

Gerhard Baumgartner

# The Road Towards Genocide

The Process of Exclusion and Persecution of Roma and Sinti  
in the 1930s and 1940s

---

## Abstract

The fate of the European Roma during the Holocaust, the murder of several hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti in the territories under control of the Third Reich – a genocide which by Roma and Sinti representatives is also referred to as ‘Porrajimos’ or ‘Samudripen’ – now forms an accepted part of European historical discourse on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has become the focal point of a new Europe-wide process of Roma identity formation. In its monstrosity and unprecedented brutality it is like a vast shadow cast upon the common history of Roma and Gadge alike, a memento of an unspeakably dehumanised past.

Historians have reconstructed the events that culminated in these murderous acts in great detail, mapping the increasingly radical acts of marginalisation and persecution of people labelled as ‘Zigeuner’ (‘Gypsies’) by the authorities. This marginalisation started during the Romantic period, when Europeans were told to see ‘Gypsies’ as fundamentally different and exotic – the ‘last savages of Europe’. This, combined with the emerging ‘science’ of eugenics, which declared these differences to be genetically determined and therefore immutable, prepared the ground for their marginalisation and exclusion from society, based on pseudo-scientific concepts.

A severe social crisis caused by the global economic crisis of the 1930s, aggravated by the lack of adequate social welfare systems in Central and Eastern Europe at the time, led to clashes between the Roma and non-Roma populations, especially in the formerly Hungarian, now Austrian, Burgenland region. This later provided the justification for the Nazi administration’s racist policies against Roma and Sinti, which eventually culminated in genocide. Some key ingredients in this catastrophe may seem strangely familiar now, as we can again encounter them in Europe today. Looking at the policies that paved the way for the Nazi genocide of the ‘Gypsies’, it becomes clear that many of today’s policies and administrative practices affecting Roma, especially in Eastern Europe, are not that new after all and have worrying echoes in the past.

---

The fate of the European Roma during the Holocaust, the murder of several hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti in the territories under control of the Third Reich – a genocide which by Roma and Sinti representatives is also referred to as ‘Porrajimos’ or ‘Samurdaripen’ – now forms an accepted part of European historical discourse about the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has become the focal point of a new Europe-wide process of Roma identity formation.<sup>1</sup> In its monstrosity and unprecedented brutality it is like a vast shadow cast upon the common history of Roma and Gadge alike, a memento of an unspeakably dehumanised past.

Historians have reconstructed the events that culminated in these murderous acts in great detail, mapping the increasingly radical acts of marginalisation and persecu-

---

1 Slawomir Kapralski, *The Holocaust in the Memory of the Roma. From Trauma to Imagined Community?*, in: Larry Stillman and Graeme Johanson (ed.), *Constructing and Sharing Memory, Community Informatics, Identity and Empowerment*, Cambridge 2007, 114-123.

tion of people labelled as ‘Zigeuner’, i.e. ‘Gypsies’, by the authorities. But the description of the gradually escalating violence often prevents scholars from recognising central elements of marginalisation and persecution, which we now think of as typical of the Nazi period and Nazi persecution machinery, but which in fact have long been present in European society.

One of the often underrated but nevertheless crucial elements of marginalisation of Europe’s so-called Gypsies is their idealisation, which set in during the Romantic period. ‘Gypsies’ were cast in the role of the last children of nature, relics of an idyllic past, unimpaired and unspoilt by the many restraints of bourgeois society, living a carefree, temperamental life of simple wants and simple pleasures. An 1830s painting by Ferencz Pongrácz entitled *The Three Gypsies* illustrates this idealised view of the Gypsy, a view which the Central European poet Nikolaus Lenau translated into well-known verses:

### *The Three Gypsies*

*Once I chanced upon gypsies three  
resting in sunny weather,  
as my jalopy carried me  
wary through gravelly heather.*

*Just for himself one gypsy had  
gotten hold of his fiddle,  
played, surrounded by evening’s red,  
fiery songs for a diddle.*

*Had the other a pipe in his mouth,  
looked at the spiralling matter -  
happy, as if from the whole of this earth  
nothing could suit him better.*

*And the third one in comfort slept,  
his guitar in a tree bend;  
over the strings the breezes crept,  
over his heart a dream went.*

*On their clothing carried the three  
holes with patches around them,  
but they defied intrepidly  
what in their destiny bound them.*

*Threefold the gypsies revealed that day,  
how, when one’s life is benighted,  
to sing it, to smoke it, to dream it away -  
and thrice to detest and deride it.<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> Nikolaus Lenau, Drei Zigeuner [Three Gypsies] 1838, in: Hermann Engelhard (ed.), Nikolaus Lenau. Sämtliche Werke [Complete Works], Stuttgart 1959, translated by Walter A. Aue.



© Hungarian National Gallery Budapest

Ferencz Pongrácz: Three Gypsies, 1836.

Romanticism taught modern Europeans that the Roma were fundamentally different from 'us' – that they would never be like the rest of us. Initially, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this prejudice still conveyed mostly positive connotations, but not for long.

