MULTI-DISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO ROMANY STUDIES

Selected Papers from Participants of Central European University’s Summer Courses 2007–2009
THE OTHER GENOCIDE

For me it is unbelievable that I am still alive. My survival has been a punishment. Again and again and again I have asked God: why was I left alive, I alone? They destroyed our whole life, the love, the families, the cohesion. We don’t have families anymore. Everything is in tatters. They took everything. The trust in others, the openness and warm feelings, they are all destroyed. I don’t even believe in myself anymore. It was our faith in other people that they took from us, all the feelings from which that derives…


Between 1939 and 1945 in every country that was brought under Nazi rule, in every city, in every village, in every concentration camp, Gypsies, like Jews, were persecuted because of their birth. By the end of the war, two thirds of Germany’s thirty thousand Gypsies, a greater proportion of Austrian, Czech and Croatian Gypsies and tens of thousands elsewhere, were dead. Of those who remained in Germany, many had been sterilised, others had been crippled through slave labour. Although it is still extremely hard to put precise figures on the total number of dead, it seems that at least 130,000 Gypsies and maybe many more were killed as a direct consequence of racial policies pursued by the German state and its various allies in Italy, Croatia and Romania in particular (Zimmermann, 1996, pp. 381–83).

Although the special facility at the Auschwitz death camp, the Gypsy Family Camp, Zigeunerfamilienlager, which constituted the largest single concentration of Gypsies created during the war, only operated from March 1943 till July 1944, genocidal initiatives directed at Gypsies were proposed (and in part enacted) from the first to the last days of the war. Three weeks after the outbreak of hostilities, on the 21st September, 1939, at a conference called by the head of the Security Police, Richard Heydrich, it was agreed that the 30,000 German Gypsies were to be deported to ‘General Government in Poland.’ This deportation did not in fact take place—but only for administrative reasons. Two years later, in the late autumn of 1941, the first transports of ‘racial aliens’ were sent from Austria to the occupied territories. 5,000 Austrian Gypsy citizens accompanied 20,000 Jews. With more than half of these Romany deportees being children, and crammed together in a few buildings in the centre of Lodz (Littmannstadt), typhus and other disease spread with such rapidity that even the Germans became alarmed—particularly after typhus brought down the German ghetto commandant, Eugenius Jansen (Dobroszycki, 1984, p. 96). It was in fact in response to the difficulties of managing the ghetto at Lodz that the decision was
taken to experiment with mass gassing at a camp in the village of Chelmno (Kulmhof) some fifty kilometres northwest of the city. A special commando unit that had been operating in eastern Prussia, carrying out euthanasia killings among Germans, was brought over and the first Jews were killed there in December 1941. Five weeks later, in January 1942 4,400 Gypsies were taken from the ghetto. Even using the primitive instrument of carbon monoxide poisoning in specially adapted vans, the Germans were able to kill at a rate of one thousand victims a day. The liquidation of the Gypsy ghetto was completed with almost no one noticing (ZSL Ludwigsburg, 203 AR-Z 69/59, Bd. 1; Dobroszycki, 1984).

Three months later, on the eastern Front, formal instructions were given to the Wehrmacht and other fighting forces that Gypsies were to be treated ‘as the Jews.’ In this situation, the Gypsies may actually have been the worse off. Jews who were captured might be subject to selection—the Germans needed skilled slave labour. Gypsies, lacking formal education, were shot upon capture. Wherever the Germans went, Gypsies fell: in the Ukrainian forests where they had sought refuge with partisan units; on the Baltic coast, where 800 of the tiny Estonian Gypsy population of 850 were dead by 1944. In the Reich itself, towards the end of the war, some Gypsies were given the possibility of having themselves declared ‘socially adjusted.’ If they then ‘consented’ to sterilisation they would be exempted from the oppressive and often murderous regulation of their people. Hanjörg Riechert, who researched this very practice, estimated that 2,500 German Gypsies lost the ability to reproduce thus (Reichert, 1995, p. 135).

In the Romanian wartime fiefdom known as Transdnistria, alongside one hundred and fifty thousand Jews deported from Bessarabia, at least twenty five thousand ‘nomadic’ and ‘asocial’ Romanian Roma were sent to starve to death; our best evidence suggests that possibly 40% of the deported Roma died there (Varga, 2005). On the Reich’s southern front, in Serbia, Gypsy ‘hostages’ were shot alongside Jews and partisans; in neighbouring Croatia, the Ustashe-run camp of Jasenovac became the graveyard for somewhere between 50 and 95% of the Croatian and Bosnian Gypsy populations (Reinhartz, 1999; Jasenovac, 1997; Ackovic, 1995).

In brief, despite profound differences in the motivation, scale and intensity of the persecutions of Gypsies and Jews, the Romany peoples were threatened with extinction—and, had the course of the war turned otherwise, without the slightest shadow of a doubt they, like Europe’s Jews, would have disappeared.

And yet, the mass murder and sterilisation of the Sinte, Roma and Gypsies provides, perhaps, the locus classicus in the modern world of a genocidal catastrophe denied and cast into public oblivion. Despite the efforts of a number of historians and activists, the general European public remains almost totally unaware of the Nazi treatment of the Romany peoples and in no European country are these persecutions taught as a part of the national curriculum. One saga is particularly telling in its absurdity. In 1992,
the German Federal Government agreed to construct a memorial to the Sinti, Roma and Gypsies of Europe to go alongside the national monument to the Jews. They had only conceded after years of campaigning and direct action by Romany organizations. Seventeen years later, in the summer of 2009, the agreed location remains an ugly building site in a copse at the edge of the Tiergarten opposite the Brandenburg Gate and diagonally opposite Peter Eisenman’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. After much debate about the site itself and, more fundamentally, the purpose and meaning of such a memorial, the construction itself has been delayed to the point that, at its opening, it is conceivable that no adult Romany survivors of World War Two will be alive.

