

Modern History Sourcebook:

<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/gypsy-holo.asp>

## ***Gypsies in the Holocaust***

***Paul Halsall***

It is extremely difficult to locate the sorts of sources about Gypsies in the Holocaust of the type widely available about Jewish victims of the Nazi terror. This may reflect difference between an extremely literate culture and a largely illiterate one. It is known that perhaps 250,000 Gypsies were killed, and that proportionately they suffered losses greater than any other group of victims except Jews. The accounts here were collected, and made available on the net, from various sources.

"Gypsies", or the "Roma" as they prefer to be called, are an ethnic group which originated in India (their language - Romany - is directly descended from Sanskrit) which for unknown reasons took to a wandering life-style in the late middle ages. Eventually they reached Europe and became part of the ethnic mix of many countries, contributing not a little in areas such as music and the arts.

Because they were strangers to many of the people they moved among, strong prejudices grew up, and indeed continue to this day. Although they were indisputably "Aryan" according to the Nazi racial typology, they were pursued relentlessly.

### **Gypsies in Auschwitz - Part 1**

"For Nazi Germany the Gypsies became a racist dilemma. The Gypsies were Aryans, but in the Nazi mind there were contradictions between what they regarded as the superiority of the Aryan race and their image of the Gypsies...\*

At a conference held in Berlin on January 30, 1940, a decision was taken to expel 30,000 Gypsies from Germany to the territories of occupied Poland...

The reports of the SS Einsatzgruppen [special task forces] which operated in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union mention the murder of thousands of Gypsies along with the massive extermination of the Jews in these areas.

The deportations and executions of the Gypsies came under Himmler's authority. On December 16, 1942, Himmler issued an order to send all Gypsies to the concentration camps, with a few exceptions...

The deported Gypsies were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where a special Gypsy camp was erected. Over 20,000 Gypsies from Germany and some other parts of Europe were sent to this camp, and most of them were gassed there...

Wiernik described the arrival of the largest Gypsy group brought to Treblinka, in the spring of 1943:

'One day, while I was working near the gate, I noticed the Germans and Ukrainians making special preparations...meanwhile the gate opened, and about 1,000 Gypsies were brought in (this was the third transport of Gypsies). About 200 of them were men, and the rest women and children...all the Gypsies were taken to the gas chambers and then burned'...

Gypsies from the General Government [Poland] who were not sent to Auschwitz and to the operation Reinhard camps were shot on spot by the local police or gendarms. In the eastern region of the Cracow district, in the counties of Sanok, Jaslo, and Rzeszow, close to 1,000 Gypsies were shot..."

Excerpted from. Yitzhak Arad, BELZEC, SOBIBOR, TREBLINKA - the Operation Reinhard Death Camps Indiana University Press -, 1987.,--pp150-153--

According to the The Institut Fuer Zeitgeschicthe, in Munich, at least 4000 gypsies were been murdered by gas at Auschwitz-Birkenau. (See victim count, Holocaust Almanac)

## **Gypsies in Auschwitz - Part 2**

"Like the Jews, Gypsies were singled out by the Nazis for racial persecution and annihilation. They were 'nonpersons,' of 'foreign blood,' 'labor-shy,' and as such were termed asocials. To a degree, they shared the fate of the Jews in their ghettos, in the extermination camps, before firing squads, as medical guinea pigs, and being injected with lethal substances.

Ironically, the German writer Johann Christof Wagenseil claimed in 1697 that Gypsies stemmed from German Jews. A more contemporary Nazi theorist believed that 'the Gypsy cannot, by reason of his inner and outer makeup (Konstruktion), be a useful member of the human community.'<70>

The Nuremburg Laws of 1935 aimed at the Jews were soon amended to include the Gypsies. In 1937, they were classified as asocials, second-class citizens, subject to concentration camp imprisonment. <71> As early as 1936, some had been sent to camps. After 1939, Gypsies from Germany and from the German-occupied territories were shipped by the thousands first to Jewish ghettos in Poland at Warsaw, Lublin, Kielce, Rabka, Zary, Siedlce and others. <72> It is not known how many were killed by the Einsatzgruppen charged with speedy extermination by shooting. For the sake of efficiency Gypsies were also shot naked, facing their pre-dug graves. According to the Nazi experts, shooting Jews was easier, they stood still, 'while the Gypsies cry out, howl, and move constantly, even when they are already standing on the shooting ground. Some of them even jumped into the ditch before the volley and pretended to be dead.' <73> The first to go were the German Gypsies; 30,000 were deported East in three waves in 1939, 1941 and 1943. Those married to Germans were exempted but were sterilized, as were their children after the age of twelve. <74>

Just how were the Gypsies of Europe 'expedited'? Adolf Eichmann, chief strategist of these diabolical logistics, supplied the answer in a telegram from Vienna to the Gestapo:

Regarding transport of Gypsies be informed that on Friday, October 20, 1939, the first transport of Jews will depart Vienna. To this transport 3-4 cars of Gypsies are to be attached. Subsequent trains will depart from Vienna, Mahrtsch-Ostrau and Katowice [Poland]. The simplest method is to attach some carloads of

Gypsies to each transport. Because these transports must follow schedule, a smooth execution of this matter is expected. Concerning a start in the Altreich [Germany proper] be informed that this will be coming in 3-4 weeks. Eichmann. <74>

Open season was declared on the Gypsies, too. For a while Himmler wished to exempt two tribes and 'only' sterilize them, but by 1942 he signed the decree for all Gypsies to be shipped to Auschwitz. <76> There they were subjected to all that Auschwitz meant, including the medical experiments, before they were exterminated.