That this romantic image of the 'Gypsy' should prove so powerful and lastingly effective, is due to the appearance, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, of a new medium, photography, which swept across Europe. Photography played a pivotal role in the history of Roma and Sinti. The first photographs, called *carte de visite* because they were the size of a visiting card, sold in the thousands. Bestsellers were portraits of royals, such as Empress 'Sisi' and Franz Joseph, famous murderers and their executions, and exotic peoples – in Europe first and foremost the 'Gypsies'.<sup>3</sup> Photographers in Transylvania captured these 'last savages of Europe' and sold their images in tens of thousands of copies all over the continent. The photos were arranged in their studios and the photographers often supplied all the clothes and props.<sup>4</sup>

3 Anne Maywell, *Colonial Exhibitions and Photography, Representations of the Native and the Making of European Identities*, London/New York 2000.

4 Peter Szuhay, Zur Darstellung der Roma und Sinti in der 'Zigeunerfotografie' des 19. Jahrhunderts und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts [Concerning the Representation of Roma and Sinti in the so-called 'Gypsy-Photography' of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century], in: Gerhard Baumgartner/Taifun Belgin (ed.): *Roma & Sinti, 'Zigeuner-Darstellungen' der Moderne [Roma & Sinti, 'Gypsy-Representations of Modernity']*, Krems 2007, 24-29; Frank Reuter, *Fotografische Repräsentation von Sinti und Roma. Voraussetzungen und Traditionslinien [Photographic Representations of Sinti and Roma, Conditions and Traditions]*, in: Silvio Peritore/Frank Reuter (ed.), *Inszenierungen des Fremden. Fotografische Darstellungen von Sinti und Roma im Kontext der historischen Bildforschung [Staging the Other. Photographic Representations of Sinti and Roma in the Context of Historical Visual Research]*, Heidelberg 2011, 163-222.

The 'Gypsies' captured in these photographs mostly represented a very small and special segment of the European Roma population, namely groups of wandering Roma of Moldavian, Transylvanian and Romanian origin, who, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, started to appear in larger numbers in other European countries. A minority even then, albeit a picturesque minority.

It is very important to remember that the number of Roma and Sinti actually living in Central European countries was very small. In the western provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy only 492 Gypsies were counted by the provincial authorities.<sup>5</sup> In 1893, a first official census established about 275,000 Roma and Sinti in Hungary. And Hungary at that time included all of Croatia, northern Serbia, Transylvania, all of Slovakia and the Transcarpathia region of what is now the Ukraine. These 275,000 amounted to little more than 1.2 per cent of the total population of this vast area, and 90 per cent of them were already settled; a mere nine per cent were classified as *kóbor cigányok*, i.e. as *truly nomadic Gypsies*.<sup>6</sup>

But by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, literature and operettas, supported by photographs and paintings,<sup>7</sup> had firmly embedded a romanticised image of the 'Gypsy' in the mind of the average European that is reflected in this Czech postcard.



© Museum of Roma Culture, Brno

Czech postcard, 1920.

Public perception centring on a small group of Roma of Eastern European origin had very little to do with the everyday circumstances of the majority of European Roma and Sinti. In Western Europe, most of the travelling Sinti families – like many other migrant segments of society, e.g. the 'Jenische' in Southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland,<sup>8</sup> the 'Resande' in Scandinavia, the Tinkers and Travellers of the

5 Nachweisung der in Niederösterreich, Tirol und Vorarlberg, Salzburg, Oberösterreich, Kärnten, Steiermark heimatberechtigten Zigeuner [Verification of Gypsies Holding Residence Permits in Lower Austria, Tirol and Vorarlberg, Salzburg, Upper Austria, Carinthia and Styria], Oberösterreichisches Landesarchiv (OÖLA), BH Vöcklabruck IV A – VI H 1872.

6 A Magyarországon 1893. január 31-én végrehajtott cigányösszeírás eredményei 5 grafikai táblázattal [Results of the Conscription of Gypsies in Hungary from January 31<sup>st</sup> 1893 Including 5 Tables]. Szerkeszti és kiadja az Országos Magyar Kir. Statisztikai Hivatal [edited and published by the Hungarian Royal Office of Statistics], Budapest, Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények 1895/IX: 18.

7 Jana Horváthová, Devleskere čhave svedectom starých pohl'adnic [Divine Children – Testimonials of Old Postcards], Brno 2006.

8 Toni Pescosta, Die Tiroler Karrner, Vom Verschwinden des fahrenden Volkes der Jenischen [The Karrner of Tyrol. On the Disappearance of the Jenischen Travelling People], Innsbruck 2003.

British Isles, or the Dutch ‘Woonwagenbevooners’<sup>9</sup> – normally only wandered during the summer, following established seasonal routes from country fair to country fair and markets and festivals. They were not necessarily that poor either. Many other Western European Sinti families had settled into middle-class occupations and lifestyles; many of them were running cinemas, for example, or professional musicians.