In this short text I want to link the particular character of the Nazi persecution of the Roma and Sinti with the treatment the genocide received after the war and its fate in terms of historical memory. In doing so, I hope to explain why this catastrophe remains contested, how the killing of Gypsies differed from that of Jews and why it is important to put the case of the Gypsies in the context of “denial” or forgetting since this is one of the factors that helps explain the terrible treatment accorded this day to many Gypsy communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

After the Catastrophe

For years after the Second World War ended, many Gypsy victims of the Nazis campaigned, some of them to the end of their lives, for proper acknowledgement of what they had been through as well as some sort of monetary compensation for everything they had lost. In the majority of cases this was a fruitless endeavour. In every case it involved the humiliating discovery that the attitudes that had sent them to the concentration camps were alive, flourishing and had found new legitimacy (Margalit, 2002, pp. 83–142). Take the case of just one man whose story is by no means atypical.

Berhardt Reinhard, a Sinto, or German Gypsy, had a fairly typical war for a person of his background and age. He was one of many socially consolidated German Gypsy families who had deep historical roots in the country, Reich citizenship, and a strong sense of belonging to the German nation. His family, who had settled in the city of Kassel in the heart of Germany, and in the smaller town of Fulda to the south, had been well integrated into local German society, and his conscription into the army at the outbreak of war was never in question. However, his service in the *Wehrmacht* was terminated early in 1943 when all Gypsy recruits were expelled from the armed services on racial grounds (Lewy, 2000, pp. 95–97). Immediately transported to Auschwitz, he was then transferred to Sachsenhausen in 1944, before the liquidation of the Gypsy camp. From there he was sent to Ravensbruck where, like other Gypsies who were exempted from extermination, he was forcibly sterilised. On the 9th of
January, 1945, he was conscripted into a military ‘suicide’ unit—a *Sonderkommando* of the SS named the *Dirlewanger*, after the convicted paedophile who led it. Originally the *Dirlewanger* had offered ordinary criminals and ‘asocials’ an exchange: service in lieu of internment in a concentration camp. As the German army collapsed at the end of the war, political prisoners and sterilised Gypsies were offered the same deal. Reinhard was among the luckier recruits. Badly wounded in the foot a few weeks later, he survived to the war’s end.

Four years later, in November 1949, Bernhardt Reinhard applied for compensation for ‘bodily and mental injuries’ suffered between March 1943 and April 1945. The first doctor he saw declared that his wound and various persecutions, including his forced sterilisation, reduced his ability to earn an income by 50%. Since the minimum rating for compensation stood at 25%, he was assured a pension. But that was not at all the view of the people who would have to foot the bill, the Kassel welfare office. They immediately questioned his right to a monthly pension. First they wanted to be persuaded that the grounds on which he had been sent to Auschwitz were racial and not behavioural. If he had been deported as an ‘asocial’ this would not count as ‘political persecution’ under the terms the Allies had set for the compensation procedures.

Janos Korpatsch—on the right of the three men, here photographed in 1904 when his family were held at the German/Dutch border for several weeks, unable to cross the frontier—became the object of a veritable show trial in 1936 when he was accused of being the King of the German Gypsies by the Nazi controlled police in Frankfurt. Copyright, R.H. Postma.
The Fulda police, who had effected the deportation, confirmed that Reinhard’s deportation was ‘without doubt’ racial in character. Kassel town hall then came up with a new objection. They suggested that since the Dirlewanger was a ‘parole unit’ his service there was presumably for a ‘common misdemeanour’ committed while in Ravensbruck. Since common criminals—even if they had been worked to death’s door as slave labour in a concentration camp—were not eligible for compensation, this was a way to query the state’s liability for his foot wounds at least. The Kassel authorities suggested that, for establishing the extent of his claim to compensation, his period of ‘loss of liberty’ should end in December 1944, before conscription into the Dirlewanger.

For six years the argument went back and forth. Every time Reinhard received a supportive or sympathetic testimony from a doctor or other assessor, the Kassel welfare office found new quibbles with his application. In 1956, it seemed he was in a winning position when all parties agreed that he was suffering 30% loss of earning capacity as a result of his sterilisation. But the town council then pointed out that he had not originally asked to be compensated for this ‘intervention.’ They asked him to demonstrate that his foot wounds—for which they did now accept liability—were causing him a similar degree of incapacity.

In the delay caused by this manoeuvre, a new public health officer took over his case and set the whole procedure to naught. In his view, the age of the applicant at the time of sterilisation, 22 years old, made it “unlikely that his personal development would have been unfavourably influenced by this intervention.” He sent Reinhard back for yet further examinations, this time in the clinic of a Prof. Dr. Villinger and a Professor Dr. Sophie Erhardt, two people who were, you might say, particularly well qualified to understand where their patient was coming from. In November 1957 Werner Villinger had not yet been exposed as one of the higher ranking doctors involved in the secret “T4 action,” the euthanasia murders of over 100,000 people in mental hospitals between 1939 and 1941. Sophie Erhardt had also managed to avoid prosecution for her work in the Racial Hygiene Office of the Reich, determining which Gypsies were to be sterilised and which sent to Auschwitz. No surprise then that they examined this case with uncommon thoroughness; nor at their perverse conclusion. They found the patient mentally and physically sound and complained that no adequate hereditary or medical reasons had been recorded to justify a sterilisation in the first place.

