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A Database of “Gypsy” Victims of National Socialist Persecution

Collective Biographic Data from the Territory of the Czech Republic

Abstract

In 1999, Miroslav Kárný, founder of the Institut Terežínske iniciativy (Terezín Initiative Institute, TII), offered the support of the Terezín Initiative Institute for a dignified remembrance of victims of the genocide of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War. Since nobody took up this offer, TII themselves decided to undertake this remembrance. The project Databáze romských obětí holocaustu (Database of the Roma Victims of the Holocaust, DROH), which began four years ago, resulted in May 2020 in the publication of the database online at holocaust.cz. This project report highlights a few of the developments throughout the past four years and the possibilities this new database opens up for further research on the topic.

“I know that a list of victims exists of the Romany genocide, which was a very praiseworthy work by Doctor Nečas, because he did it, so to speak, on his own. I think, though, that it needs to be done in a much more dignified way, and we are offering to help you not only with our experience but also with our technical support, i.e. our computer support where this could be done. [...] This is [...] my offer on behalf of the Terezín Initiative Institute [...]”¹

This is how Miroslav Kárný, founder of the Institut Terežínské iniciativy (Terezín Initiative Institute, TII), explained the need to remember the genocide of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War in Czech Republic at the international conference “The Holocaust Phenomenon”, which was held in Prague and Terezín in October 1999. For him, the similarity of experiences justified a similar remembrance of both victims of the Shoah and of the genocide of Roma and Sinti.² What he referred to as “technical support” in 1999 had by the year 2008 become a database containing the information on the victims of the Shoah in the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia drawn from the Terezín Memorial Books. The records of those who did not survive were made publicly available online at holocaust.cz, with further materials on the individual victims added throughout the years. Though interest in the genocide of Roma and Sinti continually grew alongside research on the topic, nobody ever took up the Miroslav Kárný’s offer from 1999.

The public debate about the genocide of the Roma and Sinti proves time and again the necessity of reliable data, and not only for a dignified commemoration of the victims. Aside from the general debate conducted in academic circles, the public dis-

1 Miroslav Kárný, Fenomén Holocaust/The Holocaust Phenomenon. Conference Report of the International Scientific Conference, Prague-Terezín, 6th–8th October 1999, Prague 1999, 164–165.

2 Ibid.

course in the Czech Republic, which mostly focusses on the former ‘Gypsy camp’ in Lety u Písku, thrives on myths and distortions, fuelled not only with intent but also with an obvious lack of knowledge. Not even the nature of the persecution has been left unchallenged. Whether intentional or not, a dignified remembrance of the victims of the genocide of Roma and Sinti in the Czech Republic was not possible under these circumstances. The memorial books compiled by Ctibor Nečas remained a rather unknown source made use of by only a small number of private individuals.³

In 2015, TII decided to take up this task themselves. Funded by Bader Philanthropies, TII started working on the project DROH – Databáze romských obětí holocaustu (Database of the Roma Victims of the Holocaust) in the summer of 2016. The main objective of the project, in accordance with the words of Miroslav Kárný, is to create a database of victims of the genocide of Roma and Sinti whose fate was in any way connected with the territory of today’s Czech Republic, and to collect and systematise the data found on the individual victims to make this information available for remembrance, education, and research. Moreover, the project contributes to answering some open questions concerning for example the number of prisoners in the so-called ‘Gypsy camps’ in the Protectorate, a description of the mechanism of persecution, and the fate of those deported from the Protectorate, mostly to Auschwitz-Birkenau, but also to other concentration camps.

The project partners are the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno and the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance. TII furthermore cooperates with the Central Council of Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg, the Fritz Bauer Institute in Frankfurt am Main, the concentration camp memorials Dachau and Flossenbürg, and the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Pedagogical University of Krakow on this project. After four years, the project ended in May 2020 with the publication of the database on holocaust.cz, which focusses on the victims of the former ‘Gypsy camp’ in Lety u Písku.

The database contains basic biographical information on the 329 people who died in the Lety camp. These can be searched individually by name, date of birth, and place of birth, and there is a list of all prisoners of the Lety camp accessible in the database by using the “search by camp” function.

