



The Fate of the Gypsies at Auschwitz Birkenau

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[Editor's Note: While most of us -- and rightly so -- identify the term "holocaust" with the Nazi genocide against the Jews during World War II, the mass slaughter and persecution extended to other groups as well: gypsies, homosexuals, and mental patients among them. More than half a million gypsies (Sintis and Roms) are estimated to have been killed by the Nazis. While Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and their families have engaged in a 50-year struggle to reclaim their lives and their history, the suffering of other victims has been less well articulated. In the essay that follows, Karl Bonhoeffer reviews a recently published compendium of the experiences of European gypsies in one of wartime Germany's most notorious concentration camps. M&GS 1995;2:91-97]

Two volumes of a unique book -- The Sintis and Roms in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp -- are in front of me. Written in three languages -- English, Polish, and German -- and filling a total of 1,674 pages, the work is dedicated to "the Sintis and Roms, men, women and children who were tormented, humiliated and murdered in Auschwitz." It was edited by the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau in cooperation with the Documentary and Cultural Center of German Sintis and Roms in Heidelberg and was published in 1993.

Volume I contains a preface by Romani Rose, an introduction by Ian Parcer, a brief essay "On the History of the Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau" by Waclaw Dlugoborski ,and the camp register of gypsies (female) at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Volume

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II contains the camp register of gypsies (male) at Auschwitz Birkenau, an alphabetical register of the names of the gypsies entered in the camp registers, an alphabetical register of their birthplaces as entered in the camp registers, statistical analyses, reports from eight survivors, a chronological synopsis of the campaign against the gypsies, various documents, and an appendix -- "SS-men in the gypsy camp at Auschwitz Birkenau."

The Faces of the Sintis and Roms

The unique thing about this book is its character as a "memorial book," which -- quite consistent with the publisher's goal -- prevents reading it as a normal book. The book requires the complete concentration of all those who are prepared to deal with the question at all, and for two very different reasons: first of all, because of its gruesome contents, which can not easily be put out of one's mind, and second, because of the inexplicable carelessness with which the book was made (see below).

The core of this memorial book are the

two registers of the gypsy camp. They were kept by prisoners -- the men's camp register was kept for a time by Elisabeth Guttenberger, one of the survivors who tells her story in the book -- and were buried by the prisoners on the grounds of the camp in 1944. Although damaged, they were successfully unearthed in 1949. Since 1960, the individual original pages have been kept under foil in the archives of the Auschwitz Memorial. The full contents of those pages have now been published for the first time.

The camp registers provide reliable information on the first and last names, birth-dates, birthplaces, and nationalities of more than 20,000 Sintis and Roms: 10,849 women and 10,094 men. They came from 13 countries, most of them from Germany and Austria (63%), as well as Czechoslovakia (21%) and Poland (7%). The others are distributed relatively equally (less than 1%) among France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Yugoslavia (including Croatia and Slovenia), Hungary, the Soviet Union, Lithuania, Norway, and Spain. Approximately 90% of them arrived in the year 1943.

The entries regarding the fate of the camps' prisoners -- whether they were transferred to another concentration camp or died -- at the time seem to have been made relatively thoroughly. In contrast, the columns on profession, marital status, religion (only for men) and "entry into the camp" are filled in only sporadically. As such, we know the professions of only 11% of the men and 54% of the women. Of the latter, approximately one-third list no profession at all. Among both sexes, workers and agricultural labourers prevail by far (63% of the men and 49% of the women); academic professions are not discernible.

The mere fact of seeing all of these pages with a seemingly unending list of names causes a barely tolerable level of horror to arise in the reader. If one then compares the data of the camp registers with other documents in the book, insights into individual fates are made possible, which are then very difficult to forget. And that's exactly how it should be. This book is necessary because to date, far too few people have dealt in an adequate manner with the fate of the Sintis and Roms under Nazi rule. How many of us have truly realized the fact that the Sintis and Roms were tortured, humiliated, and murdered exactly, yes, precisely like the Jews? How many of us, when we hear the word "Holocaust," think of the genocide of the Sintis and Roms along with that of the Schoah? It took until the year 1982 for a German Chancellor -- Helmut Schmidt at that time to officially recognize the fate of the Sintis and Roms for the first time!