The majority of Eastern European Roma, by contrast, were very poor agricultural labourers who lived in houses built on common land, working as seasonal workers, herdsmen, harvesters and brick makers, supplementing their income as knife and scissor grinders, broom makers and basket weavers, etc. The supposedly ‘wild’, roaming bands of Transylvanian and Romanian Roma, often painted, photographed and filmed, were an absolute minority even before World War I.

But this stereotypical perception of the ‘Gypsies’, firmly fixed in the consciousness, or ‘collective memory’, of the European population was one of the fundamental reasons why so many experts, administrators and institutions in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would dedicate so much time and effort to such a small group.

The Nazis, too, counted only 18,000 so-called Gypsies in Germany before World War II – i.e. 0.02 per cent of the population of the Third Reich. Even after the annexation of Austria and Bohemia, there were never more than 50,000 Roma and Sinti living in the Third Reich, a negligible 0.05 per cent of the total population.<sup>10</sup> But due to this deeply ingrained stereotype, the Roma and Sinti people were perceived as fundamentally different, and by the 1930s were also regarded as fundamentally dangerous and bad, a threat to society.

This shift in the perception of Roma and Sinti had taken place towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal regimes of the European states, which had enabled free movement of people over most of the continent, had changed radically. Military draft, police regulations, trade restrictions and stricter rules for residence and work permits led to the introduction of special permits and passports.<sup>11</sup> All kinds of migrants now had to become registered.

The first identity cards in the modern sense of the word, i.e. ID cards with a photograph and fingerprints, were issued in France just over one hundred years ago, in 1912, registering all migrants (*gens du voyage* in French), who were now required to carry their *carte anthropométrique* at all times.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the firmly embedded ‘Gypsy’ stereotypes, compulsory registration became the second decisive element in the early marginalisation of European Roma and Sinti. In the decades after World War I, this new approach of registering all migrants swept across Europe and was soon extended to include all ‘Gypsies’, even those that were settled. Special passports and registers were introduced in Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, etc. The fact that the so-called ‘Zigeunerfrage’ – the ‘Gypsy Question’ – now became a ‘European problem’ is closely linked to the development of international police cooperation. The International Criminal Police Commission (ICPC),

9 Lau Mazirel, *Woonwagenfolk. Samenstelling en nawoord door Leonie de Goie* [Caravan Dwellers. Documentation and Afterword by Leonie de Goie], Amsterdam 1986.

10 Hans Joachim Döring, *Die Zigeuner im nationalsozialistischen Staat* [The Gypsies in the National Socialist State], in: *Kriminologische Schriftenreihe*, 12, Hamburg 1964.

11 John C. Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State*. Cambridge Studies in Law and Society, Cambridge 2000.

12 Marie-Christine Hubert, *Les réglementations anti-tsiganes en France et en Allemagne, avant et pendant l’occupation* [Anti-Gypsy Regulations in France and Germany before and during the occupation], in: *Revue d’histoire de la Shoah* N° 167 (sept.–déc. 1999), 20-52.



the precursor of today's INTERPOL, was established in Vienna in 1923<sup>13</sup> by the former President of the Vienna Police and later Federal Chancellor, Johann Schober.

The registration process of all so-called Gypsies was started in 1899 by the Munich-based Nachrichtendienst für die Sicherheitspolizei in Bezug auf Zigeuner, though INTERPOL played an important role in extending this practice all over Europe. The Austrian police had a long tradition of registering and especially of photographing suspicious elements of society,<sup>14</sup> reaching far back into the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Earlier registration by the police or by a municipal administration in 'Gypsy registers' was to become one of the crucial criteria for later racist persecution by the Nazi authorities. Virtually everyone who had been registered as a 'Gypsy' during the inter-war years, later ended up on a deportation train to a Nazi concentration camp.

The majority of European Roma had always lived in Central and Eastern Europe, and the eastern half of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy had always had a much higher percentage of Roma population. In 1921, as part of the peace negotiations after World War I, Austria acquired a new province from former Hungary, the Burgenland, with a Roma population of three per cent. The situation in the Burgenland – which exhibited many typical features of Eastern European societies – should essentially influence the general discourse about the 'Gypsy Question', first in Austria and, after 1938, also in the Third Reich. The particular circumstances of a small group of Eastern European Roma and Sinti were, again, to determine first the Austrian and then the National Socialist debate about Roma and Sinti.

The Roma of the Burgenland – a total of 9,000 people living in 120 settlements of 30 to 300 people each – constituted three per cent of the region's population;<sup>15</sup> in the district of Oberwart they even amounted to ten per cent. The Burgenland Roma are also an exceptionally well-documented group, with numerous photographs and illustrations of their houses and traditional occupations.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the photographs from these Roma settlements include – as can be detected on closer inspection – a figure in the background, which deserves special attention. It is a policeman. These photographs from the Provincial Archives of Burgenland were all taken by the police during police raids in the 1920s and early 1930s. And this is also the reason why in most of these photographs all inhabitants are standing in front of their houses in a somewhat awkwardly staged way.