Remembrance and Education

In terms of remembrance, this database, like the database of Shoah victims, allows the victims’ descendants to discover the fate of their ancestors and enables a dignified tribute to the victims by “returning them their faces”, that is, to gather as much biographical information as possible on the individual people and to present

3 Ctibor Nečas, *Andrůda taboris. Věznové protektorátních cikánských táborů 1942–1943* [Prisoners of the Protectorate Gypsy Camps 1942–1943], Brno 1987; Idem, *Aušvicate hi khér báro. Čeští věznové cikánského tábora v Osvětimi II-Brzezince* [Czech Prisoners of the Gypsy Camp in Auschwitz II-Birkenau], Brno 1992; Idem, *Z Brna do Auschwitz-Birkenau. První transport moravských Romů do koncentračního tábora Auschwitz-Birkenau* [From Brno to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The First Deportation of Moravian Roma to the Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau], Brno 2000; Idem, *Pamětní seznam – 1: jména a údaje o nebožácích, kteří byli násilně koncentrováni v tzv. cikánském táboře I (Lety, 1942–1943)* [Memorial List – 1: Names and Personal Data of the Unfortunate Who Were Concentrated by Force in the So-Called Gypsy Camp I (Lety, 1942–1943)], Nymburk 2012; Ibid, *Pamětní seznam II – 2: jména a údaje o nebožácích, kteří byli násilně koncentrováni v tzv. cikánském táboře II (Hodonín, 1942–1943)* [Memorial List – 2: Names and Personal Data of the Unfortunate Who Were Concentrated by Force in the So-Called Gypsy Camp II (Hodonín, 1942–1943)], Brno 2014.

them as the individual human beings they once were.⁴ On a practical level, the database of Shoah victims has been employed as a source of information on individual victims during the public reading of the Holocaust victims' names held each year on Yom HaShoah since 2008, which is organised in the Czech Republic by TII.⁵ "Returning faces" might seem like a rather symbolical gesture at first, but the display of the individuality and diversity of victims of the Shoah by means of the database of Holocaust victims has proven a worthy contribution to combatting wrongful assumptions about the Shoah and contemporary antisemitism and discrimination by making obvious the incorrectness of stereotypes. "Returning faces" or "turning numbers back into people" allows an educational approach where people can relate to the victims as individuals, which is not possible if they are thought of as an anonymous mass on which it is easy to project the assumptions and stereotypes that have been assigned to them by the Nazis and others, too.

On these grounds, it is right to assume that the same approach towards another group of victims of National Socialist racial ideology will offer the same possibilities regarding stereotypes about the given group. Consequently, the database of the victims of the genocide of Roma and Sinti will be put to use in the same way that the database of victims of the Shoah has been used for more than ten years in educational programmes. On the one hand, this means using the database as a pool of materials that is easily available for the creation of educational materials of more general importance, which can be distributed and used by a large number of people in different educational contexts. On the other hand, it can be used as a resource for commemoration and remembrance.

Methodology

Against the original assumptions, the lists of victims prepared by Ctibor Nečas and mentioned by Miroslav Kárný did not prove a promising starting point since it was impossible to reconstruct the exact way they had been compiled and the specific sources used.⁶ DROH therefore used a twofold approach developed in cooperation with members of the project's advisory board.⁷ While entering the lists prepared by Nečas into the database, another list based on a variety of archival documents was compiled, including all the necessary documentation of sources used. The ongoing comparison of the newly compiled list and the works of Nečas provides a reliable foundation for the database as well as for further research.

4 For an example of what this looks like, see: <https://www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-victims/victim/111327-helena-neumannova/> (29 June 2021) or choose any other entry in the database of victims of the Holocaust at www.holocaust.cz.

5 For more information, see: <http://www.terezinstudies.cz/events/jom-ha-soa/index.html> (29 June 2021).

6 This is not to be read as an expression of disrespect for the work of the late Ctibor Nečas, who also belonged to the advisors of this project and to whom the project owes much. He himself was aware of this and open for discussion. Rather, this is a problem of the scholarly culture in the Czech Republic. There is currently no general consensus among historians concerning the use of references, a situation that has been unresolved for several decades and dates back to pre-1989. See: Jaroslav Ira, Používání a zneužívání poznámek pod čarou [The Use and Abuse of Footnotes], in: *Dějiny – teorie - kritika* (2016) 2, 285-299, available online at <http://www.dejinyteoriekritika.cz/Modules/ViewDocument.aspx?Did=3574> (29 June 2021) and Martin Nodl, Tragický konec české poznámky [The Tragic End of the Czech Footnote], in: *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* (2019) 1, 89-108, available online at <http://www.dejinyteoriekritika.cz/Modules/ViewDocument.aspx?Did=4685> (29 June 2021). Through systematic efforts made mainly at the universities, the situation is continuously improving.

