

# Remembering the Genocide of the Roma

by Michael Curtis



Django Reinhardt

**Many religious, ethnic, and national groups** have experienced, historically and in recent years, persecution and discrimination, but only two peoples, Jews and Roma, have been targeted by the German Nazi regime for total elimination to protect German “racial purity.” A Nazi law of 1935 officially defined the technically Aryan Roma as “non-Aryan.” The indictment at the post war Nuremberg trials, November 1945-October 1946, of the leaders of the Nazi regime included “the extermination of racial and national groups ...in order to destroy particular races and classes of people and national, racial, or religious groups, particularly Jews, Poles, and Gypsies (Roma) and others.”

The details of the Holocaust against Jews are well documented, but the Nazi treatment of the Roma is much less familiar. At

the trials at Nuremberg that treatment of the Roma was not specifically prosecuted. Nor are there precise statistics about the number of Roma killed, estimates vary between 250,000 and 500,000, but proportionately they suffered greater losses than any other group except Jews.

The Wiener Holocaust Library in London has the largest British collection of materials, books, pamphlets, documents, photos, and periodical titles, and holds the oldest Holocaust archive in Britain, concerning the Nazi era. The Library is performing a valuable service by holding its current exhibition, titled "*Forgotten Victims: The Nazi genocide of the Roma and Sinti.*" Though the treatment by the Nazis of the Roma was not as systematic as that against the Jews, and started later, it was a genocide, taking similar forms as the Holocaust. Indeed, one poignant reminder of this is the photo displayed of a handsome Roma woman with the Auschwitz tattoo number on her arm.

The Roma and related group Sinti descend from an Indo-Aryan group originally coming from northwest India and dispersed throughout the world. In general, Sinti were located in western and central Europe, while Roma were in south and south eastern Europe.

There has never been an accurate counting of the past or present number of the Roma population, but some estimates suggest the present number is about 3.5 million, with Bulgaria having 10%, and North Macedonia and Slovakia 9% each. In the past, the U.S. apparently absorbed about a million.

The Roma are a distinct ethnic and cultural group, sharing a family of several dialects of a language, and some of them at times living a nomadic mode of life. They are popularly known as Gypsies, a word (*Zigeuner*) deriving from "untouchables." That life of Gypsies has been displayed in Western culture, in *Carmen* by Prosper Merimee and by Bizet, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by Esmerelda in

Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, and by Van Gogh's painting *The Caravans*. Probably the most well known non-fictional Roma is the Gypsy Django Reinhardt, the renowned legendary Belgian jazz guitarist, co-founder of the Quintet of the Hot Club of France. But other celebrities are said to have a Roma inheritance including Tracey Ullman, the British-American actress, Bob Hoskins, the British actor, Yul Brynner, and perhaps even Charlie Chaplin and Michael Caine.

Initially for any official action against them there was the question of identification. Jews could be more easily identified for the Nazis because of the lists and records available by Jewish committees. However, there was and is not similar documentation of who was a Roma. This made the Nazi regime resort to an individual named Robert Ritter, a "racial scientist," who tried to identify the Roma by racial type, and thus establish a register of almost all Roma in Germany.

The Roma have long suffered historic persecution and forced assimilation. But that persecution was sporadic and at random. Germany, even before the Nazis, prepared for action against Roma. An office was set up in 1899 in Germany to fight the "gypsy menace." In 1929 a law held that all Roma in Germany had to register with the authorities. It was however the Nazi regime that passed laws for the protection of German "blood and honor," which aimed at discrimination and possible genocide of the Roma people. Like the Jews, the Roma were considered a racially inferior people, and some were sterilized as "mental defectives." The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 were amended to apply to them as well as to Jews, with consequent loss of citizenship, violence, and persecution, and they were classified as "asocial" persons.

In 1933, a German plan to sink ships containing 30,000 Roma in the Atlantic Ocean was proposed but it was abandoned. In July 1936 the first concentration camp for Roma was set up at Matzahn, outside Berlin. Others followed in Lackenbach and Salzburg. Lackenbach was the largest camp for Roma holding up

to 2,000, an internment and forced labor camp and deportation point. Salzburg was a forced labor camp and also preparatory for deportation. Roma from Germany and German occupied territory were the first to be deported to other places including Jewish ghettos. Adolf Eichmann indicated that car loads of Gypsies were attached to the train transport of Jews. Heinrich Himmler, who in 1938 had set up an office to "fight the Gypsy (Roma) menace," on December 16, 1942 decreed that all Gypsies were to be sent to Auschwitz, but they were also sent to other places. Himmler in 1944 authorized their extermination.

