

The Situation of Concentration Camp Survivors

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Germany | Austria | Socialist Countries

➤ *When the few survivors of the Holocaust returned, they had, in most cases, lost their families and belongings. Yet they were regularly accused of lying about their internment in a concentration camp and thus were refused any aid by the post-war authorities, which continued to work on the basis of the same assumptions and prejudices they had the years, and decades, before. In Germany and Austria, restitution or compensation payments were issued later, but it took until the mid-1990s for them to receive proper offers. In the socialist countries, Roma were not officially recognised as victims of the Holocaust at all.*

“THEY LIVED QUITE PRIMITIVELY, BUT THEY WERE FREE”

III. 1 (abbreviated and translated from Hohmann 1990, p. 176)

On March 1, 1961, the “Oberlandesgericht” (Higher Regional Court) of Munich decided that “the Gypsies of German origin now living in Poland” (that is Roma deported to and interned in Lodz, Chulmo, Auschwitz etc.) had not endured “forced labour or quasi-prison conditions” under the NS regime. Allegedly,

they lived “in open camps, deserted Jewish quarters or with farmers in the country”, “quite primitively, but free.” – “They were occasionally used and drafted into work in armament factories or in road and position construction. It was in the nature of things that they had to do this work under surveillance and certain

in duress. [...] Maltreatment certainly occurred, particularly when single individuals were less apt or willing to work. [...]” The cynical climax of the decision was reached by the statement that it was by no means forced labour, “as the workers were usually not restricted in their free time after working hours”.

GERMANY

Exact figures of Romani survivors of the Holocaust are still not available, since – with the exception of the city of Hamburg, where about 500 Sinti survived – local authorities after 1945 neglected to officially register the number of victims and survivors. The number of surviving Roma in Germany has been estimated at all together less than 5,000. These survivors returned to their home towns, tried to establish contact with surviving relatives and to replace their destroyed and confiscated property, and started to take up their life again.

Since the Roma were victims of the Holocaust, the German local welfare administrations would have been responsible for claims from them as concentration camp survivors. But many of the

administrators refused to acknowledge that the Roma and Sinti had been persecuted on racial grounds and continued to see them as “asocial” persons, with no justified claims for compensation payments. Although the Allied Forces obliged Germany to pay compensation payments to victims of National Socialist persecution in 1945, so-called “Gypsies” were mentioned nowhere in these proceedings. Local authorities – like the social welfare administration in Berlin – introduced discriminatory criteria for Sinti and Romani claimants. If they wanted to be officially recognised as victims, they had to have a permanent address and proof of steady employment.

The different zones of occupation had different systems of restitution and compensation. In the British-occupied zone survivors only got a “Haftentschädigung” (compensation payments for imprisonment), whereas in the American

zone the scheme of compensation and restitution payments was the most generous. However, as early as in 1947, the local welfare administrations responsible for the handling of claims and allocations of money were again cooperating with the criminal police, in order to identify “asocials, criminals and frauds among the claimants.” These “Gypsy specialists” among the bodies of the criminal police, who in several cases had been directly involved in the National Socialist persecution and deportation practices, were now advising the local welfare administrations in their decisions concerning Sinti and Romani claims. In a typical case, the “Landesentschädigungsamt” (compensation office for the province) of Munich in 1950 rejected a claim by a survivor of the concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück, arguing that the racial motivation of the claimant’s persecution was not clearly established. Similar cases

Germany

Austria

Socialist countries

“... THE GYPSY’S ASOCIAL PROPERTIES ...”

The decision of general principle taken by the German Federal Court on January 7, 1956, denied the racial character of the persecution of Roma before Himmler’s decree of 1942. It follows the NS regulations both in argumentation and terminology:

“Focusing at first on the decision of ge-

neral principle by the SS Reichsführer and head of the German police, taken on December 8, 1938, which is given great importance by the appeal judge, it can be clearly seen that notwithstanding clear racial-ideological issues, it is not the race itself which was the cause for the measures taken, but the already mentioned asocial properties of the Gypsies, which had already at earlier times given reason for particular restrictions concerning members of that people. It does not

only point to racial-biological findings, but also focuses on the experiences made in the course of fighting the Gypsy plague; and it seems necessary to tackle the Gypsy question through the nature of that race. The reason for the measures was ordained as follows, that the half-breeds make up the biggest share of Gypsy crimes, and that on the other hand all attempts to make the Gypsies settle failed because of their strong migratory instinct.”