7 For a complete list of the members of the advisory board, see: <http://www.terezinstudies.cz/projects/roma-database.html> (29 June 2021).

This approach also allows for a certain ‘reverse engineering’ that helps to clarify uncertainties unanswered by earlier research, for example regarding the prisoners’ card file of the Lety camp. Irregularities in this file already became apparent during the time the camp was in operation, after the initial commandant Josef Janovský had been replaced by Štepan Blahynka in early 1943. Mostly, the irregularities concern the fate of prisoners: While some were mistakenly listed as “dead” in the prisoners’ card file, others who had indeed died were labelled as alive. On the basis of further documents from the camp administration such as deportation lists and personal documents, first efforts to correct such mistakes were undertaken during the spring of 1943. During the compilation of the list of prisoners based on archival documents, we had to trace double entries as well as carefully connect all information from different sources to individuals, which also enabled us to reconstruct the corrections made during the time the camp was in operation. Furthermore, we compared the information on the fates of prisoners with available information from other sources, for example camp records from Auschwitz-Birkenau, to verify whether someone had been deported there or not. An overview of cases that could not be clarified completely will be made available for further research.

Nečas, who had to work with the same large number of documents as we do today but without the advantages of electronic data processing, left traces of his work in the prisoners’ card file, which also caused confusion. On Nečas’s request, the archive added altogether eight cards to the file, with the argument that the people concerned had been prisoners in the camp but were not registered in the card file. For seven of them, he later withdrew his claim, which was documented, without stating the reason, on the cards still contained in the card file today. This has led to doubts on the reliability of the card file. The reason for Nečas’s later withdrawal was that these individuals were already contained in the original card file⁸ and that he had simply overlooked them while processing more than 1,300 cards manually. The final individual who Nečas claimed had been imprisoned in the ‘Gypsy camp’, whose file he did not retract, can still be found among those registered in the original card file.⁹

The change of approach regarding the lists of victims subsequently caused a second change concerning the database. Unlike the victims of the Shoah, who were deported because they had first been ‘identified’ as Jews by the Nazis, the inmates of the ‘Gypsy camps’ in the Protectorate were only classified as ‘racial Gypsies or Gypsy half-breeds’ or ‘racial non-Gypsies’ after having been imprisoned at the ‘Gypsy camps’. Everyone imprisoned there thus became a victim of the National Socialist persecution of ‘Gypsies’, without regard to their later racial categorisation. Consequently, the database will not be published under the name initially suggested in the project. Instead, its title will be “Database of the Victims of the National Socialist Persecution of ‘Gypsies’”. The term ‘Gypsies’ will be left in quotation marks to make clear that it is not to be equated with ‘Roma and Sinti’ in this context.

8 See: Státní oblastní archiv Třeboň [State Regional Archives in Třeboň] (SOA), fond CT Lety, inventory no. 144 prisoners’ card file 99/97; 461/1650; 1066/1064; 1822/1756; 1922/95; 1999/2119; 2067/2057.

9 See: SOA Třeboň, fond CT Lety, inventory no. 144 (prisoners’ card file), 683/681.

Archival Materials

The pool of archival materials collected for the project adds up to a total of 72,331 digitally copied pages. The greater part, comprising 41,661 scans, makes up the complete archival collection “CT Lety” held in the State Regional Archives in Třeboň.¹⁰ The name of the collection translates to “cikánský tabor” (CT) or “Gypsy camp Lety”. Its name notwithstanding, this collection also contains the materials from the preceding camps, the Kárný pracovní tábor (disciplinary labour camp, KPT) and the Sběrný tábor (collection camp, ST) that were run by the same personnel in the same place and whose histories are closely linked to that of the ‘Gypsy camp’. The greater part of the collection, however, covers the ‘Gypsy camp’. Although an exact number has not yet been established, the current estimate is that about a third of all documents from the “CT Lety” collection contain information on individuals imprisoned in the so-called ‘Gypsy camp’ from August 1942 through to the early summer of 1943. Next to the inmates’ card index, there are several prisoners’ lists included in the archival records, as well as prisoners’ registries, personal documents, and contemporary correspondence between different authorities concerning groups or individuals. The correspondence also includes several documents on contemporary corrections of irregularities in the prisoners’ card file.