This superficially sympathetic stance was merely a cover for a cunning piece of sophistry: since he was in good health as far as the effects of his sterilisation were concerned, with no ‘morbid perturbations’ or ‘psycho-neurological impairment,’ there were no grounds on which to compensate him! Eight years after his original application for material compensation, Bernhardt Reinhard was turned away, with a formal decision from the Regional authority, on the basis that he had retained over 75% of his earning potential.
Fascination with the distinctive life-style of Roma and Gypsies sat comfortably beside the kind of official harassment that stopped them travelling freely.

The single positive aspect of this development was that his lawyer was, at last, entitled to challenge the administrative decision in the courts. The Regional Compensation Office sensed that their apparently heartless stance might need defending and wrote to the Judge saying that Reinhard’s tireless battle for a pension was, from their perspective, entirely understandable. It was a psychic reaction to his circumstances. ‘Specifically,’ they thought he might be suffering from what they dubbed ‘a pension neurosis.’ Their considered view was that were Reinhard now to receive a pension this would only serve to tie him to his past, reminding him every month of the original trauma. Compensation could only worsen his condition. It was thus not cold heartedness but their ‘duty of care,’ so they reasoned, to refuse him the money he requested. Once again the court found against his main application—though this time he was awarded a one-off payment for ‘mental and bodily suffering.’

Reinhard bravely rejected the proposed settlement. And so a few months later he found himself once again publicly humiliated, this time at the regional appeal court, the senior judge of which told him that he should not think of comparing himself to the seventeen-year-old childless, sterilised girl whom they had just compensated. His puberty had come to an end and he had had two children before ‘the unfortunate operation’. The judge did not mention that one of these had died in Auschwitz. He refused to alter the lower court’s decision.
A full twenty years after the end of the war this doggedly determined and endlessly patient Sinto man won what he had originally sought. A change to the Compensation Law in 1965, allowed many disputed Gypsy cases to be referred back to the courts, his included. In 1963, the Bundesgerichtshof, the highest court of the Federal Republic, had broadened the legal responsibility of the state to the Gypsy victims by overturning a highly restrictive definition of the racial persecution of the Gypsies. Until this decision the courts only acknowledged racial persecution from the date of the implementation of the Auschwitz Decree (January, 1943). Any actions against a Gypsy before this date were presumed by the courts to have been due to their individual ‘common criminality’ or ‘asociality’. As the radical shift of the 1963 decision worked its way down the legal system, Reinhard was re-examined by a doctor who, for the first time since his original examination in 1949, saw his case in its plain human dimension.

This new doctor penned a furious report, implicitly denouncing his forebears’ narrow-minded approach to both the client and the law. If Reinhard had no immediate physical symptoms from the sterilisation that reduced his capacity to work, the fact that he had lost the ability to reproduce and that his marriage had collapsed under the double burden of both his and his wife’s sterilisation was very much the concern of the law. He was awarded a monthly pension, backdated to 1944. It took another twenty five years for the Federal courts to award the now 68-year-old Reinhard something that, had he not been a Gypsy, he would have received at the outset of his application, a period of ‘therapeutic treatment’ in a sanatorium.¹

Rendering the Romany Victims Invisible

What do we learn from the progress of Bernhardt Reinhard’s application through the compensation offices and the courts?

The American and British military administrations after the war wished publicly to recognise all victims of the Nazis and, as a moral and political gesture, to reward them with financial compensation to be taken from the coffers of the German state.² They then, however, made a fundamental interpretive error by restricting the definition of the victims to ‘racial’ and ‘ideological’ enemies. In so doing they tied the hands of the future (German) administration by denying compensation to those who had been interned for any kind of common crime. The logic appeared flawless. Why should rapists, thieves, drunks or murderers be treated as victims of the Nazis? But for the Gypsies the logic was fateful. ‘Asociality’ counted in both popular belief and the legal

¹ Many of the documents from this case are reproduced in Mettbach and Behringer, 1999, pp. 94–114.
² The Soviet administration was only willing to compensate victims of ‘fascism’ and active fighters against it. Racial enemies of the Nazis were declared ‘passive’ victims and denied compensation (Margalit, 2002, p. 87).
system as a common delict and thus most Gypsies whose lifestyle had been classified as ‘asocial’ by the Nazis were denied access to the compensation funds.

In this way the interim allied administration failed to acknowledge that the Nazi system of criminal justice worked in deeply discriminatory ways against members of ethnic minorities and other social outcastes. Many Gypsies had convictions for petty offences like begging, loitering, selling goods without a licence or even holding foreign currency and since Nazi justifications for interning Gypsies always referred to their criminal tendencies, the Allied definition of political or racial victim implied that every Gypsy would have to go through a special procedure to establish their individual eligibility. But even more basically, the Allies failed to understand that by 1940, if not earlier, the whole of criminal law had been poisoned and perverted by political considerations. Central to this perversion was the crucial notion of ‘preventive justice,’ by which people could be imprisoned before any crime had actually been committed. What this meant in effect was the politicisation of ordinary crime. And after the outbreak of war the very distinction between ‘ordinary’ and ‘political’ crime was lost as the former was seen and punished as a form of opposition to the regime (Gellately, 2001, p. 78).
With these erroneous procedures in place, especially as power and authority were handed back to the Germans, the Gypsies were ever more systematically excluded from procedures for official recognition and compensation. A punctilious and thrifty local bureaucracy, who felt charged above all to conserve their limited resources, allied itself with the plain prejudice of others involved in cases like these. The presence at all levels of the state bureaucracy of officials who had been active partners in the Gypsies’ persecution meant that Gypsies came up against almost exactly the same prejudices as they had under the Nazis. In several regions of post war Germany payments of any compensation to Gypsies were limited to those who could prove they had fixed accommodation and employment (Margalit, 2002, p. 98).