Ill. 2 (translated from Hohmann 1990, p. 172f.)

“JUST LIKE THE CONCENTRATION CAMP”

Traumatised and feeble, often ill, those who returned were literally left with nothing. Theresia Pfeifer, a Romani woman from Stegersbach, Burgenland, recalls:

“And everybody had had a nice house. We did not even get a shilling for our house, not even that. [...] And I went to Stegersbach because of the house, so they would give us something, anything. We got nothing, absolutely nothing. There was nothing we could do. I got nothing in Stegersbach, not even a

slice of bread. And I felt so sick. No man nor woman gave us a slice of bread. [...] It was all over, they had destroyed all our houses. What could we have done? When we came home, it was just like the concentration camp. We had nothing, absolutely nothing.”

Ill. 3 (translated from Amesberger / Halbmayr 2001, p. 181)

are documented for the province of Niedersachsen. With the onset of the Cold War the Holocaust survivors lost their strong support by the American administration, which now was trying to win the new German political elites as allies in their fight against communism. During the 1950s German compensation administrations even

started to employ the same racial biologists and police specialists, who had played a crucial role in the Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma. As a consequence of this cooperation, the victims of forced sterilisation in particular, never got any compensation payments for the injustices they had suffered. In 1950 several surviving Roma and Sinti,

whose claims had been rejected by German welfare administrations, went to court, but in 1956 the German “Bundesgerichtshof” (Federal Court of Justice) finally rejected their claims, denying the racial character of the persecution of Sinti and Roma before Himmler’s decree of 1942. The decision was finally overruled in 1963. [Ill. 2]

AUSTRIA

Recent research has shown that most of the 11,000 Austrians labelled as “Gypsies” by the police administration before 1938 and by the National Socialists after 1938, did not survive the Holocaust. Secret police counts of the late 1940s – which have only recently been released – document that only 10 percent of the people persecuted as “Gypsies” survived the Holocaust. The criminal police as well as local and state administrators persisted in their prejudiced treatment of the rights of Roma up to the early 1960s, often trying to deny them residence permits in their villages of origin. In the first decade after 1945 the government even instructed the

police to question their Austrian citizenship whenever possible. [Ill. 5]

A special Austrian problem posed the property rights of the destroyed “Zigeunersiedlungen” (“Gypsy” settlements) of Burgenland. In the period between the two World Wars there were 130 Romani settlements in Burgenland, usually situated at the fringe of the villages, inhabited by 30 to 300 people. Most of these settlements were to be found in the districts of Oberwart and Güssing in Southern Burgenland, along the current Hungarian and Slovene border. These compact Romani settlements originated from the 19th century. They had generally been erected on common land, but the buildings themselves were the property of the Roma. Most of them were not aware of the fact, that such a “superaedificium” could be re-

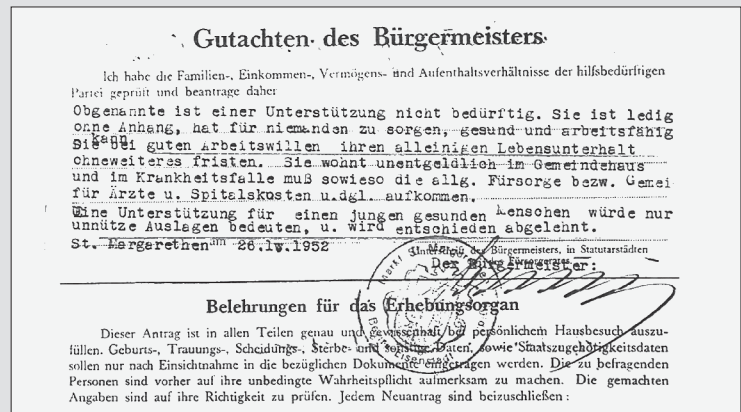
gistered with the public property registry. After the deportation of the local Romani population into labour and concentration camps the settlements were – with very few exceptions – completely destroyed. The houses were pulled down or simply burned down. After 1945 the survivors of the concentration camps were thus unable to file claims for their destroyed property, since they could not prove to have owned houses at all. Houses belonging to Romani families erected on private plots within the villages were usually spared. [Ill. 3]