13 Jens Jäger, *Verfolgung durch Verwaltung. Internationales Verbrechen und internationale Polizeikooperation 1880–1933* [Persecution by Administration. International Crime and International Police Cooperation 1880–1933], Konstanz 2006; Malcolm Anderson: *Policing the World: Interpol and the Politics of International Police Co-operation*. Oxford 1989; Christoph Arbeithuber: *Die Internationale Kriminalpolizeiliche Organisation. INTERPOL* [The International Criminal Police Organization INTERPOL], PhD Thesis, Univ. of Linz, Linz 1996.

14 Walter Mentzel, *Tatorte und Täter. Polizeiphotographie in Wien 1890–1938* [Scenes of Crime and Perpetrators. Police Photography in Vienna 1890–1938], Wien 2007, 22–24.

15 Florian Freund/Gerhard Baumgartner/Harald Greifeneder, *Vermögensentzug, Restitution und Entschädigung der Roma und Sinti* [Confiscation of Property, Restitution and Compensation of Roma and Sinti], Vienna/Munich 2004; Florian Freund: *Zigeunerpolitik in Österreich* [Gypsy Policy in Austria], Habilitation Thesis, Univ. of Vienna, Wien 2003, 88–93.

16 The provincial archives of the Austrian province of Burgenland at Eisenstadt, the Burgenländisches Landesarchiv, houses an extensive collection of police from the Interwar period.



© Burgenländisches Landesarchiv, Eisenstadt, Nr. 05271

Roma settlement in Unterschützen, Burgenland.

The police wanted to be able to identify all members of each household. Rather than to illustrate life in the Roma settlements, the photographs were taken to highlight the difficulties of police work and were later published in professional police journals. Here, the early practice of the Habsburg police force of photographing all suspect elements in society merged with INTERPOL's new approach of registering all 'Gypsies', along with the latest anthropometric methods such as fingerprinting. Registering and policing the Roma and Sinti was highly popular work among the police. The international context and the experience it granted in the application of the latest tools and methodologies made it an attractive career stepping stone within the Criminal Police.<sup>17</sup>

Another crucial element in the marginalisation and persecution of the Roma and Sinti was the general acceptance of eugenic theories within the academic world, especially among the medical professions, the natural sciences, but also the social sciences. The basic tenant of eugenics – i.e. the theory that social behaviour is to a large extent hereditary – had far-reaching consequences for criminal law administrations, because 'criminal' and 'antisocial behaviour' in particular were considered to be a hereditary defect and thus incurable and, of course, self-perpetuating. If you were regarded as a 'born criminal', in the eyes of so-called experts you might be able to fight your inborn urge to commit crimes and, in very unlikely cases, might even succeed, but it was much more likely that you would sooner or later succumb to your hereditary traits and commit a crime. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, eugenic theory reigned supreme throughout the Western world, and in many Central European countries too, with forced abortions in women who had been labelled as 'antisocial' remaining common practice in some countries, such as Sweden and Czechoslovakia, right up to the late 1960s.<sup>18</sup>

Another factor that was crucial in contributing to the marginalisation and increasing persecution of the European Roma and Sinti was the economic crisis of the inter-war years, first during and right after World War I, and then during the Great

<sup>17</sup> Walter Mentzel, *Tatorte und Täter*, Vienna 2007, 26-29.

<sup>18</sup> Elof Axel Carlson, *The Unfit: A History of a Bad Idea*, Cold Spring Harbor 2001; Ruth C. Engs, *The Eugenics Movement. An Encyclopedia*, Westport 2005; Majja Runcis: *Steriliseringar i folkhemmet. [Sterilisations in Welfare]*, Stockholm 1998.

Depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s. The years after World War I had marginalised many itinerant workers, the transition from horse to motor vehicle had affected the traditional horse-trading families among the Western European Sinti, while inflation ruined many small businesses and enterprises.

Once again it was the Eastern European Roma who were hit the hardest. Living on the fringes of farming communities, they had managed to scrape a living as seasonal harvest workers during the summer and by supplementing their income with traditional crafts or as occasional musicians during the winter. Mass unemployment caused by the global economic crisis brought disaster to the Roma settlements. In Eastern Europe, the unemployed returned in large numbers from the industrial cities to their villages of origin and pushed the local Roma right out of the labour market.<sup>19</sup> Their living conditions deteriorated in an unprecedented way. In some of the Roma settlements, child mortality soared to 70 per cent.<sup>20</sup> The Roma were quite literally starving to death.

But why were they so much worse off than the rest of the rural population? And why was the situation so much worse in Central Europe? The reason for this lies in the system of land ownership. Most settled Roma of Central Europe owned no land whatsoever. They had either been settled by the aristocracy on their domains, where they were allowed to erect houses and work on the estates, mostly in exchange for food; or they had been settled on common land at the fringes of existing villages.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the rural population, the majority of whom had small patches of land available for subsistence farming, the Roma had no land at all. Half an acre of land, 0.2 hectares, usually suffices to feed a family and fatten a pig. The Roma of Central Europe had to buy every single potato and every stick of wood for heating in the winter, or had to work for it – or else were forced to steal food and firewood from the surrounding fields and forests. Conflicts between Roma and non-Roma farmers in the villages were escalating during the 1930s.<sup>22</sup>