Stations On The Road To

Auschwitz

In the past few years, the Documentary and Cultural Center of German Sintis and Roms in Heidelberg, as well as universities and research facilities in both Germany and Austria, have published a whole series of comprehensive studies on the persecution and genocide of the Sintis and Roms, so that at the very least we are now in the position of being able to "clearly follow the painful path that ended in Birkenau for the majority of German, Austrian, and Bohemian Sintis and Roms." The persecution and annihilation of the Sintis and Roms have their roots in the years long before the "seizure of power"; in the eyes of the Nazis, the Sintis and Roms were always not only "asocial," but also "alien and racially inferior elements"; long before 1933, men recognized as scientists attempted to explain the lifestyle of the Sintis and Roms on genetic or "race" grounds. A certain Dr. Ritter was in the forefront here; he would later play a significant role in the Sintis and Roms annihilation process (see notes to the year 1936, below). Today, we are experiencing a revival of racism. In times like these, a book like this must be taken more seriously than ever. The only fear is that it might not gain the desired level of distribution -- not least because of its price of 398 German Marks. Therefore, I consider a condensed chronological report on the fate of the Sintis and Roms under National Socialism, as it is represented in this book, to be a necessary part of this review.

1933

* On 14 July, the "Law to Prevent Progeny with Inheritable Diseases" is passed. The supporters of this law openly call for the generational annihilation of the Sintis and Roms; deportation is not considered sufficient as a "final solution" of the "gypsy question."

* The first compulsory camps for Sintis and Roms are established in Germany's large cities.

1934

* Sintis and Roms are expelled from professional associations. Artists and musicians are the most negatively affected.

1936

* For the first time, Sintis and Roms -- about 400 people -- are transported to the Dachau concentration

camp. After the "Anschluss" of Austria, another 1,500 are added.

* From the annex to the "Nuremberg Laws": "Of the foreign blood common in Europe, there are only Jews and Gypsies." Marriages between gypsies and non-gypsies are prohibited.

* Dr. phil. Dr. med. habil. Robert Ritter, a neurologist from Tübingen, takes over the direction of the Rassenhygienische Forschungsstelle ("Institute for Race Hygiene and Population Biology")¹ of the Reich's Health Department in Berlin. Amalie Schaich, one of the survivors who tells her story in the book, remembers a visit from him to her home when she was a 14-year-old girl.

1938

* In January, Himmler announces the regulation against "work-shy elements."

* As a result of that regulation, Sintis and Roms are arrested and transported to the Buchenwald concentration camp in March and April. Two hundred of them may have been later transported to Auschwitz.

* A new wave of arrests throughout the country begins in June.

* In October, the "Gypsy Office," established in Munich in 1926, comes under the auspices of the Reichskriminalpolizeiamt (National Police Headquarters); it is called the "Reich Head Office to Combat the Gypsy Problem."

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1. The Institute for Race Hygiene and Population Biology was established for the "solution to the Gypsy problem" and was later made a part of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA - Main Office for State Security). Initially, its responsibilities included developing so-called criteria for "race characterization" and to justify them genealogically. After the beginning of the war, it began to concentrate on the "complete registration" of Sintis and Roms, so that "the appropriate papers can be provided for the radical measures that are soon anticipated." It received the lists prepared in the 21 "Gypsy Regional Bureaus" of the RSHA, and turned them into deportation lists based on "race reports." By 1941, the research facility had registered approximately 20,000 people within the "Gypsy Clan Archives" in this manner.

* In December, Himmler announces his "Decree for Basic Regulations to Resolve the Gypsy Question Required by the Nature of the Race"; also referred to as the "Decree on the Fight against the Gypsy Plague."

1939

* On 21 September, a meeting takes place in the RSHA regarding the deportation of approximately 30,000 Sintis and Roms from Germany to Poland.

* On 16 October, the Gestapo in Berlin gives the following written notice to their regional headquarters in Moravian-Ostrava: "Regarding the removal transport of Gypsies, you are informed that the first transport of Jews will leave from Vienna on Friday, 20 October 39; 3-4 wagons of Gypsies can be attached to this transport. Continual transports will now leave regularly . . ."