In many villages the property and private belongings of the deported Roma had been auctioned off among the local population. The houses were torn down and the useable materials were sold off together with the furniture. The proceeds were transferred to regional welfare orga-

III. 4

In 1952 the mayor of Markt St. Margarethen, near Eisenstadt, Burgenland, gave the following reason for his rejection of a victim's welfare claim: "The claimant mentioned above does not need any support. She is single, has no dependants, does not have to look after anybody and is healthy and able to work. If willing, she is able to make a living without any further problems. She has free lodging in a council building and in case she falls ill, the general welfare system and the community will have to cover her fees for doctors and hospitals anyway. Any support for a young and healthy person would only create unnecessary costs and is decidedly rejected." Only years later, after a new mayor had been elected, was her claim granted.

(copy of original document, provided by the author)



“TO IMPRESS, THE GYPSIES PASS THEMSELVES OFF AS CONCENTRATION CAMP SURVIVORS”

The policy of deporting the Roma was continued throughout the whole state with this confidential decree by the Ministry of the Interior (Department 4, Public Security) [1948]:

“It was brought to our notice that the Gypsy mischief is on the rise again in certain areas of the state and can be noticed to our displeasure. To impress the population, the Gypsies often pass themselves off as concentration camp inmates. As long as the regulations of the ‘Ausländerpolizeiverordnung’ (police

law concerning foreigners) seem to apply and it is possible to move them out of this country, the annoying Gypsy question could be solved by banning them from staying in the country and proceeding with the deportations. [...]”

III. 5 (translated from Rieger 2003, p. 53)

nisations – after 1943 to Berlin – which used the money to finance the labour camps and even the deportations into the death camps. Many Sinti and Lovara families had invested their savings in jewels or in gold and silver coins, which were confiscated on arrest. The Roma were never compensated for any of these confiscated valuables.

When the surviving Roma filed so called “Opferfürsorge” claims (claims for “victims’ welfare” payments), they often encountered prejudiced mayors, who collectively disqualified the claimants as “lazy” or “asocial”. [III. 4]

The Austrian “Opferfürsorgegesetz” (“Victims’ Welfare Bill”) of 1947 created two categories of victims. Resistance fighters and people persecuted for political reasons were issued so-called “Amtsbescheinigungen” (official legitimations), which under certain circumstances enabled its bearer to claim a pension. People who “for reasons of descent, religion or nationality ... had suffered substantial damages”, were only issued a so-called “Opferausweis” (“Victim’s legitimization”), which granted the bearer privileged access to communal flats and offered some tax and trade advantages. It

was only after 1949 that victims of racial, religious and nationalist persecution got issued an “Amtsbescheinigung”, if they had been imprisoned in a concentration camp. Since the imprisonment in forced labour camps, work camps and even in the Camp Lackenbach (the largest “Gypsy camp” in the Reich) was not recognised as imprisonment in a concentration camp, many Austrian Roma received only small or no restitution payments whatsoever.