And so while few officials would have dared after 1945 to use the anti-Semitic language and imagery of the war years to suggest to Jewish applicants that it was their membership of “a parasitic community” that had “tried to achieve world domination” that had given rise their persecution, Gypsy supplicants did not benefit from the same restraint. From the end of the 1940s people like Reinhard were told that the ‘admittedly combative measures’ taken against them were their own fault. It was the Gypsy character type, their ‘antisocial behaviour,’ ‘crime,’ and ‘wandering drive’ that were the root of the problem. And it was not just open racists who reasoned thus. Many officials who had not been directly implicated in the persecution of the Gypsies felt that while Nazi policies had been a little harsh they lay within the standards acceptable in time of war.

Even more widely shared was an implicit ranking of the different groups of victims in which the Gypsies invariably came towards the bottom. As the full extent of the criminality of the Nazi regime was revealed for the first time in 1945, it was only natural that the sheer, overwhelming scale of the Holocaust should provide the standard measure for all the other crimes of the regime. Those persecuted for their religious faith like the Jehovah witnesses and some other Christians were likewise quickly recognised. The mentally sick, apparently an embarrassment to all concerned, were forgotten; homosexuals, so-called ‘asocials,’ communists even and Gypsies all had a hard time asserting the injustice of their persecutions.

Sophie Erhardt, the anthropologist who had been called as an expert witness in the Reinhard case and who had worked during and after the war on Gypsy specimens taken from prisoners, easily aligned her own, deeply ambivalent stance, with views like these. In 1963, in the context of a debate about general compensation for all the forcibly sterilised, she wrote to the finance ministry in these terms:

What would people say if some asocial alcoholic, who from the point of view of hereditary science (erbbiologisch) was wrongly sterilised, should from now on be treated as the equal of all those who, as reputable citizens, were tortured for years on end in concentration camps simply because of their race, their
beliefs or the political convictions. A compensation provision for the sterilised would in many cases lead to a disavowal and ridicule of restitution among right thinking minds (*echten Gedankens*).3

This moral hierarchy was in some respects built into the institutional structure of the Federal Republic. The compensation offices, for instance, used Nazi anti-Semitic ideology and practice as their point of reference for defining ‘political’ persecution. And the Gypsies struggling for recognition found themselves trapped within this logic.

**The Fog of Genocidal Planning**

For Roma and Sinte seeking financial compensation as well as moral recognition, their interest, indeed their obligation has been to assert the identity of the Jewish and Gypsy persecutions. Between 1950 and 1985 a political, legal and intellectual campaign was fought for the Gypsies to be included as victims of the Nazis. All efforts were focused on proving the courts wrong but this meant that the terms of the whole debate were set by the legal context. Given the procedures of the judges, the most persuasive, perhaps the only way to win the argument was to trace the evolution of Nazi policy to the Gypsies in dated, signed decrees and orders. It was with the help of such documentary proof, that the start date for ‘racial persecution’ was pushed back from January 1943, when Himmler signed the Auschwitz decree that sent most German Gypsies to concentration camps, to an earlier decree of the same office dated December 1938.

It is essential to understand that the pernicious influence of this misapplied model had little or nothing to do with the personal histories or the political stance of the individuals involved. This much became clear in the 1980s when a new generation of lawyers, prosecutors and judges came to office. Many were ashamed by the failure to identify individual perpetrators or hold anyone accountable for the persecution and genocide of the Gypsies and were determined to try and set the historical and judicial record straight. In a number of German cities, long-abandoned investigations into employees of the Racial Hygiene and Population Research Offices were reopened.

But time and again these reached a similar dead end. In Hamburg an energetic public prosecutor investigated a certain Ruth Kellermann who had worked alongside Sophie Erhardt carrying out individual racial classifications of all the Gypsies living in Germany. The case never made it to court. The prosecutor published a statement, explaining that “as regards the Gypsies a clear and traceable chain of orders, analogous to the order for the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ is missing.” Since the only other charges against Kellermann fell under the statute of limitations, there was no

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case to be answered. Two years later a similar investigation led to a prosecution of one of the ‘small fish,’ a former Block leader in Auschwitz. At the end of a three-year long trial, SS Rottenführer, Ernst-August König, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1991 on three counts of murder in the Gypsy Family Camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. But the more serious charge that these murders as well as his participation in organising transport to the gas chambers were evidence of involvement in genocide was dismissed. The judges reasoned that since the court had not been presented with an order for the extermination of all Gypsies they could not accept that König’s actions had been part of a broader plan.  

Beyond questions of interpretation of bureaucratic procedure, there was of course another reason to cling to this version of history: an account of the racial persecutions of the Nazi era that stressed the culpability of the Nazi elite and exonerated the ordinary population fitted nicely into the myth of post-war Germany that Nazi policy was never an expression of popular wishes but rather the imposition of a Party leadership who forced their ideas on an unwilling population. According to this convenient story, the actual work of persecution was seen through by the SS and not by ordinary Germans. This was at best a simplification and in many respects a plain fabrication. After the effective closure of thorough de-nazification proceedings in 1948, those bureaucrats and very town hall employees who, as we shall next see, had participated to one degree or another in discriminatory practices, persecutions or even outright genocide had a clear interest in claiming that the Nazi regime had never been an organic part of German society. Uncovering the true story of the Gypsy genocide would have put the spotlight on precisely those layers of the professions who had successfully managed to whitewash their past, as we shall now see.

**Four Steps to Genocidal Catastrophe**

In the official treatment of the Roma and Sinti after World War II we see how a more or less mythologised version of the Jewish Holocaust, as the outcome of an order from the Führer, misled the legal and other professionals when they came to consider other persecutions. But even were officials to have operated with a more realistic understanding of how the Final Solution came into being, the judges and investigators would have had great difficulty sustaining an equation of the Jewish and Romany genocides. Let me be clear. I do not wish to belittle the treatment or fate of the Sinte and Roma. The point is rather that ‘the Gypsy problem’ occupied a totally different place in Nazi ideology than that of ‘the Jewish problem.’ Likewise, the measures necessary to exclude a socially and economically marginal minority from German society were not the same as those required to remove a highly educated and culturally dominant elite.