* On 17 October, Himmler's "Enabling Order" is sent to all police stations; it forbids Sintis and Roms to leave their place of residence. A total of 21 "Gypsy Centres" are established in all major cities of the country; with in three days -- from 25-27 October -- they are required to set up "gypsy lists" and prepare for the transport to the death camps.

1940

* With the deportation of 2,800 Sintis and Roms in May, entire families of people are carried off from Germany into occupied Poland for the first time.

1941

* Immediately following Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union in June, the mass murder of Jews, Communists, and Sintis and Roms by SS troops begins behind the eastern front.

* In October, talks are held in the RSHA about beginning the deportation of Sintis and Roms from Bohemia and Moravia.

* In November, 4,996 Sintis and Roms are transported from Austria to

the ghetto in Litzmannstadt.

1942

* In January, February, March, and April, all Sintis and Roms from the Litzmannstadt ghetto are murdered in the Kulmhof extermination camp; the ghetto is "liquidated."

* In September, all "anti-social elements" -- a term that included gypsies -- are subjected to the direction of SS-Reichsfuehrer Himmler by German Justice Minister Thierack.

* By the end of the year, almost 40,000 Sintis and Roms from Germany and Austria are registered by Section V of the RSHA, under the direction of Nebe, a gas wagon specialist and, subsequently, Einsatzgruppen leader. Of these, approximately 25,000 died; 10,000 in Auschwitz alone.

* The Nazis dealt with all Sintis and Roms in their areas of occupation in the same way: they either interned them and then deported them to extermination camps, or they murdered them behind the front. The Wehrmacht was deeply involved in these mass murders. Sintis and Roms in Serbia suffered the worst fate. According to the German administration, Serbia was classified as the only country where "the Jewish question and the Gypsy question are completely solved." As an example of the Wehrmacht's massacres, one of the book's documents is the secret report of a certain First Lieutenant Walther on the "Shooting of Jews and Gypsies," which contains the following quote: "Shooting Jews is easier than shooting Gypsies. One must admit that Jews go to their deaths in a very controlled manner -- they stand very calmly -- while the Gypsies cry, scream and are constantly moving, even when they're already standing at the shooting site. Some of them even jumped into the ditch before the shots and tried to feign death."

Only in Bulgaria are Sintis and Roms able to escape persecution, since they are Moslems and under the protection of the supreme Islamic religious leader. This kind of protection was not available in other places, for example in our own Christian coun-

tries. "The singling out of Sintis and Roms in Germany, as well as in the annexed or occupied territories, proceeded with virtually no problems. At no time was there any protest or resistance against the deportations; neither from the Churches - nor from other groups."

We will never be able to determine exactly how many Sintis and Roms were murdered by the Nazis. On the one hand, the exact number of Sintis and Roms was never known -- at least not in the countries of the East (Poland, White Ruthenia, Yugoslavia, the Ukraine), where the number of victims was probably the highest; due to their lifestyle, only a small portion of the Sintis and Roms were registered in census counts in those countries. On the other hand, we do know that Sintis and Roms were murdered not only in almost all known concentration and extermination camps, but also in many other places that we do not even begin to know about. In occupied Poland alone, about 150 such sites have been identified in recent years. But nowhere were more Sintis and Roms murdered than in Auschwitz. Romani Rose estimates that a total of more than 500,000 Sintis and Roms were murdered by the Nazis, and writes in the preface: "In Germany as well as in the areas of National Socialist occupation, there is not a single family among the Sintis and Roms who didn't lose close relatives."

* At an event of the Central Committee of German Sintis and Roms on 9 June 1983, Heinz Galinski, the Committee head, stated, "Not even every second Rom or Sinti in Europe survived the death machine of the Nazis."

The Gypsy Camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau

On 16 December 1942, Himmler announced the so-called "Auschwitz Decree," which proclaims that all Sintis and Roms, "with no regard to their degree of racial impurity" were to be deported "by families to Auschwitz Concentration camp (gypsy camp)." Expansion of the gypsy camp was begun in late 1942; this was the first of six parts of phase-II construction in Auschwitz-Birkenau. It consisted of 32 wooden barracks, of which 20 were for "living," four for sick inmates, two for babies and children, and one

for Dr. Mengele's laboratory.