Why was the situation quite different in Western Europe? The answer to this lies in the heritage systems of Eastern and Western Europe.<sup>23</sup> In Western Europe, one child – usually the first-born son – inherits the farm, while the other children are paid off with minimal sums and have to leave, swelling the ever-increasing workforce of the industrial cities. In Eastern Europe, all children usually inherit equal shares of the farm. This soon led to the splintering of farmland into ever-smaller plots. Then, with the advent of industrialisation in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pattern changed. Now, one child would stay at home and work the farm, while the others migrated to the cities or overseas to make a living there. But they were still part-owners of the farm who sooner or later had to be paid off. When, in the wake of

19 Gerhard Baumgartner, *Der nationale Differenzierungsprozess in den ländlichen Gemeinden des südlichen Burgenlandes* [The Process of National Differentiation in the Rural Communities of Southern Burgenland], in: Andreas Moritsch (ed.), *Vom Ethnos zur Nation* [From Ethnicity to Nationality], Wien/München 1991, 93-155.

20 Child mortality in Central Europe was generally around 17 to 18 per cent before World War II. A very large figure compared to some three to four per mille in Europe today, when about 4 out of 1,000 children die before their second birthday. In the Roma settlements of Burgenland up to 70 out of 100 children died before their second birthday.

21 Gerhard Baumgartner, *Einfach weg. Zum 'Verschwinden' der rund 120 Romasiedlungen des Burgenlandes und den Schwierigkeiten der Rekonstruktion ihrer Wohn- und Besitzverhältnisse* [Simply Gone. The 'Disappearance' of about 120 Roma Settlements in Burgenland and the Difficulties of Re-establishing their Inhabitants and Owners], in: *ÖZG – Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, 1999/2, 238-259.

22 Claudia Mayerhofer, *Dorfzigeuner* [Village Gypsies], Vienna 1988, 63ff.

23 Gerhard Baumgartner/Andreas Moritsch, *The Process of National Differentiation within Rural Communities in Southern Carinthia and Southern Burgenland 1850 to 1950*, in: David Howell et al. (ed.): *Roots of Rural Ethnic Mobilisation/Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-Dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe 1850-1950*, Vol. VII, Dartmouth 1992.



the global economic crisis, masses of workers lost their jobs – and soon after lost their meagre unemployment benefits as well – they returned to their home villages, where they were still co-owners of the old family farm. In the absence of any alternative, they started to work on the farm, pushing seasonal workers, such as the Roma, out of the local job market. The Austrian province of Burgenland, which had been part of the kingdom of Hungary for a thousand years, had kept its Eastern European heritage system after 1921. During the global economic crisis, this had catastrophic consequences for the local Roma communities.

What made the situation even worse was that there were only rudimentary and entirely insufficient systems of social welfare in place.<sup>24</sup> All poor relief or welfare, health services and schooling was organised and funded by the local communities. Often a farming village of some 300 inhabitants was confronted with a Roma settlement of 100, 200 or 300 people who were completely destitute, draining the village funds.

In 1933, a conference was held in the district of Oberwart, where the Roma constituted ten per cent of the population. It was organised by the mayors of towns and villages with large Roma populations and attended by representatives of all political parties, from Christian Socialists to Social Democrats.<sup>25</sup> The ideas put forward to resolve the so-called ‘Gypsy Question’ ranged from resettling the Roma in reservations, much like those created for the native American Indians, to deporting them to an island in the Pacific Ocean, e.g. Madagascar, to locking them up in workhouses or forced labour camps. One delegate introduced his contribution with the words *Since we cannot kill them ...* Even if formulated in the negative, the idea had already taken root in the minds of some of those present.

By 1933, a small group of settled Central European Roma from the Burgenland had become the focal point of the debate about Roma and Sinti, first in Austria and soon also in the Third Reich. The illegal National Socialists of the region took the so-called ‘Gypsy Question’ as key theme for their campaign, altering their normally anti-Semitic slogan into an anti-Gypsy one: *Das Burgenland zigeunerfrei!* (*Burgenland free of Gypsies!*).

It was the leader of the local – underground – Nazi party, Dr Tobias Portschy, born and bred in a farming family in a small village in the district of Oberwart, who published the memorandum *Die Zigeunerfrage* (*The Gypsy Question*), arguing from a radically racist perspective and calling for the persecution of Roma and Sinti. On its title it bore the inscription: “Willst du, Deutscher, Totengräber des nordischen Blutes im Burgenland werden, übersehe nur die Gefahr, die ihm die Zigeuner sind!” (“If you, German, want to be the gravedigger of Nordic blood in the Burgenland, all you need to do is to neglect the danger that the Gypsies pose to it!”)<sup>26</sup>

Together with the first report issued by Robert Ritter’s Research Centre for Racial Hygiene,<sup>27</sup> this memorandum played a key part in influencing the ‘Gypsy’ policy of

24 Philipp Wagner, *Von der Fürsorge zur Sozialhilfe. Am Beispiel des Burgenlandes von 1945–1975* [From Welfare to Social Help. A Case Study of Burgenland between 1945 and 1975]. Master Thesis, Univ. Wien, Wien 2009.

