Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti on the Territory of Czechoslovakia

Helena Sadílková

The 1918 Czechoslovak state was dismantled during 1938-1939. The fate of the local Roma and Sinti subsequently developed according to in which state they found themselves – the German Reich, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia, or Hungary. The following text treats only the fate of the Roma and Sinti from the Protectorate and war-time Slovak Republic. While recent historical research shows a certain degree of regional variation, the policies applied to “Gypsies” in Nazi Germany and Hungary basically defined the fate of the Roma and Sinti who remained on the territories ceded to Germany and Hungary and were sooner or later deported to Nazi concentration/extermination camps.

INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the war-time dynamics that brought an almost complete genocide of the Roma and Sinti on the territory of today’s Czech Republic and socio-economic devastation of the Roma in Slovakia, it is important to examine the local historically formed social environments and discourse on the „Gypsies“ which preceded the implementation of Nazi policies in both countries. The Holocaust of the Roma on the territories of today’s Czech and Slovak Republics cannot be fully understood without the knowledge of what has (not) happened – with respect to the victims and survivors – after 1945 and 1989. The war-time experiences of Roma in Slovakia remain until today on the margins of public historical awareness, in spite of sustained efforts to include them into the memorial landscape. The struggle to rid the former Czech “Gypsy” concentration camp in the town of Lety u Písku of the pig farm that was erected on the site and remained in operation since mid-1970’s has started to materialize only in 2018 – while the buy-out of the private firm was steadily contested by a part of Czech society, including some of its high political representatives. Diverse threads linking the Nazi genocide to pre-existing lines of thinking about “Gypsies” in the Czech lands are now being discovered in greater detail.

The Czechoslovak Republic was created in 1918 as a successor state of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, encompassing Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Transcarpathian Ukraine. The Romani population living there (estimated to reach 7.000 people in the Czech lands and more than 80.000 in Slovakia by late 1930s) was similarly diverse in terms of their subethnic identification and – importantly – their socio-economic status, due to differences in the approach to them in the preceding centuries. Slovakia belonged to the territories where central and local authorities allowed for specific forms of inclusion (and sedentarization) of the majority of the local Romani communities as musicians, craftsmen and general household and agricultural workforce. In contrast, the Czech lands had a long history of per-
secution of the Roma and their exclusion from the right of domicile. The majority of the local Romani population was economically dependent on movement, with the important exclusion of south-eastern Moravia, where individual Romani families were allowed to settle by local gentry since late 17th century.

Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia

CHRONOLOGY OF PERSECUTION

Following the incorporation of the Sudetenland into the German Reich in 1938, refugees moved to the inner regions of the Czech lands, including Roma. The general practice towards Romani and Sinti refugees, former Czechoslovak citizens, was to refuse them entry. Partially acting upon public concerns as to the rising number of “Gypsies moving across Czech countryside”, the Protectorate Ministry of the Interior issued the order for “travelling Gypsies” to settle down in November 1939.

The identification of who is a “travelling Gypsy” was not an issue, as there was an administrative and police practice dating back to 1927. In this year, the Czechoslovak parliament passed a law obliging people identified as “travelling Gypsies” to be registered with criminal police and carry a special personal identification document, the so called Gypsy ID. Given a very vague definition of “the travelling Gypsy” in the law, it increasingly became a practice to issue “Gypsy IDs” on the basis of perceived ethnicity. It was this practice and the line of thinking which presented the “Gypsies” – regardless of the actual social differentiation of the local Roma and Sinti – as a threat to public security and a population to be kept under police control which enabled an unproblematic implementation of the wartime anti-Gypsy legislation, including the Nazi decrees.

Already before the occupation by Nazi Germany, some of the Czech authorities argued for the internment of “Gypsies” in camps. This measure was gradually implemented between 1940-1942: since 1940 adult men without proper employment were interned in specialized labour camps, and as of March 1942 camp internment became a part of the “preventive combat of crime”. These measures reached only certain numbers of Roma and Sinti, interned locally and/or included in the transports of people labelled “asocials/criminals by profession” to concentration camps outside the Protectorate.