Each of the 22 "barracks for living" contained three-story plank beds; one for each family regardless of size. "Barracks which would have had room for maybe 200 people often housed 800 or more," recalls Elisabeth Guttenberger. At the end of February 1943, the first four transports with a total of 828 Sintis and Roms arrived at the gypsy camp; by May 1943, there were already approximately 16,000 Sintis and Roms there and new transports arrived every month until July of 1944.

A total of 22,411 Sintis and Roms were taken to Auschwitz. A somewhat lesser number are listed in the camp registers (see above). In the course of the 17 months that the camp existed, almost all of them died.² Most of them died of the effects of their "living conditions," of exhaustion, starvation, nonspecific infections, diarrhea, typhoid fever, tuberculosis, etc. Thousands of them were murdered -- either beaten to death while working (sometimes 50 or 60 per day) or killed in the gas chambers. On 23 March 1943, 1,700 Sintis and Roms were gassed to death immediately following their arrival from Bialystok, because typhoid fever had broken out there and the SS was afraid of an epidemic; another 1,035 Sintis and Roms were gassed on 25 May 1943, because the SS was afraid of a typhoid epidemic in the camp.

Finally, another 2,897 Sintis and Roms died in the gas chambers on 2 August 1944 when the camp was "liquidated." This "liquidation" was the second attempt to do away with the camp and its inmates. The first, on 16 May 1944, failed when the inmates resisted. This time, under the direction of Dr. Mengele, the inmates capable of working were transferred to the main Auschwitz camp or to other concentration camps, while the weak, sick, and children -- numbering 2,897 according to Nazi documents, about 3,500 according to the recollection of survivor Elisabeth Guttenberger, and about 4,000 according to concentration camp commander Rudolf Hoss -- were driven one barracks at a time into the gas chambers three hours later. Hoss recalls, "It wasn't easy getting them into the chambers."

The children in the gypsy camp suffered an especially terrible fate, which is told not only by many survivors, but was observed by the occupying SS forces as well. The mortality rate among children was extremely high. The children were starving and crying for bread night and day. The food they received contained none of the things that children need to build up their bodies. Children over 10 were forced to work hard and were driven

just like the adults. Together, children and adults had to "stand at the ready" for hours, outside, in all weather, even at night. They were the first of the inmates to die of starvation and infectious diseases; given their circumstances, they were the most susceptible to the diseases that, due to the hygienic conditions, could be contracted anywhere even in the dirty bathing troughs.

As shown by the statistics in these pages, 336 babies were born in the gypsy camp. An evaluation of this figure (it is missing in the book) shows the following: one-fifth of the babies died in the first week of life; half of them were dead within one month; three-quarters were no longer alive after two months; and within six months all but six died. These six children lived between 195 and 401 days.

When children had rare diseases, presented distinctive biological characteristics (for example, different colours in the two eyes, heterochromia iridis), or were twins, then Dr. Mengele was interested in them. Of approximately 20 pairs of twins on whom he experimented in the gypsy camp, almost all were killed for purposes of autopsy.

Three of the eight survivors who tell their story in the book had some personal experience with Dr. Mengele. Mr. Clemens describes his job as Mengele's "gofer": he had to make sure that no unauthorized people entered or left the hospital building; he had to pull individual corpses out of the little hut where they were stacked, note their numbers, and bring selected ones to Mengele for autopsy. Clemens had to deliver the twins selected for "experiments" to Mengele, who would tattoo extra numbers onto them. But Clemens was not allowed to be present for the "experiments" that Mengele performed every two or three days.

Among the documents is a protocol of Mengele's for a routine urinary analysis of a 7 year-old child, as well as a protocol for a histological examination of the head of the corpse of a 12-year-old child. Thirty-three SS men worked in the camp. The book mentions them by name with a short biography, sometimes with a photo. By the end of the war, three of them died; 13 more could not be traced. Following the end of the war, three more died without being captured -- among them Mengele -- and criminal proceedings were instituted against 14 of them. Seven were sentenced to death, two to life in prison, two to 4 and 6 years in prison, respectively. One has been sought since 1965; one was classified "beyond searching," and one was acquitted.

2. Due to the faulty analysis on p. 1476, a more exact estimate is not possible.

Contradictions, Inaccuracies, and Unanswered Questions

A book as important -- and expensive! -- as this one should be impeccable in terms of scholarship. As mentioned earlier, however, it unfortunately does not live up to that standard, since it contains confusing contradictions and inaccuracies, along with annoying omissions and mistakes. It leaves many questions unanswered, and some things to be desired.