25 Verhandlungsschrift über die am 15. Jänner 1933 in Oberwart abgehaltene Tagung über die Zigeunerfrage im Burgenland [Protocol of the Meeting on the Gypsy-Question in Burgenland, Convened in Oberwart on the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1933], Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, BKA, Gd 3/37, Kt. 7152, 339.732.

26 Tobias Portschy, *Die Zigeunerfrage*. Denkschrift des Landeshauptmannes für das Burgenland [The Gypsy-Question. Memorandum of the Provincial Governor of Burgenland], Eisenstadt 1938, 1.

27 Michael Zimmermann, “Mit Weigerungen würde also nichts erreicht” R. Ritter und die Rassenhygienische Forschungsstelle im Reichsgesundheitsamt [“Directives Thus Would Achieve Nothing” R. Ritter and Research Institution for Racial Hygiene within the Reich’s Health Office], in: Gerhard Hirschfeld/Tobias Jersak (ed.), *Karrieren im Nationalsozialismus: Funktionsebenen zwischen Mitwirkung und Distanz* [Careers under National Socialism: Functional Elites between Collaboration and Resistance], Frankfurt 2004, 291–318.

the Nazis. Published in August 1938, it was followed in December 1938 by Heinrich Himmler's *Runderlass betr. Bekämpfung der Zigeunerplage* (*General Decree on Combating the Gypsy Plague*), in which he ordered the 'Gypsy Question' to be solved "according to racial principles".<sup>28</sup>

Until 1937, open persecution of Roma and Sinti and their imprisonment in labour or concentration camps had been rather haphazard, with several institutions conflicting with each other: social services, Criminal Police and Gestapo. But no large-scale arrests or deportations had yet taken place.<sup>29</sup> With the annexation of Austria in 1938, however, a clear radicalisation in policy and attitude towards Gypsies becomes apparent. According to new research<sup>30</sup>, Portschy's memorandum from summer 1938 appears to have been at least co-authored by Bernhard Wilhelm Neureiter, a lawyer employed by the regional government of Lower Austria, who for years had been collecting material and studying the 'Gypsy Question'. The memorandum of 1938 called for the exclusion of all Roma children from schooling, the deportation of Gypsies to labour camps and for a radical policy of racial segregation in all sectors of society, including the army. All its proposals were meticulously put into practice over the next few years. Concepts drawn up against the background of the very special situation in the Burgenland served as a template for Nazi policy towards all European Roma and Sinti.

The Nazis added two new elements to the persecution of the European Roma and Sinti: one of these was a clearly racist answer to a highly complex social situation, i.e. claiming that all Gypsies were inherently parasitic, unable to create, and condemned to exploiting their hosts. The second element added by National Socialist ideology to the instruments of persecution was the principle of *Vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung* (*Crime Prevention*).<sup>31</sup> The term was invented by the Nazis and is a logical derivative of the eugenic belief that deviant social behaviour is inherited. If you are convinced that someone will sooner or later commit a crime because he or she is condemned to do so by his genes then it actually makes sense to lock this person away before they have a chance to commit the crime. Why wait until it's too late? This was the rationale behind deporting all Gypsies – men, women and children – into labour and concentration camps.

However, locking Gypsies into camps was not initially a Nazi idea. Roma and Sinti families had already been detained in camps during World War I, for example between 1915 and 1919 by the French military authorities, when French Roma and Sinti were held in an improvised camp in a Capuchin monastery in Crest.<sup>32</sup> Camps for 'Gypsies and Beggars' ('Bettler- und Zigeunerlager') had also existed in the inter-war period in Bavaria, Switzerland and Austria.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most revealing features of the 'Zigeunerlager' of the Third Reich was the fact that they were not actually established by the Gestapo, the SS, SA or the

28 Bekämpfung der Zigeunerplage, Runderlass. des Reichsführers SS und Chefs der Deutschen Polizei im Reichsministerium des Inneren vom 8.12.38, -S- Kr. 1 Nr. 557 VIII/38 - 2026 - 6 (Reichsministerialblatt der inneren Verwaltung (RMBliV), 2105 f.

29 Karola Fings/Frank Sparing, Nur wenige kamen zurück, Sinti und Roma im Nationalsozialismus [Only A Few Returned, Sinti and Roma under National Socialism], Köln 1994, 7-29.

30 Florian Freund, Zigeunerpolitik in Österreich [Gypsy Policy in Austria], Habilitation Thesis, Univ. Wien, Wien 2003, 118-120.

31 Schriftenreihe des Reichskriminalpolizeiamtes 45, Erlassammlung Vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung [Decrees Concerning the Prevention of Crime], Berlin 1937.

32 Emmanuel Filhol, Un camp de concentration français. Les Tsiganes alsaciens-lorrains à Crest, 1915–1919 [A French Concentration Camp. The Gypsies from Alsace-Lorraine in Crest, 1915–1919], Grenoble 2004.