The prosecution and annihilation of the whole of the Romani and Sinti population in the Protectorate started with the adoption of the Nazi Decree for Combating the Gypsy Plague in July 1942. Its announcement was followed by a register of all “Gypsies” – identifying as such 6500 people – and the establishment of two “Gypsy camps” on the territory of the Protectorate – in Lety u Písku and Hodonín u Kunštátu. In August 1942, less than a half of the registered was interned in the “Gypsy camps” awaiting, in inhumane conditions, their subsequent tragic fate. The rest of the “Gypsy” population – deemed more trustworthy – was to remain in their homes.
TRANSPORTS OF ROMANI AND SINTI FAMILIES FROM THE PROTECTORATE

The Auschwitz Decree from December 1942, decided the fate of all Roma and Sinti in the Protectorate, who were transported to the “Gypsy family camp” in Auschwitz-Birkenau during the following year. The first mass deportations were organized in March and May 1943 and concerned only the Roma and Sinti who were allowed to stay home in 1942. What followed were mass deportations of Roma and Sinti who survived their internment in the Protectorate “Gypsy camps”: in May 1943 from Lety u Písku and in August 1943 from Hodonín u Kunštátu. The last mass transport of Protectorate Roma and Sinti departed to Auschwitz-Birkenau in October 1943. Some Roma and Sinti saved themselves by escaping to Slovakia, some managed to survive in hiding in the Protectorate. The book of prisoners in the Auschwitz-Birkenau “family Gypsy camp” includes 4500 people from the Protectorate. Out of all the Roma and Sinti transported during 1940-1945 outside the Protectorate, only 583 returned home, according to the post-war Czechoslovak police statics from 1947.

"GYPSY CAMPS" IN LETY U PÍSKU AND HODONÍN U KUNŠTÁTU

The concentration camps in Lety u Písku and Hodonín u Kunštátu, run by the Czech Protectorate administration, represent one of the most dreadful parts of the Holocaust realities in the Protectorate. Originally established in 1940 as penal work camps for up to 300 adult men, their capacities were desperately over-exceeded when they were turned into family concentration camps for Roma and Sinti with more than 1300 people interned in each of them. The dramatic change in the numbers and composition of the interned (one third were children under 14, another third were girls and women) was hardly reflected in the approach of the camp commanderies formed by former Czech gendarmes. Shortages of food (as a result of fraud by the camp staff) and material, poor or non-existent hygienic facilities, poor health care, brutal violence experienced on daily basis, and hard work (on construction sites, in a stone mine as well as in the woods and in agriculture) soon resulted in a drastic deterioration of health of all the people interned. Typhoid epidemics broke out in both camps in late 1942 and brought hundreds of deaths, especially among the children (with more than 200 and 300 victims for the Hodonín and Lety camp respectively). Special measures to combat the disease were applied in early 1943, as the camps became a threat to public health but also because the camp commanderies were urged to prepare transports of the interned based on the Auschwitz Erlass.

The approach of the camp commanders to the people interned can be well illustrated by their (in)action vis a vis the typhoid crisis: Josef Janovský, the commander of the Lety camp, was suspended for complete mismanagement in January 1943 (Janovský refused to solve the dramatic health issues in due time; documents reveal the camp administration lost control over the identity of children left orphaned in the camp; large stocks of withheld food and material were found kept stored in the camp, etc.); Štefan Blahýnka, the commander of the Hodonín camp, was called to Lety to solve the crisis. Within
several months, he was ready to organize the mass transport of the Lety prisoners to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Writing to the Lety camp staff after his return to Hodonín, he summarized: “Risking our lives we performed our duty for the benefit of the collective. Despite the dangers, there was something beautiful and noble in our mission.”

The two “Gypsy camps” were closed after the departure of the mass transports to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The Lety camp was torn down, while the Hodonín camp continued to serve as an internment camp in the (post)war era, until it was turned into a summer holiday resort. In 1970s, a large capacity pig farm was erected partially on the site of the Lety concentration camp and in the immediate vicinity of the provisional burial ground for its victims. Both businesses were privatized after 1989.