The documents from the KPT and ST included in the archival record “CT Lety” have been digitised for their relevance to the historical context of the ‘Gypsy camp’. Both preceding camps represented forms of repression against marginalised social groups, partly on the grounds of racial ideology, though on different grounds and answering to different authorities. While the KPT Lety was the product of a longer history of decision-making during the First and Second Czechoslovak Republics,¹¹ both the ST and CT Lety were related to two distinct types of National Socialist persecution on the grounds of racial ideology, the former connected with the persecution of so-called ‘asocials’, the latter established as a genuine means to persecute ‘Gypsies’.

Except for the “CT Lety” records in Třeboň, all the other archival collections systematically researched for this project have only been partially digitised. Altogether 12,699 documents gathered in the Moravian Provincial Archive in Brno concern the mechanisms of persecution as well as individual victims, as do another 7,365 documents from the National Archives in Prague. Minor amounts of documents on individuals were obtained from the City Archives in Brno, the State Regional Archives in Prague, the State District Archives in Třebíč, and the State Regional Archives in Kladno. Another 9,362 documents stem from the Archives of the State Museum in Auschwitz-Birkenau and document the fates of people from the Protectorate who were persecuted as ‘Gypsies’ after their deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Not all of these documents have been included in the database so far. A detailed description of the contents of the database and its creation can be found on the website holocaust.cz.¹²

10 SOA Třeboň, fond CT Lety. The project team members would like to thank the State Regional Archives in Třeboň for their cooperation, which extended further than we could have expected. As the person who conducted the digitalisation of the archival collection, I would like to especially thank Ms. Plucarová for her pleasant cooperation, as well as for her friendly and supportive manner during the time I spent in Třeboň.

11 See for example: Vít Strobach/Pavel Baloun, *Likvidace nezaměstnanosti. Pracovní tábory mezi liberální demokracií a diktaturou* [Liquidating Unemployment. Labour Camps between Liberal Democracy and Dictatorship], <http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2016/9/likvidace-nezaměstnanosti/> (29 June 2021).

12 The Database of Victims of the Nazi Persecution of “Gypsies”. Notes on methodology and manual, <https://c.holocaust.cz/files/old/pdfs/TheDatabaseofVictimsoftheNaziPersecutionofGypsies.pdf> (29 June 2021).

In the Central Military Archives in Prague, we were able to obtain about 200 documents from the collection of personal files of applicants for a certificate of national resistance according to Act 255/1946 Coll. regarding the aftermath of persecution in Czechoslovakia and the later Czech Republic. While in post-war Germany, victims of the National Socialist persecution of ‘Gypsies’ were subjected to further discrimination on the grounds of the same stereotypes as during the ‘Third Reich’, in communist Czechoslovakia, former inmates of the ‘Gypsy camps’ were considered eligible for the benefits provided by the law 255/1946 Sb. Recognition by the state on the grounds of this law was the only access to any kind of compensation until 1989. The benefits connected with this status changed over time, ranging from privileged access to certain workplaces right after the war to actual financial benefits in later years, which last until today.¹³ Although detailed research on this topic is still outstanding, societal discrimination seems to have prevented many of the victims from applying.¹⁴

The total amount of more than 72,000 documents digitised during the project is four times higher than was estimated at the beginning, with a clear imbalance in favour of documents concerning the ‘Gypsy camp’ in Lety u Písku. Taking into consideration the amount of time left to finish the project, the decision was taken to limit the May 2020 publication of the database to the victims of the Lety camp.

Sensitive Materials

The possibility that at least some of the documents would be abused for the purposes of denial or distortion, considering the current situation of Roma in the Czech Republic, led to a second limitation of the project’s outcome that was not intended from the start. In April 2019, a public opinion poll led to results that were in some newspapers celebrated as “the best result in twenty years” concerning public opinion on the co-existence of “ethnic Czechs” and Roma. However, this “best result” still entailed 72 per cent of those polled characterising the relationship between the two groups as “rather bad” or “really bad”.¹⁵ According to a poll conducted by the Ministry of the Interior in 2017, 42 per cent believed that Roma were more criminal than other ethnic groups in the Czech Republic.¹⁶ This classic stereotype about ‘Gypsies’ also keeps appearing in the discussion about the genocide of Roma and Sinti during the Second World War, mostly in connection with denying the function of the ‘Gypsy camps’ as a means of racial persecution, instead labelling them ‘work camps