The very first illustration is incorrectly captioned: the U.S. Air Force did not, as claimed, photograph only the gypsy camp, but rather the entire camp complex of the Auschwitz I and II camps. The gypsy camp is barely discernible. In the two alphabetical registers, there is no note regarding what the numbers behind the peoples' names and residences mean: they refer to the original page in the camp register and not -- as might be assumed -- the prisoner's number.

The essay "On the History of the Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau" deals more with the history of Sintis and Roms in Europe than the history of the camp. The printed text of the autobiographical recollections of Rudolf Hoss is longer than the facsimile. Again and again, the reader finds differing information from different authors on the same set of facts regarding the countries from which the Sintis and Roms were transported to Auschwitz, the passing of the "Law to Prevent Progeny with Inheritable Diseases," the location of the "Institute for Race Hygiene and Biological Biology" in Berlin, the question of whether all of the victims were registered in the presented documentation or not, the number of children born in the camp, the Sintis and Roms' last road to the gas chambers upon the "liquidation" of the gypsy camp and more.

The omissions include any and all literary references throughout all contributions to the book. Important abbreviations used in the book are neither explained nor translated. For example, there is no explanation for the important abbreviation "Z" on p. 21 -- eventually one figures out that it must stand for "Zigeuner" ("gypsy" in German), and that all abbreviations combined with "Z" stand for the nationalities. The word "Sonderbehandlung" ("special treatment") appears with no commentary whatsoever; the majority of readers probably don't know that "Sonderbehandlung" meant nothing less than execution.

In the statistical analyses the professions are not translated into English and Polish; the statistics have merely headings instead of legends; the author of the chronology is not mentioned; the listing of SS ranks does not

include the corresponding ranks in the Wehrmacht and/or Bundeswehr; and more.

Columns in the statistical analyses are mixed up and contain wrong German terms, erroneous headings, and inaccurate numbers. Two pages are mixed up in the document section. Professor Ferdinand Sauerbruch is mistakenly referred to as the holder of the Nobel prize.

I question why there are four contributions that have such a similar content, of which three are at the beginning and one is at the end of the book; why the statistical information on the nationalities of the Sintis and Roms deported to Auschwitz is presented in such exaggerated detail, while other figures, surely every bit as interesting, are missing completely: for example, the number of children in the camp, or the question of whether there is a correlation between survival time and age, both among those born in the camp and those transported there; according to which criteria the documents were selected, and why certain types are disproportionately represented in the book (death certificates, photos, and watercolours by prisoners); when and under what circumstances the eight survivors made their statements; why photos of some SS men appear and not others; and more.

Confronting the Fate of the Gypsies

Finally, I would like to know for what kind of readers the publishers are striving. In its present form, the book seems to be able to interest only those who were already convinced of the significance and need for such a book before it was even published -- and that really should not be the case. Maybe my standards are too strict, and maybe I'm being too critical. But this subject, which, after all, affects not only the friends of the Sintis and Roms, seems to call for a special degree of reliability and thoroughness in terms of presentation as its supreme commandment. And I'm afraid that each inaccuracy, omission, or mistake may be damaging to both the book's reputation and its purpose.

In my own case, however, this did not happen. I must admit that all of my complaints lost more and more importance the longer I dealt with them; and I asked myself more and more frequently what purpose scientific criteria actually have in the context of the book's atrocious contents. The book is supposed to be a commemorative volume. And if commemoration strives to be more than an empty word, it requires a particularly intense confrontation with the fate of those to be commemorated. As such, the aforementioned flaws of the book -- unwillingly, but

nonetheless consistently with the intentions of the publishers -- serve to intensify the memorial when all is said and done.

I, for one, would have read the book with much less attention if it had been made perfectly. In the future, when I think of the word "Holocaust," I will think of the Sintis and Roms every bit as much as the Jews. That was not the case before I studied the book. It was not the case although I "knew" that the Nazis did not differentiate between Jews and "gypsies" in their genocide. And it was not the case although I had personally been to Auschwitz several times and "knew" that there had been a gypsy camp. I am thankful to the authors and publishers for this publication. 