BELATED MEMORIALS

It took more than seven decades before dignified commemoration of the victims of the two Protectorate “Gypsy camps” could be realized. As a result of international and local pressure, the first memorial on the site of the provisional burial ground for victims of the Lety concentration camp was unveiled by Václav Havel in 1995 next to a fully-functioning pig farm. In 1997 a new memorial monument was erected on the site of the burial ground in Hodonín u Kunštátu. While the smell of the pig farm continued to accompany subsequent annual commemoration acts in Lety, public debate on the possibilities of buying out both the pig farm and the holiday resort continued endlessly. In 2009, a deal was reached over the Hodonín resort, the agreement on the Lety pig farm only in 2018. Both places as well as memorials on the sites of the burial grounds in their vicinity are now managed by the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno.

MEMORY RETAINED

The consequences of the war-time tragedy for Romani and Sinti survivors can only be approximated. They lost most of their relatives, homes, financial means. When returning home they often faced hatred and the old anti-Gypsy stereotypes. „Gypsies” were presented by communist ideologists as victims of previous regimes, but the specificities of their wartime fate were not to be explored. The perpetrators were not punished. “Gypsy registers” were again compiled for new policy proposals – once again called “the solution to the Gypsy question”. Some of the survivors decided to protect their new families by keeping silent about the past. They did not want to bind their children to anything that would indicate their ethnic origin. Many continue to perceive such identification as threatening. Yet, the transfer of the trauma was often inescapable. In spite of the discouraging atmosphere, some of the survivors decided to act on their tragic experience and insist on commemoration. Their post-war activities included: a few written autobiographies, the erection of modest monuments in Lety u Písku and elsewhere, cooperation with researchers, or the strife for political representation and self-organization resulting in the establishment of the Union of Gypsies-Roma (1969-1973) which also organized commemoration in Hodonín u Kunštátu and assisted in compensation claims. While insisting on taking care of the memory of their families and communities, the survivors actually man-
aged with the help of a handful of researchers to save this part of uneasy Czechoslovak history from oblivion.

War-time persecution of the Roma in Slovakia

The Roma in war-time Slovak Republic suffered a long row of persecution orders which resulted in their extreme pauperization, exclusion from the society and isolation. Despite harsh intimidation by the Hlinka Guards, a paramilitary organization of the leading Slovak People’s Party, as well as German army soldiers, in spite of persecution orders by the government, the Roma in Slovakia survived the war as a group. Researchers agree the belated timing of the anti-Gypsy persecutions helped to save their lives and above all the fact that they formed an integral part of the local population. Depending on the region and locality, the approach of the local authorities to the individual Romani families was not uniform but rather based on the previous history of socio-economic (and personal) relations. These protected the Roma in many localities for at least some time or from some parts of the anti-Gypsy measures.

The fact that the Roma were regarded as a population that “belonged” is well illustrated by the discussion in the early 1940s about the implementation of one of the first discriminatory laws which excluded “Gypsies” from the army. In the parliament discussion, the need to define who is a Gypsy was raised with the following comment: “It is well known that one part of this race has acclimatized itself already to the degree that they identify themselves as Slovaks, and Slovaks do not recognize them as Gypsies in the right sense of that word.”

Local relations were enough to protect some Roma and Sinti but they also gradually deteriorated in the war-time misery. The sense of isolation and treachery was even more difficult to bear, when, at a certain point, the Roma found themselves abandoned even by their neighbours. The disintegration of the historically formed social bonds is one of the most drastic effects of the war on the Romani communities in Slovakia with important repercussions until today.

TRAVELLING ROMA

The first central document to target a certain part of the Roma population in war-time Slovakia was the order from June 1939 to control the legal domicile of all “Gypsies” and to exclude them from horse-trade. It was later specified that the horse-trading licences were to be withdrawn only from “travelling Gypsies”. Travel licences were withdrawn from travelling Roma in 1941.