33 Sigrid Wadauer, Asking for the privilege to work. Applications for a peddling licence [Austria in the 1920s and 1930s], in: Elizabeth Hurren/Andreas Gestrich/Steven King (eds.), Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe. Narratives of the Sick Poor 1780–1938, London/New York 2012, 225–246.

Criminal Police, but by the municipal authorities. The first 'Zigeunerlager' was established in 1929 in the city of Frankfurt,<sup>34</sup> the second followed in Cologne in 1935. Local Roma and Sinti families were forced to move from their flats, houses and sometimes with their wagons into the new camp at the outskirts of the city. When Berlin hosted the Olympics in 1936, the same fate befell the Sinti and Roma families of Berlin, who had to move to the newly established 'Gypsy Camp Marzahn'.<sup>35</sup>

A common feature to all these forced resettlements was that they were not justified by any legal framework. The same is true in many cases of the initial deportations into labour camps in 1938. The fatal problem for the Roma and Sinti was that, under the Nazi government, the state had withdrawn its protecting hand from its Gypsy citizens and there was no authority to which they could turn for help or legal protection. The Roma and Sinti found themselves completely at the mercy of local mayors, communal and regional institutions, bureaucrats, police officers and political party thugs, who often turned out to be one and the same.

The dynamic that was to culminate in the genocide of the Roma and Sinti was set in motion by the mass arrests and mass deportations of 1938 and 1939. Two classic institutions of Roma administration and persecution, the police authorities and the welfare institutions, cooperatively created the practical constraints that step by step led to mass murder and, ultimately, to organised genocide.

The well-documented example from Austria serves to illustrate this fatal development. After the annexation of Austria in 1938, the National Socialists deported many Roma and Sinti to work camps all over Austria. In 1939, the Reichskriminalpolizei-amt (Criminal Police Office of the German Reich) in Berlin, reminiscent of the Austrian complaints from Tobias Portschy and Bernhard Wilhelm Neureiter about thousands of unemployed Austrian Roma and Sinti, ordered the deportation of 3,000 able-bodied men and women into the concentration camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück. These deportations set in motion a vicious circle of rising welfare costs, which should eventually prove fatal for its helpless victims.

Following the annexation of Austria in 1938, the German war industry had quickly absorbed the surplus of unemployed workers, who had disappeared back into the cities, and the Roma had found work as well. The local leader of the provincial government, the Styrian Gauleiter Siegfried Uiberreither, commented on the nonsensical nature of the deportations: "Although these are correctly employed Gypsies, who are neither unwilling to work nor have previous criminal records and in no way constitute a burden to the general public, I will order their internment into forced labour camps out of the consideration that a Gypsy – as somebody who stands outside the 'Volksgemeinschaft' (*people's community*) – is ever asocial!"<sup>36</sup>

34 Peter Sandner, Frankfurt. Auschwitz. Die nationalsozialistische Verfolgung der Sinti und Roma in Frankfurt am Main [Frankfurt. Auschwitz. The National Socialist Persecution of Roma and Sinti in Frankfurt am Main], Frankfurt am Main 1998; Wolfgang Wippermann, Das Leben in Frankfurt zur NS-Zeit, Vol. II: Die nationalsozialistische Zigeunerverfolgung [Life in Frankfurt am Main, Vol. II: The National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies], Frankfurt a. M. 1986.

35 Karola Fings/Frank Sparing, Rassismus-Lager-Völkermord. Die nationalsozialistische Zigeunerverfolgung in Köln [Racism-Camps-Genocide. The National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies in Cologne], Köln 2005, 68-108; Ute Brucker-Boroujerdi/Wolfgang Wippermann, Das 'Zigeunerlager' in Berlin-Marzahn [The 'Gypsy-Camp' in Berlin-Marzahn], in: Pogrom – Zeitschrift für bedrohte Völker 1987, 77-80.

36 "Obwohl es sich hier um unständig [sic] beschäftigte Zigeuner handelt, die weder vorbestraft noch arbeits-scheu sind oder in anderer Weise der Allgemeinheit zur Last fallen, will ich ihre Unterbringung in Zwangs-arbeitslagern aus der Erwägung heraus anordnen, dass ein Zigeuner als außerhalb der Volksgemeinschaft stehend stets asozial ist." LH Gauleiter Uiberreiter an das RKPA, 11.9.1939, StLA, Landesregierung 384 Zi 1 – 1940.

A year later, he reported the disastrous and counter-productive results of the deportation policy: “Because of the recent deportation into work camps of all male Gypsies who are able to work, the number of Gypsy family members in need of social assistance has risen dramatically, since through this action nearly all Gypsy families have been robbed of their breadwinner and so around 2,000 Gypsies (grown-ups, women and children) have become dependent on social aid. The deportation has actually achieved the exact opposite of its original intention.”<sup>37</sup>

The villages had called for the deportation of unemployed Roma, but when the deportations came, the Roma were no longer unemployed. However, since all able-bodied men and women were deported and only children and elderly remained in the Roma settlements, the cost of social welfare the local councils had to shoulder became even greater. So the villages asked for more deportations, which left even more children and elderly at the mercy of the local councils. The louder they called for deportations, the more Roma were deported – and the more local councils had to pay for the family members left behind.