Only after a revised form of the “Opferfürsorgegesetz” (“Victims’ Welfare Bill”) had been passed by the Austrian parliament in 1961 did survivors of Lackenbach and other work camps receive compensation payments for the “restriction of their personal freedom” amounting to 350 Austrian Schilling for every month spent in a camp. Survivors of concentration camps received 860 Austrian Schilling for each month of their imprisonment. The imprisonment suffered in the Camp Lackenbach and in other work camps has not been officially recognised as concentration camp imprisonment until today. After 1988, survivors of these camps were finally issued the so-called “Amtsbescheinigungen”, if they had suffered a minimum of six months imprisonment

in one of them, enabling them to claim a “Victims’ Welfare Pension” under certain circumstances. The claimant had to be needy, encumbered in his ability to work and had to have a clean criminal record. However, due to the discriminatory legislation in the period between the two World Wars, and even after 1945, many Roma had criminal records directly resulting from the restrictions imposed on them, e.g. for “vagabondage”. In cases, where the Roma had been deported to labour camps and concentration camps for their allegedly “asocial” behaviour or way of life, they could not claim restitution payments or victims’ pensions either. For many Roma the required proof of their diminished ability or complete inability to work – due to health problems resulting from their imprisonment – proved to be an insurmountable obstacle, since official medical examiners – many of whom had themselves been involved with the Nazi system – were extremely reluctant to certify physical handicaps of the former concentration camp inmates. Even in cases of obvious handicaps the medical examiners often negated the possibility that these handicaps might be induced by or related to the treatment the Roma had suffered in the camps.

For all victims who had received only unsatisfactory restitution or compensation payments, the Republic of Austria created the “National Fund for the Victims of National Socialism” in 1995, out of which Romani survivors received payments of up to 70,000 Austrian Schillings, about 5,000 Euro. In the year 2000, a separate fund for payments to former slaves or forced labourers was set up by the Austrian government, where Roma from all over Europe were eligible for compensation payments, if the work had been carried out on territory within the current borders of the Republic of Austria. Roma, who had been interned in labour or concentration camps in the German Reich or in German-occupied

lands can also apply to the “German Forced Labour Fund” for compensation.

A recently published study of the economic and social situation of Austrian Roma after 1945 demonstrates the extremely marginalised situation of Romani Holocaust survivors in Austria up until the early 1980s. Their standard of living was considerably lower than that of the majority population, usually lagging behind by 20 years as far as living standards and housing were concerned. Many of them lived in one-room flats and houses without toilets or bathrooms, often up to 10 people per flat, in families usually comprising several generations and distant family relatives.

Due to the bad schooling situation

of the interwar years and the banning of Romani pupils from schools after 1938, the majority of the Holocaust survivors were illiterate. After 1945, children from Romani families – coming from families speaking a minority language, with extremely low family incomes and illiterate parents – were often relegated to schools for mentally and physically handicapped children, a practice only abandoned in Austria in the late 1980s. As a consequence their access to higher education was virtually non-existent. The access of Roma to the Austrian labour market was thus limited to jobs as untrained labourers and itinerant craftsmen and merchants in agricultural products for decades.

SOCIALIST COUNTRIES

In the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany, the later GDR (German Democratic Republic), Roma registering for recognition as surviving victims of National Socialist persecution had to prove their “antifascist-democratic conviction”, a criterion which no other group of victims had to fulfil. The clear aim of these procedures was to exclude Roma from the privileged group of officially recognised anti-fascist victims. The few, who did manage to gain recognition, received a state pension, which in the GDR did not discriminate between victims of political or racial persecution.

Most of the socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe did not recognise the Roma as victims of the Holocaust. The Stalinist ideology of the 1940s and early 1950s, in most cases saw the “Gypsies” just as an especially poor segment of rural society, for which certain special measures were contemplated – as in Hungary – but never really carried out. The marginalised situation of Roma in the countries of the “Eastern Block” was further complicated by social tensions with the families of farmers in their home villages. These tensions were caused by the communist campaigns for land collectivisation, which the farmers unsuccessfully tried to avoid and for which the Communist admini-

strators could win over many agitators among the landless Roma.

A clear picture of the situation of Roma in post-war Communist countries is not yet perceivable. But the one major institution responsible for discrimination against Roma were – here as anywhere else – certain special departments within the police forces, which after 1945 tried to reactivate their anti-“Gypsy” policies and practices of the first half of the 20th century. In Hungary, for example, the Ministry of the Interior started to issue special personal documents for “Gypsies”, which had a black cover instead of the standard red one, in order to be immediately able to “segregate” them; a practice which was only abandoned in the early 1960s.

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