EXCLUSION FROM ARMED FORCES

As mentioned, uncertainties as to which “Gypsies” to target by anti-Gypsy legislation accompanied the implementation of the law on compulsory military service from January 1940 which ordered to admit “Gypsies and Jews” only into labour units instead of the armed troops of the Slovak army. The Ministry of Defence later specified the measure only concerned “travelling
Gypsies” and “settled Gypsies that abstain from work”. The decision which Romani recruits to in/exclude lay with local commissions. As a result, we see Romani men serving in the work battalions as well as fighting in the Slovak army on the side of the Axis Powers in Russia and Italy. Romani soldiers also took part – as deserters or prisoners of war re-integrated into the Allied Powers armies – in the anti-Nazi struggle. In Russia, they joined the First Czechoslovak Army Corps in the USSR. Formed by Czechoslovak emigres in the USSR and Czech and Slovak prisoners of war, the Corps participated, as of 1943, in the liberation struggles of the Red Army in today’s Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia and Czech Republic. According to police estimates from 1945, 1500 Romani soldiers served in the Corps.

FORCED EVICTIONS, GHETTOIZATION, PAUPERIZATION

It was the regulation no. 163 of the Ministry of the Interior from April 1941 that hit the Roma in Slovakia very hard – if not everywhere and right after its adoption, then gradually (the Ministry repeating the obligations in July 1943). The regulation made it illegal for travelling Roma to move outside their place of domicile and – more importantly for the majority of the Romani population in Slovakia – ordered the eviction of all Roma living close to public roads to places separated and far from the local population. The following evictions represented a terrible blow to the socio-economic integration of the Roma into the local communities, as they isolated the Roma and destroyed the daily exchange of services, goods and communication. The places where the Roma were moved to were often far from suited for living. It took sometimes several decades before (if at all) the removed Romani communities managed to return from their makeshift housing back into the original villages.

The isolation and economic desolation was made even worse by local orders that regulated the entrance of the Roma into towns and market places. Trespassing was punished by gendarmes and the Hlinka Guards with beating, detention and humiliating hair cutting. Harassment and humiliating forced hygiene measures were another part of the war-time daily reality. In 1943, Roma were also excluded from public transport, first locally, and as of January 1944 in the whole of Slovakia.

FORCED LABOUR

The internment of Romani men in forced labour camps was another significant part of the anti-Gypsy persecution in Slovakia. The idea of penal camps for adult men for social, moral and/or political reasons was discussed already since the late 1930s. In 1941 the Ministry of the Interior established the first labour camps in Most na Ostrove and Očová. (Camps for “Gypsy families” in Krupina and Močová were also planned but did not start to operate.) In 1942, new labour units were organized – with “Gypsies without employment” listed among the targeted. During 1942-1944, nine forced labour camps were established all across Slovakia in which the Roma formed a significant/dominant proportion. The decision on internment lay with local authorities. While in some localities the mayors refused to send ”their Gypsies” into the camps, in other regions the measure was implemented en mass.

The management of the camps was shared by the Ministry of the Interior and private construction firms who “employed” the internees on infrastructure projects – building railroads (Hanušovce and Topľou, Bystré, Nižný Hrabovec, Petič near Chmeľov, Revúca), roads (Jarabá), and dams (Ústie nad Oravou, Ilava, Dubnica nad Váhom). The conditions in the camps were
terrible – hard work, cruel punishments, buildings plagued with insects, unliveable conditions. Neither of the two responsible parties stood up to their management duties: reports from the camp in Jarabá in 1942 for example talked about half-naked men, working barefoot, starving and suffering from diseases never treated by a doctor. The internees were to be paid for their work, but received very little if anything. The internment not only brought suffering to the interned, but also caused deeper pauperization for their families who lost their men in the difficult war times, and also bore the burden of – if allowed – supplying food to them. Letters by wives asking for the release of their husbands best illustrate their dire situation: “I have four children aged from 5 months to 8 years. I cannot leave them to go to work and let them without my control. So far I have not received a penny from the wage of my husband. I am living in utmost poverty” (Helena Maňkošová, in Nečas 1994).

DETENTION CAMP FOR GYPSIES
IN DUBNICA NAD VÁHOM

Following the 1942 announcement that central authorities will concentrate on the “Gypsy issue” in the following year, 1943 was marked by an increased pressure on local authorities to implement previous anti-Gypsy regulations. In spring 1944 the Ministry of the Interior announced its new plan to intern the whole Romani population in detention camps for “Gypsy” families. Only one of the detention camps was established in Dubnica nad Váhom in the time remaining (the liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army and its allies started already in the early months of 1945).