Mass internment in camps for the Roma and Sinti were organized by local German police. The first roundup of Roma was in June 1938 and continued in Dachau, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, and in Jewish ghettos such as Lodz in central Poland. Roma were sent to Lodz, the second largest ghetto after the Warsaw ghetto, in November 1941 where conditions were appalling, and where many died from the typhus epidemic.

Roma were deported, sent from Germany to concentration camps in Poland, Yugoslavia, Bohemia and Moravia at Lety and Hodonin, and eventually to the gas chamber. In the concentration camps the Sinti were forced to wear a black triangle (asocial) or brown triangle. In Auschwitz Roma were put in a special camp, the gypsy camp, where they were subjected to experiments by the infamous, inhumane, Angel of Death, Josef Mengele with his pseudo-scientific racial studies, and experiments to discover means of increasing fertility. It is sad that Mengele evaded prosecution after the War, fled to Brazil where he died in 1979. On August 2, 1944 the special gypsy camp was closed, and all the Roma were gassed in Auschwitz in one night.

This persecution or discrimination of Roma was not limited to Nazi Germany, but occurred in both authoritarian systems such as Croatia and Hungary in 1944, and more moderate countries, especially those collaborating with the Nazis. In the

Netherlands, the occupation authorities interned and later deported its Roma population. The French Vichy regime detained more than 6,000 Roma in the 31 camps in France, mainly at Montreuil-Bellay, where over 2,000 were held under the surveillance of the French police, and which was recently designated a historic site. President Francois Hollande confessed in October 2016 that France had broad responsibility for the internment of thousands of Roma by the Vichy regime.

A secret document signed by Himmler in March 1944 in Nazi bureaucratic language reveals the genocide reality. Prohibitions against Jews and Gypsies, he wrote, were no longer necessary because of the "accomplished evacuation and isolation" accomplished by the secret police and intelligence authorities. Roma and Jews had been removed from the Reich. In December 1942 Himmler had ordered the deportation of all Roma from the German Reich. More than 23,000 Roma and Sinti were murdered at Auschwitz, plus killings by Wehrmacht units and death squads and deportations. Croatia killed 25,000 Roma, almost the whole population, and had a major concentration camp at Jasenovac, the "Auschwitz of the Balkans," run by the Croatian military and secret police, not the Nazis. Photos show Serbian gendarmes taking Roma to their execution. Bulgaria wanted to solve the gypsy problem, for them non-native Europeans, by putting them in reservations.

Post war Germany at first refused to recognize treatment of Roma as genocide committed for racial reasons, but rather spoke of their social and criminal behavior. Only in 1979 did West Germany identify the Nazi persecution of Roma as racially motivated, and began providing some compensation for their suffering, and in 1982 acknowledged that Roma and Sinti had been victims of racial persecution by the Nazis.

The Roma today are probably the largest minority group in Europe, but there is no political lobby constantly concerned with their welfare. The Wiener exhibition in London may change this relative indifference. Already signs of change have

appeared. In 2011 Poland officially adopted August 2 as the day of commemoration of the Roma, the memory of the 2,897 Roma killed in that one night in 1944 in Auschwitz. Earlier, a federal court in Germany in 1956 held that the deportations of Roma had not been for racial reasons, but a pre-emptive criminal measure. However, in 1985 the German legislature endorsed an apology for genocide committed by previous regime. On October 2012 a memorial was held in Germany at which Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke. The monument was designed by an Israeli artist, Dani Karavan, and is located near the Reichstag and memorials for the Holocaust. Merkel said it was acknowledgement that a group of victims have gone unacknowledged for far too long. "We cannot reverse what happened, but we can bring remembrance of it into the very center of our society."

Django Reinhardt, strumming his jazz standard, *Nuages*, would have been delighted by Merkel's remarks. After all, "Django" purportedly means "I awake" in the Romani language.