4 For these cases see, ZSL Ludwigsburg, 414 AR 540/83, Bd. 4, pp. 233 and 799.
I stress here some fundamental differences and derive these from the history of public policy towards these two minorities in the half-century and more preceding the Nazi takeover. For the Jews the institution and consolidation of the modern nation-state meant—in fits and starts but ineluctably nonetheless—their emancipation and integration into European societies, Germany included: Jewish legal and civil equality in the German states that was established during the 1860s, the great movement out of the ghettos and into the cities from the 1870s on and above all their integration into banking, trade and the professions, all this marked their passage to full members of the national citizenry.

For the Gypsies, the same period saw a decline in their status and a reversal of a number of ‘privileges’ or ‘protections’ from which they had benefited in the early modern social order. Even if they had occupied a radically marginal and often impoverished socio-economic niche and had profoundly circumscribed political claims, in localities where they could demonstrate longstanding affiliation they were subject to the ‘protection’ (Schutz) of the Herrschaft and, as Thomas Fricke has brilliantly demonstrated, found a substantial degree of integration into the local social order. The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries saw a set of institutional moves the effect of which was to exclude many Gypsies from the new social and political protections of the modern German state. Traditionally well-integrated and tolerated as the providers of cheap labour, until the early 19th century the Gypsies had lived a kind of caste-existence, providing specialised services to the otherwise more or less socially isolated and economically insulated communities of farmers in early modern Germany, bringing news of the outside world and purchasable tokens of modernity with them. With the rise of a mass, increasingly urbanised, consumer society, as all kinds of tradesmen, commercial travellers included, were coming under state regulation, the Gypsies found themselves caught in a whole new set of administrative procedures. In country after country local authorities sought to determine who was a legitimate ‘salesman’ and who was merely ‘a Gypsy’ using their wanderer’s status as a cover for supposedly shadier activities.

The task of distinguishing one from the other was handed on to the body which, till then, had had the most systematic dealings with the Gypsies—the police. To facilitate what was in effect surveillance work the police composed registers of legitimate tradesmen and illegitimate ones (Gypsies)—creating card registers and even, in some cases, books of descriptions to enable rapid identifications. In Munich in 1905 Alfred Dillman published his synoptic work, ‘The Book of Gypsies’ building on over one hundred years of police documentation, providing aliases, locales, occupations and identifying features of different ‘clans.’ From this time on the issuing of what were called ‘Wandergewerbschein’ or travelling-tradesman permits became a central point of conflict between Gypsies and the local authorities responsible for regulating their activities.
The police were in the frontline of the persecution of Gypsies before and during the war devoting relatively enormous resources to a small minority. Source: Burgenländisches Landesarchiv. Anonymous police photographer, 1930s. Courtesy of Gerhard Baumgartner.
The second negative shift for the Gypsies was the transformation of the old duty of the local Herr to provide for his ‘own’ poor into a nationally imposed obligation on the local authority to provide various forms of support (Fursorge or Schutz as in ‘Kinderschutz’) for the locally registered needy, which led to all kinds of efforts to define the boundaries of responsibility and to the exclusion of many Gypsies from such social support. As Andreas Wimmer has argued, the first moves towards creating what was later to become the welfare state went hand in hand with restrictions on immigration (on the import of new potentially welfare-dependent persons) and with efforts to cleanse the population of problematic ‘elements’: ‘the logic of inclusion and exclusion’ that he sees as central to the specific form of ‘social closure’ that is a national community (Wimmer, 2002, pp. 57–64). With the ‘nationalisation of the regime of mobility’ those beyond the borders became de facto out of the ‘realm’. But that is not the end of the matter. Since integration and exclusion are articulated around notions of national citizenship, questions of ethnic attachment and the status of persons and groups as ‘proper citizens’ acquire novel force. And these lines are drawn within the state. With limited resources to distribute among the needy the local state even has an interest in such demarcation work.

Moreover, the terms in which the nationalist ‘compromise’ on social solidarity among citizens was justified included powerful notions of social improvement. If Kinderschutz were to be handed out to the socially and morally dubious classes then one had to be assured that its effect was moral improvement. There was no single European language in which such socio-moral reform was couched, but across the political spectrum from left to right biology, psychology and sociology mixed in various combinations. With the rise of early genetic science, the possibility emerged, on the horizon, of population improvement by regulation of demography. Just as pasteurisation had made milk safe to drink for the masses congregated in the cities, so population science offered to de-contaminate the nation’s demographic profile. In Germany in particular, even more than Italy, France or the United States, notions of eugenics, ‘racial hygiene’ and the language of ‘degeneration, decay and corruption’ took deep root amongst many intellectuals Graphic and lurid imagery, implicating not just the clearly alien like Gypsies but the poor, the alcoholic and, brilliantly vague term, the ‘asocial’, spread in the years before the war, turning illness itself into a political concern (Frevert, 1984; Evans, 2001). Under the Nazis, this trend led to a situation where anyone who ‘stood out’ or ‘came to the attention of the authorities’ (the German term äuffalig is hard to render exactly) because of their idiosyncratic or irregular comportment, might be labelled asocial and carted off for correction.5

It was in the police force of the new nation state that these various trends came together in a particularly pernicious constellation. The police in Germany, as a national

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5 See especially Kranz and Koller, 1941, pp. 160–62 for this loose definition of the ‘socially unadaptable’ (gemeinschaftsunfähig).
institution, had in fact come into being partly in response to the perceived threat posed by ‘rootless,’ ‘wandering’ and ‘hard-to-identify’ criminally-inclined social groups, the ‘herrenloses Gesindel’ (hordes of masterless men) and among those the ‘Zigeuner’ in particular. The very first ‘police circulars’ and list of wanted persons had been created at the end of the 18th century to help track down families of Gypsies, and the gradual centralisation of the German state and modernisation of police procedures had, if anything, intensified their professional interest in this area of work (Lucassen, 1996; Fricke, 1996).

