified discrimination include a law in New Jersey, enacted in 1917 and not repealed until 1998, that regulated Roma more harshly than other groups by allowing local governments to craft laws that specified where they could rent property, where they could entertain and what goods they could sell.⁶⁴ Until 1930, Virginia legally barred Roma from telling fortunes. As recently as the 1970s, New Hampshire expelled some Roma from the state on the grounds merely that they were "gypsies". And in New Jersey in the middle 1980s, special regulations and licensing requirements applied to Roma who told fortunes. Until the middle 1980s, Roma households in Mississippi were labeled as "dens of thieves" so that charges brought against one household member would apply to all members.⁶⁵



Facing this kind of discrimination, up until the more recent Roma immigrant groups (the Ludar and Lovara in particular) in the 1990s, the Roma learned to hide and blend in. This may be why my family identified as Italian rather than Roma upon their arrival to the U.S.. Robert Kushen, executive director of the European Rights Center says, "Traditionally,

nothing good has come from being identified Roma because the prejudice is so high."⁶⁶

Part of that prejudice comes from the pervasive stereotype that casts Roma as nomads, beggars, scammers and thieves. Ian Hancock has said, "People are looking for Esmeralda and wagons and horses and tambourines, but of course, they never see them because they don't exist." The real Roma may be your next-door neighbors who are telling you they are Lebanese or Italian. "We're all taught as kids that you don't tell people that you are Roma," says Hancock⁶⁷. Fearful of the racism they experienced and continue to experience in Europe (such as the bulldozing of an entire Roma neighborhood in Milan in 2010), as well as discrimination here in the U.S., many Roma hide part of their identity. They may choose to not identify themselves as Roma, opting

instead to identify with the country they come from, being it Slovakia, Romania, France or Italy.

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