Gypsies perished in Dachau, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück and other camps. At Sachsenhausen they were subjected to special experiments that were to prove scientifically that their blood was different from that of the Germans. The doctors in charge of this 'research' were the same ones who had practiced previously on black prisoners of war. Yet, for 'racial reasons' they were found unsuitable for sea water experiments. <77> Gypsies were often accused of atrocities committed by others; they were blamed, for instance, for the looting of gold teeth from a hundred dead Jews abandoned on a Rumanian road. <78>

Gypsy women were forced to become guinea pigs in the hands of Nazi physicians. Among others they were sterilized as 'unworthy of human reproduction' (fortpflanzungsunwürdig), only to be ultimately annihilated as not worthy of living. ... At that, the Gypsies were the luckier ones; in Bulgaria, Greece, Denmark and Finland they were spared. <80>

For a while there was a Gypsy Family Camp in Auschwitz, but on August 6, 1944, it was liquidated. Some men and women were shipped to German factories as slave labor; the rest, about 3,000 women, children and old people, were gassed. <81>

No precise statistics exist about the extermination of European Gypsies. Some estimates place the number between 500,000 and 600,000, most of them gassed in Auschwitz. <82> Others indicated a more conservative 200,000 Gypsy victims of the Holocaust. <83>

## Notes

<70> Raul Hilberg, "The Destruction of the European Jews" (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p.641; quotation by Staatsrat Turner, chief of the civil administration in Serbia, October 26, 1941, in *ibid.*, p.438

<71> Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, "Destiny of Europe's Gypsies" (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p.72

<72> Jan Yoors, "Crossing, A Journal of Survival and Resistance in World War II" (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), pp. 33-34

<73> Hilberg, p. 439

<74> Ruzena Bubenickova, et al., "Tabory utrpeni a smrti" (Camps of Martyrdom and Death)(Prague: Svoboda, 1969), pp. 189-190

<75> Simon Wiesenthal, "The Murderers Among Us" (New York: Bantam, 1967) pp. 237-238

<76> Kendrick, pp. 88-90

<77> Hilberg, pp. 602, 608; the doctors were Hornbeck and Werner Fischer

<78> *ibid.*, p.489

<79> Julian E. Kulski, "Dying We Live" (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), p.200

<80> Kendrick, p.100

<81> Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, "Tovarna na smrt" (Death Factory) (Prague: Nase vojsko, 1957), p.200

<82> Yoors, p.34; Bubenickova, p. 190

<83> Gilbert, Martin. "The Holocaust, Maps and Photographs" (New York : Mayflower Books, 1978. p.22; Kendrick, p. 184

**Extracted from "WOMEN IN THE RESISTANCE AND IN THE HOLOCAUST: THE VOICES OF EYEWITNESSES"** Edited (and with introduction) by *Vera Laska*. Greenwood Press, Westport & London, 1983. LOC 82-12018, ISBN 0-313-23457-4

### **Gypsies in Auschwitz - Part 3**

"Gypsies were officially defined as non-Aryan by the Nuremberg laws of 1935, which also first defined Jews; both groups were forbidden to marry Germans. Gypsies were later labeled as asocials by the 1937 Laws against Crime, regardless of whether they had been charged with any unlawful acts. Two hundred Gypsie men were then selected by quota and incarcerated in Buchenwald concentration camp. By May 1938, SS Reichsfuehrer Himmler established the Central Office for Fighting the Gypsy Menace, which defined the question as `a matter of race,' discriminating pure Gypsies from part Gypsies as Jews were discriminated, and ordering their registration. In 1939, resettlement of Gypsies was put under Eichmann's jurisdiction along with that of the Jews. Gypsies were forbidden to move freely and were concentrated in encampments with Germany in 1939, later (1941) transformed into fenced ghettos, from which they would be seized for transport by the criminal police (aided by dogs) and dispatched to Auschwitz in February 1943. During May 1940, about 3,100 were sent to Jewish ghettos in the Government-General: others may have been added to Jewish transports from Berlin, Vienna, and Prague to Nisko, Poland (the sight of an aborted reservation to which Jews were deported). These measures were taken against Gypsies who had no claim to exemption because of having an Aryan spouse or having been regularly employed for five years.

Some evaded the net at first. Despite a 1937 laws excluding gypsies from army service, many served in the armed forces until demobilized by special orders between 1940 and 1942. Gypsy children were also dismissed from schools beginning in March 1941. Thus, those who were nominally free and not yet concentrated were stripped systematically of the status of citizens and segregated. The legal status of Gypsies and Jews, determined irrevocably by the agreement between Justice Minister Thierack and SS Reichsfuehrer Himmler on 18 September 1942, removing both groups from the jurisdiction of any German court, confirmed their fate. Thierack wrote, ` I envisage transferring all criminal proceedings concerning

[these people] to Himmler. I do this because I realize that the courts can only feebly contribute to the extermination of these people.

The Citizenship Law of 1943 omitted any mention of Gypsies since they were not expected to exist much longer. Himmler decreed the transport of Gypsies to Auschwitz on 16 December 1942, but he did not authorize their extermination until 1944. Most died there and in other camps of starvation, diseases, and torture from abuse as live experimental subjects. By the end of the war, 15,000 of the 20,000 Gypsies who had been in Germany in 1939 had died."

**Excerpted from "Accounting for Genocide: Victims - and Survivors - of the Holocaust"** (New York: Free Press, 1979) *Helen Fein*

**This text is part of the Internet Modern History Sourcebook.** The Sourcebook is a collection of public domain and copy-permitted texts for introductory level classes in modern European and World history.

Unless otherwise indicated the specific electronic form of the document is copyright. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use. If you do reduplicate the document, indicate the source. No permission is granted for commercial use of the Sourcebook.

(c)Paul Halsall Aug 1997