In 1940, this finally led to the establishment of the largest so-called Gypsy Camp of the Third Reich in Lackenbach in the Burgenland, with about 4,000 prisoners, planned and financed by the social welfare organisations of the regional and district governments of Lower Austria and Vienna. The Criminal Police supplied the prison guards.



© Collection of Leopold Banny

Gypsy Camp Lackenbach, 1940.

<sup>37</sup> “Durch die in der letzten Zeit erfolgte Abtransportierung aller arbeitsfähigen männlichen Zigeuner in Arbeitslager ist die Zahl der hilfs- und unterstützungsbedürftigen Zigeunerangehörigen im Kreise Oberwart nunmehr sprunghaft angewachsen, da durch diese Aktion nun nahezu alle zurückgebliebenen Zigeunerfamilien ihrer Ernährer beraubt sind und somit mit einem Schlag etwa 2000 Zigeunerköpfe (Erwachsene, Weiber und Kinder) hilfsbedürftig geworden sind. Mithin ist demnach das Gegenteil erreicht worden, was bezweckt werden sollte. Arbeitsmöglichkeiten für Zigeunerweiber und gebrechliche alte Zigeuner sind über den Winter nicht gegeben, also muß öffentlich Fürsorge Platz greifen.” Schreiben des Landrates Dr. Hinterlechner an den Reichsstatthalter in der Steiermark vom 30.11.1940 betr. Zigeuner-Arbeitslager, StLA Landesregierung 120 Zi 1 (1940).

The ever-rising welfare costs for the abandoned children and elderly finally led to the decision to deport 5,000 Austrian Roma and Sinti to a special 'Gypsy' camp within the Jewish Ghetto in Łódź, then Litzmannstadt. Of the 5,007 people deported in five trains in November 1941, eleven were dead on arrival. Sixty per cent of the deported were children under the age of twelve. They were crammed into five old buildings on the outskirts of the Jewish ghetto, about forty people per room. The appalling sanitary conditions and severe malnutrition resulted in an outbreak of typhoid fever, which killed 630 people within six weeks. When the Nazi warden of the camp also died of typhoid fever, the city bureaucrats panicked and ordered the mass murder of all remaining inmates. In January 1942, they were deported to the Chełmno extermination camps, where they were gassed or shot and buried in mass graves. Not a single person survived. The deportation to Łódź had not been planned, organised or financed by the SS or Nazi Party officials, but by the municipal authorities and social services administrations of Styria, Lower Austria and Vienna.<sup>38</sup>

Subsequent mass deportations of Roma and Sinti from all over the German Reich and German occupied territories, especially the deportations to Auschwitz in 1943, as well as mass shootings by German units – which went on until the very last days of the war – resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti. Of the 22,600 prisoners in the Gypsy camp at Auschwitz, only about 2,400 survived.<sup>39</sup> The victims among the Roma number several hundreds of thousands.<sup>40</sup> Since research into the topic only began 35 years after the end of World War II, much remains to be researched, uncovered and documented. But the losses were devastating. In the Burgenland region, 90 per cent of the original Roma population were killed and all but one or two of the 120 Roma settlements were destroyed.

38 Florian Freund, *Zigeunerpolitik in Österreich*, 248-308.

39 Waclaw Długoborski (ed.), *Sinti und Roma im KL Auschwitz 1943–44 vor dem Hintergrund ihrer Verfolgung unter der Naziherrschaft* [Sinti and Roma in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp 1943–44, Before the Background of Their Persecution Under Nazi Rule], Oświęcim 1998.

40 Romani Rose (ed.), *Der nationalsozialistische Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma. Katalog zur ständigen Ausstellung im Staatlichen Museum Auschwitz* [The National Socialist Genocide of the Roma and Sinti. Catalogue of the Permanent Exhibition at the State Museum Auschwitz], Heidelberg 2003.



Gerhard Baumgartner  
Historian  
Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstands, Vienna  
[gerhard.baumgartner@doew.at](mailto:gerhard.baumgartner@doew.at)

Quotation: Gerhard Baumgartner, The Road Towards Genocide. The Process of  
Exclusion and Persecution of Roma and Sinti in the 1930s and 1940s,  
in: S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 1 (2014) 1, 5-18.

[http://simon.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Articles/2014-1/2014-1\\_ART\\_Baumgartner/  
ART\\_Baumgartner.pdf](http://simon.vwi.ac.at/images/Documents/Articles/2014-1/2014-1_ART_Baumgartner/ART_Baumgartner.pdf)

Article

Copy Editor: Miha Tavcar

**S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON.**  
ISSN 2408-9192

Board of Editors of VWI's International Academic Advisory Board:  
Gustavo Corni/Dieter Pohl/Irina Sherbakova

Editors: Éva Kovács/Béla Rásky  
Weditors: Sandro Fasching/Éva Kovács/Béla Rásky  
Webmaster: Bálint Kovács  
Layout of PDF: Hans Ljung

S:I.M.O.N. is the semi-annual e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for  
Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.