A forced labour camp was working in Dubnica nad Váhom all year round since 1942, without ever solving the problems with poor hygiene, health care, food and material shortages. As of November 2, 1944, the camp was turned into a “detention camp for Gypsies”. All non-Roma were released and transports brought Romani families into the already poorly managed location. By December 14, more than 700 people, including 250 children, were interned in the camp suffering from freezing weather, starvation and horrific hygienic conditions. The spread of infectious diseases – and the breakout of typhus epidemics – forced the authorities to stop further transports in December 1944. Local hospitals refused to take in more patients and the increasing number of people infected were thus kept inside the camp in provisional quarantine.

The locality was a sensitive one – an important weapon factory was operating in Dubnica nad Váhom, and the whole region on the border with the Protectorate was controlled by the German army. Disturbed by the developments in the detention camp, the German army authorities intervened. In February 1945, on the pretence of taking the patients to a hospital, German soldiers brutally killed a group of 26 people. The camp itself was dissolved in April 1945 – in a chaos, as the frontline was already approaching. Survivors from eastern Slovakia talk about further suffering and deaths they encountered on their way home – going eastwards towards the German forces and the front line that were both moving westwards.

REPRISALS AGAINST THE ROMA
DURING AUTUMN 1944 – SPRING 1945

The last months of the Second World War in Slovakia brought the most brutal prosecution of the people directly or indirectly involved in the Slovak National Uprising (crushed in October 1944) and the partisan war-fight. Reprisal operations were led by the German army troops, the SS, Sicherheitsdienst and Sicherheitspolizei units, but local paramilitary organizations also
Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti on the Territory of Czechoslovakia

**ILL. 14**
The testimony by Irena Tomášová (born 1923, Tolčemeš) on forced eviction, in Jana Kramářová et al. (2005):

"Our childhood was beautiful. […] The people in our place did not make any distinctions, we were used to each other. […] After 1939 only one family joined [the Hlinka Guards], […] but they made fuss in all of the village. […] they would not let us into the town, to do shopping, nothing. […] They would not let us sleep, woke us up in the middle of the night! And […] then they came and (she is crying) we had to break down our houses by our own hands. […] They brought us three kilometers away […] and they abandoned us there […] You cannot imagine the pain we felt. […] I would have never thought that we could be harmed by someone whom we knew, whom we helped out […] who knew that we had never done anything bad to him […] That such person can humiliate you so much, […] I could not forget, […] I could not forgive.

**ILL. 15**
Working among Romani communities since the early 1950s, Elena Lacková (1921-2003), one of the key figures in the Romani movement in Slovakia, experienced some of most dire post-war realities in eastern Slovakia. Her summary presents an insight into the effects of the war-time persecutions in some of the local communities and their post-war repercussions:

What was worse than the material poverty was the fact that after five years of constant fear, uncertainty, chicanery, and maltreatment, those hungry, dirty, sick, lice-infested, illiterate people had stopped taking care of themselves, and nothing mattered to them, because they had come to know that not a single one of their wishes would be listened to, and that their every effort was in vain. (…) People had stopped believing, stopped trying, fallen into a kind of lethargy and living death.

**COMMEMORATION**
The first ceremony to commemorate Romani victims of the Holocaust was organized in Slovakia in 1991. Following an initiative by the Slovak Ministry of Culture in 2005 to support the commemoration of the specific fate of the Roma in Slovakia during the Second World War, the NGO *In minoritu* has organized commemoration ceremonies and erected monuments in places connected with war-time persecution and suffering of the Roma in Slovakia. As part of the project “Ma bisteren/Do not forget”, memorials designed and/or produced by Romani artists and craftsmen were installed since 2005 to commemorate the participation of the Roma in the anti-Nazi fight, the victims of forced labour and the detention camps, the Roma executed following the Slovak National Uprising, and victims of mass murders in local Romani communities in the aftermath of the Uprising.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**