With the rise of modern policing came the first efforts at scientific criminology, many of which were, inevitably considering the overall intellectual climate, couched in more or less biological terms. It was not necessary to have signed up to the agenda of Cesare Lombroso’s rococo pseudo-science, to adopt the apparently innocent idea that ‘if the father is a loafer and thief so will be the son’.

The police were being asked to determine administratively who was and was not a Gypsy, just as welfare services were deciding who was and was not a worthy recipient of public charity (with a considerable overlap in the families being labelled deviant) and leading criminologists and detectives were adopting notions drawn from the ever-expanding field of ‘criminal biology’ to account for the phenomenon of the ‘incorrigible’ or ‘habitual’ criminal. It was to deal with such that the police developed the final ingredient in this devilish broth: the adoption of a program of preventive detention. On November 13, 1933 the Prussian Minister of the interior announced the introduction of a new status of detention, *polizeiliche Vorbeugungshaft*, preventive detention. Habitual and sex criminals could now be indefinitely detained in concentration camps to prevent them committing the crimes to which they were biologically driven. After Heinrich Himmler unified the German police and security apparatus under his command in 1936 the number of persons held in such custody rose dramatically. A few hundred were in camps at the end of 1935 but mass arrests in March 1937 and in December 1938 took the number to over 13,000. At least 2,000 of those arrested in 1938 were ‘Gypsies’—taken away for their asocial and ‘work-shy’ lifestyles. (Wagner, 1996, pp. 255–98; Buchheim, 1966).

In fact, this kind of treatment of Gypsies, though in a far less intense and aggressive fashion, pre-dated the Nazi takeover of the police. Indeed before 1933 Gypsies were subject to special police measures reserved only for the Gypsies and those who lived like them. In 1926 the state legislature in Bavaria passed a law that aimed to drive Gypsies, travellers and the ‘work shy’ out of the country. Among its numerous repressive measures, one stands out: any Gypsy over the age of 16 who could not prove regular employment could be sentenced to up to two years labour in a work house.

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6 It is no accident that at the creation of Interpol, the pursuit of Gypsy criminals was identified as one of the specific tasks that this form of transnational cooperation would permit.
This was punishment for a disposition, not an actual crime, and the sentence was renewable (Strauss, 1986). This was a model of the kind of preventive policing that the Nazi Reich’s Police Administration (RKPA) was to adopt after the reorganisation of the police in 1936. Then, following the ‘father to son’ logic, once they had detained the son, the whole family and clan should follow: and thus the persecution of the Gypsies became what Henriette Asseo has called a ‘familial genocide’—a persecution carried out through genealogical records and on family social structures.

The Decisive Role of the Municipal and the Local

There is one final ingredient—beyond their exclusion from the trading and craft niche, their exclusion from welfare and their inclusion amongst the biologically predisposed to crime—that was needed for the institutional encirclement of the Gypsies to become complete: the power of local conflicts to create apparently unstoppable desires for someone to ‘sort things out’. After 1933, few ever thought to ‘get rid of the Gypsies,’ but the coming to power of a regime proclaiming national regeneration unleashed these great currents and in locality after locality officials began to work out ways to ‘get rid of these Gypsies here.’

To understand the dynamic of the Gypsy persecution we have to turn to the activities of civil servants, the Mayors, town planners, welfare officers, policemen, university lecturers, members of scientific research institutes who dealt with Gypsies in the course of their normal work routine. It was in the offices of these academic and town hall racists, in the cells of the Frankfurt and Münich criminal police, on the plots of the compulsory municipal camps of the Ruhrland where Gypsy families were visited by racial scientists hunting for the gene of ‘asocial behaviour,’ in the university Departments of Anthropology and Racial Health, in the ‘hereditary health’ (sterilisation) clinics run throughout the Reich by the City Health Office and then in the various concentration and death camps that local, individual ‘solutions to the Gypsy problem’ were found. If we try and read all the local initiatives and approaches as the unfolding of some central plan, or the inevitable consequence of structural features of Nazi rule we can never make sense of what happened.

In the case of this despised, socially isolated minority at the bottom of the social scale, Nazi rule offered the chance to thousands of people, civil servants and party men in particular, but plenty of ordinary citizens as well, to turn their private agendas into state policy. The author of the most authoritative survey of the Jewish persecutions, Saul Friedlander, explains that the majority of Germans shied away from widespread violence against Jews, urging neither their expulsion from the Reich nor their physical annihilation. But in relation to the Gypsies and other marginal groups, public opinion lay not so far from Nazi policy. Public order, social reform, a return to a ‘healthy community’ of productive workers, the re-evaluation of the rural idyll of farmer and
his family in their hof, ‘a national community without criminals’—these were popular slogans among the German electorate. In fact one wonders if the fact that Gypsy policy was not tainted by an association with Nazi fanaticism was precisely what enabled these orderly people to use the opportunities presented by National Socialism so enthusiastically.

But while keen local bureaucrats, ‘ordinary citizens’ in every other respect, innovated and initiated, in Berlin, both Chancellery and Ministerial headquarters not only lagged behind but deliberately dragged their feet. During the 1930s and even into the war, officials in various ministries committed themselves to producing a ‘Reich Gypsy Law’ that would create a unified and consistent approach to the Gypsies and replace the incoherent old policy by which each district would expel as many Gypsies from its own territory as it could, leaving its neighbours to fend for themselves.\(^7\) But nothing ever came of these promises.