13 Milada Závodská/Lada Viková, Dokumentace genocidy Romů za 2. světové války v Československu. Nálezová zpráva – diskontinuita a kontinuita odhalování historie Romů po roce 1946 [The Documentation of the Genocide of Roma during the Second World War in Czechoslovakia. Report on Findings in the Archives – Discontinuity and Continuity in Uncovering the History of the Roma after 1946], in: Romani Džaniben 23 (2016) 2, 107-124, here 110-111.

14 Eva Zdařilová, Proces odškodňování obětí romského holocaustu v České republice [The Process of Compensation for the Victims of the Roma Holocaust in the Czech Republic], Prague 2007, 25-27.

15 Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, Sociologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky [Centre for Public Opinion Research, The Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic], Naše společnost [Our Society] 30. 3.–10. 4. 2019, published 17. 5. 2019, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form-2content/documents/c2/a4924/f9/ov190517.pdf (29 June 2021).

16 Ministerstvo vnitra ČR [Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic], Výzkum zaměřený na zjišťování názorů a postojů obyvatel na otázky spojené s problematikou kriminality a její prevenci [Research Aimed at Identifying the Opinions and Attitudes of the Population on Issues Related to Crime and its Prevention], 2017, <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/nazory-a-postoje-obyvatel-na-otazky-spojene-s-problematikou-kriminality-a-její-prevenci-signalni-zprava-mv-cr.aspx> (29 June 2021).

for the workshy'.¹⁷ This obvious continuation of stereotypes, which played an important role in the evolution of the National Socialist mass murder, gave us reason to reconsider the initial idea of publishing all documents, and rather to exclude certain documents with an especially high potential for such abuse. Many documents will moreover only be published in direct combination with contextualising information. Furthermore, the educational section of the website holocaust.cz concerning the genocide of the Roma and Sinti in the territory of the Czech Republic, which has initially established at the beginning of the project in the late 1990s, will be further expanded. This decision is the result of a discussion which also engaged descendants of survivors of the genocide of Roma and Sinti in the Protectorate, for whom a minimum level of security is of great personal importance.

This discussion among the project team as well as descendants and survivors also had an impact on other activities of TII. Based on the reflections in the context of this project, other parts of the educational section on the website have been taken offline and will be reconstructed to prevent the abuse of the documents contained therein, for example in sections concerning antisemitism.

Use and Accessibility of the Database

Disregarding the above-mentioned limitations to public and anonymous use of the database without prior registration, survivors and descendants of victims, researchers and students, as well as individuals active in education, remembrance, and the like will not be subject to these limitations. To prevent abuse, TII has decided to grant access to the database only after registration. This registration process resembles the usual procedure in archives. This procedure will not be automatised. To register, interested users are required to contact TII directly.

Registered users will have access to the database and its contents, but not necessarily access to all documents digitised by TII in the course of this project, since the database does not substitute for the archives, whose records were used for its creation. Rather, the database is a resource and a powerful starting point for further research.¹⁸ Additionally, registered users of the database – if interested – will be provided access to the list of archival records available in the Czech Republic containing information connected to the topic of the genocide of Roma and Sinti in the Protectorate, which is also part of the project's outcomes but does not claim to be exhaustive. For remembrance or educational uses, we encourage interested parties not to register as users of the database, but to address inquiries directly to the staff at TII.

17 Among the best known is probably the case of Andrej Babiš, current Prime Minister of the Czech Republic, who in the autumn of 2016 made this argument as part of his election campaign. For a commentary, which takes the election campaign into consideration, see for example: Martin Fendrych, Když prasečák stojí na místě koncentráku pro Romy. Babiš lže, že Lety byl pracovní tábor [When There Is a Pig Farm on the Site of a Concentration Camp for Roma. Babiš's Lies about Lety Having Been a Labour Camp], <https://nazory.aktualne.cz/komentare/kdyz-prasecak-stoji-na-miste-koncentraku-pro-romy/r~e3e8ef0470f011e6b597002590604f2e/> (29 June 2021).

18 For an illustration of the scope of possibilities starting from biographies, see Michal Schuster's article on the Dycha family in this issue.

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