It was at the interface of central inertia and local mobilisation of new state resources that Gypsy policy developed. If we take the early development of the Gypsy camps as an example of this process, we see that what began as slightly stricter versions of municipal camps for travellers metamorphosed gradually towards ethnic internment lager. In fact the appearance of continuity is deeply misleading, for the Zigeunerlager can only really be understood in the broader context of the entire ‘camp system’ that the Nazis were in the process of constructing.\(^8\) Like the scores of miniature Concentration

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7 See, for example, Dr. Zindel’s letter to State Secretary Pfundner of 4\(^{th}\) March, 1936 and his ‘Thoughts on the design of a Reich Law for the Gypsies.’ There we find promises of rapid new and specific proposals, but there is no further trace of these in ministerial papers. Bundesarchiv, Berlin R 18, R1501 5644, pp. 215–27.

8 See Newborn, 1993, especially, Vol. III.
The Other Genocide

During and after WW1 many European Police forces started to issue special identification cards for ‘Gypsys’ or ‘nomads’ who were, supposedly ‘hard to identify’. Later these registers were used by the Nazis to identify Gypises for deportation. Großwarasdorf/Veliki Boristof StadtArchiv. Courtesy of Gerhard Baumgartner.

9 In Frankfurt the same decree was used to justify the ‘sedentarisation’ of ‘domestic’ Gypsies.

10 “Grundlegender Erlass über die Vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung durch die Polizei.” Confidential, unpublished decree, circulated in the Erlasssammlung Nr. 15. Available at the Institut fur Zeitgeschichte, Munich.

and Labour Camps that sprung up in 1933, the municipal Gypsy camps had a characteristically ad hoc and local nature (Burleigh, 2000, p. 198–205). Above all, they had no legal basis whatsoever—not even by executive decree. In creating them each city council operated more or less as it saw fit using whatever Circular Instructions were in operation at the time. In Berlin, an instruction to establish a ‘manhunt day’ to track down Gypsy criminals provided the pretext. In Hamburg, a year later, the Mayor turned to the Decree of December 14th on the Preventive Struggle against Crime, the provisions of which allowed closed camps for ‘improvement,’ through labour, or, helpfully, for ‘sundry other purposes.’ Just as the legal basis of the camps was determined by unchecked local power, so, in the absence of any overarching Regulation, each camp developed its own system of regulations.

If the evolution of the
camp order was not planned at the outset this does not mean it was determined entirely by chance. While a camp like Marzahn was set up in order to make Berlin *ziegnerfrei* for the foreign ‘guests’ at the Berlin Olympics almost no thought was given to how order would be maintained. Once in existence, by an almost ineluctable logic, regulations were introduced which governed an increasing number of the inmates’ activities. Within a short period a camp superintendent and a police watch had been appointed: what was the point of forcing all the Gypsies to live in one place if not to control their activities and to reduce the threat they posed to the surrounding population? The coming and going of residents could be restricted to departure for work (eight to ten hours) or for shopping (a much more limited time allowed for those without work). To ensure the Gypsies obeyed these rules a register could be kept of all departures and arrivals. To enforce registration, punishment would be introduced for failure to present oneself. And what was the point of controlling the movement of the Gypsies if outsiders were allowed free entry?\(^{11}\) As this ever-sharper residential and physical segregation of the Gypsies was implemented so blatant discriminatory measures were also introduced, followed by their gradual exclusion from the last remaining bastion where Gypsies had a place in German society, the school system. And little of this required decrees, laws or written orders.

Later when central orders were issued, as in the decisive Auschwitz decree of December 1942/January 1943, this itself can better be seen as the outcome of a struggle between different wings of the Reich Security apparatus created by Himmler’s insistence that a small minority of ‘pure’ Gypsies be exempted from some of the regulations hitherto aimed at all Gypsies. The *Kripo*, convinced that matters were getting out of hand, used evidence from the racial hygienists to argue for the deportation of ‘the rest’ of the Gypsies, the so-called ‘*mischlinge*’. The most fateful decision as far as the German Sinte and Roma were concerned emerged, if this interpretation is correct, not as an effect of pure ideological or value commitment but from the way existing conditions, conceptual commitments and political struggles intertwined at a particular conjuncture (Zimmermann, 2007).

**Prevention?**

Why does any of this matter? Well, first because of the historical record and its impact on later generations. I have carried out research for over twenty years among Romany populations in the countries where these persecutions took place. Throughout this time I have been aware that the lack of recognition of their racial persecution and genocide undermines trust and fuels fear of new persecution. The descendants of victims look at the peoples among whom they live influenced by a knowledge that is rarely openly articulated. Day by day, this influence is hidden. It is not talked about in public. But the

\(^{11}\) For Marzahn, see Sparing, 1997.
sense of persecution is quietly transmitted from generation to generation. As part of my doctoral research I lived with Romany-speaking Gypsies in Hungary in the 1980s and I found that the Rom barely bothered to recall or discuss the distant past and their experiences of the war. There was not even a term in Romany for 'the holocaust.' An American Romany intellectual had coined the term *pharajmos*, the 'devouring', but none of the people I knew had ever heard of or used this word. And yet they had not forgotten the war.

Shortly after I returned to England I discovered just how vividly the past lived on. Hungary was at this time going through a rapid political liberalisation, one consequence of which was that the police no longer repressed the small numbers of home-grown 'skinheads.' Groups of shaven young men toured the country playing their brand of rock music and painting racist graffiti wherever they went. Slogans like 'Gypsy Free Zone' appeared on bus stops and factory walls. And then something strange happened. Throughout the summer of 1988, a series of what the media called 'skinhead hysterias' swept the Romany communities of Hungary. The men and women amongst whom I had lived were caught up in one such collective panic attack in June 1988. One night on a wall facing the settlement where they lived someone had sprayed, 'we'll be back to get the stinking Gypsies.' A few days later an elderly Gypsy woman had seen a car full of skinheads pass through the main square, or maybe she had seen skinheads gathering there; the stories varied. On her return home the self-defence of the settlement was agreed. The twenty-eight Gypsy families living nearby moved at once into three houses in the centre of the settlement. At night, the men armed themselves with spades and pitchforks and kept watch. In other villages across the country similar incidents were taking place. And in every case, when interviewed, the Roma gave the same explanation: the fascists were coming back to kill them.

I have written this paper partly in response to such fears, maybe to help lay them to rest. There is little in the position of Roma in Europe to celebrate but a repeat of those persecutions seems, for the time being at least, unlikely.

There is also a broader lesson that the Romany genocide can teach us that speaks beyond the particular case. If we accept that the Nazi persecution of the Gypsies does count as genocide then it may be necessary to rethink our understanding of the crime of genocide. Ever since Rafael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish scholar who coined the term *genocide*, first wrote on this topic in 1943, the scholarly and legal tradition has assumed that this is a crime carried out with a ‘special intent’ and invariably involves the execution of a plan. This genocide, however, shows that it is possible to arrive at

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12 In fact since the original term was *porrajmos* but because this also has an obscene meaning it has recently been rejected by most Hungarian Romany speakers who use the calqued term *Holocausto* or use a more appropriate Romany form, *sa madaripen*, 'the killing of everyone'. Both these have the advantage of being closer to common usage than the rather literary invention of 'porrajmos.'

a genocidal solution of a social ‘problem’ without the political leadership or central authority of a state coming to an explicit decision or formulated ‘intention’ as the International Genocide Convention misleadingly has it.

This is by no means a purely academic matter. In 1993, a fellow anthropologist prophetically pointed out that the outside powers were misrecognising the policy of ethnic cleansing being pursued by Franjo Tudjman and Slobodan Milosevic in former Yugoslavia against the Bosnian Muslim population. At a conference held in December of that year, eighteen months before the massacre of Srebrenica, Cornelia Sorabji argued that a ‘holocaust’ model was hampering understanding of this new genocide. She suggested that in this case a ‘franchise organisation’ had been adopted by Serbian and Croat leaders. This made the ethnic cleansing appear anarchic and decentralised (Sorabji, 1995). Haphazardly using schools, factories, abandoned collective farms as their detention centres, the Bosnian Serb forces made it appear as if these were ‘merely’ improvising temporary solutions for holding and neutralising enemy combatants and their supporters.

But destandardisation and disorderliness did not imply a lack of organisation. Rather there was ‘organisation of a different type in a different political, historical and cultural setting’ (Sorabji, 1995, p. 86). One of the ex-inmates of Omarska camp
in North-East Bosnia appeared astonished when asked whether the torture there was organised: ‘Anyone could come there and do whatever they liked.’ Or, as another man detained in the same camp explained, “Omarska camp was open for all those Serbian volunteers who had someone of ‘their own’ in it, some captive on whom they wanted to vent their rage.”\textsuperscript{14} I suspect that this model of genocide is in fact the historical norm and what one might call the ‘Wannsee-Auschwitz model’ the exception. Predictable outcomes may arise from a persecution that has plenty of regional variations, a variety of different routes to killing and even divergent ideological justifications for the crime.

Surveying the catalogue of 20\textsuperscript{th} mass crimes from the Turkish killings of the Armenians in 1915, through the massacres of around one million persons in Bali in 1965, the thirty-six-year-long campaign against the Mayans in Guatemala, carried out under cover of an anti-insurgency war from 1960 to 1996, through to the horrors of Darfur today, where again a restrictive definition of genocide is allowing the Sudanese government to dispose of a troublesome minorities, we can discern a clear enough pattern.\textsuperscript{15}

Every genocide at the moment it takes place appears to outsiders to be ambiguous and inherently implausible. The world turned the other way during World War II, preferring not to believe. It allowed the criminally incompetent to represent it in Bosnia in the form of a UN envoy whose hand-wringing and procrastination allowed the ethnic cleansers to turn his presence into one of their primary devices for pursuing a mass crime. It claimed not to have time to notice in Rwanda and, as I write, it is shamefacedly looking at its collective feet, denying that the slaughter in Darfur is properly speaking genocide and hoping no one will force it to take action against the criminal regime in Khartoum. It is only after the event that genocides appear with certainty and without ambiguity to have taken place. It is only in their aftermath that world leaders and the peoples of the world behind them vow that they must never happen again. It would be absurd to imagine that the research that underpins publications such as this will alter this profound disposition to incredulity and inaction in the face of such man-made catastrophes. The desire to disbelieve is as built into the individual psyche as it is into the structure of the present world order. But it may set the record straight for one group of victims and it should alter our understanding of the way mass murder occurs.

\textsuperscript{14} Cited Sorabji from Hukanovic, 1996, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{15} In fact, as a younger generation of German historians has demonstrated, the same argument applies to the development of the Holocaust. Focussing on the period before the Wannsee conference, Ulrich Herbert, Dieter Pohl and others have shown that the practical preparations and to some extent even the intellectual origins of the Final Solution lay less in plans conceived in Berlin than in the improvisations of commanders on the ground on the eastern Front and in the former Polish territory of the General Government. The fate of the Gypsies in this sense is not so different than that of the Jews before the meeting on the lake in Berlin (Herbert, 2000).
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