

# The genocide of Roma during the Holocaust

## Study visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau



This booklet has been developed in partnership with Holocaust Education Ireland and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, to support and inform Roma and others engaging in activities relating to learning and commemorating the genocide of Roma during the Holocaust.



# The Holocaust

**Humiliation**

**Identification**

**Expulsion**

**Segregation**

**Concentration**

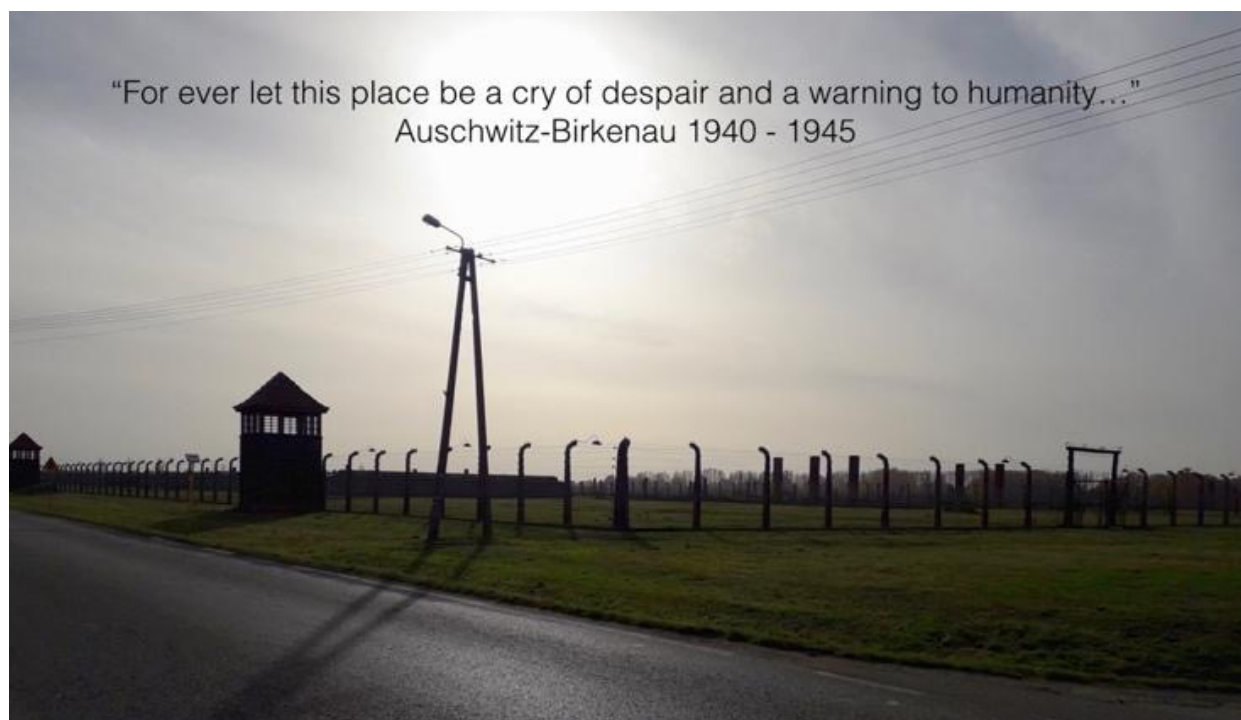
**Annihilation**

The Holocaust was a deliberate attempt by the Nazis and their collaborators to annihilate the Jewish people of Europe as well as hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti and other victims. The Holocaust was genocide perpetrated on an industrial scale with industrial efficiency. It is estimated that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust as well as millions of other people who were targeted because of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religious beliefs or political affiliations. Nazi ideology was rooted in racism that targeted groups deemed racially inferior or undesirable.

The Holocaust did not begin with gas chambers and crematoria, it began with hate speech, rumours, spitting, taunting, bullying, name-calling, nasty images, physical attacks.

Nazi persecution unfolded in stages: discriminatory laws, forced sterilisation, ghettoization, deportations, and eventually mass murder in death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and other killing centres.

The Nazi era lasted from 1933 to 1945. Since the end of the Second World War, genocide has taken place in many countries. Intolerance and racism are still widespread today. By learning more about the Holocaust, the victims, survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers and resisters, we might be able to devise strategies to prevent such atrocities from happening again.



# Visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau



A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau is a profound experience that prompts reflection on many levels, it is a challenge that people respond to in different ways. Before, during and after the visit you may find you need to take time out to reflect. We are not going to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a punishment but as an education. A visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps reminds us of what happens when the principles of tolerance and respect break down and hatred and discrimination are allowed to fester. The study visit will provide an opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the Holocaust in our own lives and the world around us.

Visiting Auschwitz Birkenau is a challenge that impacts people differently. It is a private experience shared with others. It is thought-provoking and personal and it can be unsettling for some people. The experience is also meaningful and positive. It may cause us to change our perceptions. The purpose of the study visit is to become informed, to become educated, to reject Holocaust denial and to do our best to combat racism and bigotry wherever they prevail.

## Why go to Auschwitz-Birkenau?

### There are many reasons NOT to go:

- It is more than 80 years since the end of the Second World War – Is it time to move on? Time to forgive and forget?
- Life is already complicated. Dealing with our daily lives is difficult enough without having to face the past.
- It is too difficult to face the enormity of the Holocaust.

### But there are also many reasons why we should go:

- We go to remember.
- We go to learn.
- We go to become informed.
- We go so we can teach the lessons.
- We go to consider and to reflect.

### Points to ponder

- What expectations do you have about the visit?
- Is Auschwitz-Birkenau a tourist site? Are we tourists?



# Background to the Roma genocide and the rise of National Socialism

Roma, along with Jews and other minorities, were stripped of their citizenship and denied rights under extensions to the Nuremberg Laws (1935). As early as 1936, Roma were transferred out of cities to internment camps and ghettos. There was debate within the Nazi government about how to solve the “Gypsy Question”.

In January 1942, the Wannsee Conference took place at which the ‘Final solution to the Jewish Question’ was debated and endorsement of the decision to murder the Jewish populations of Europe was agreed. In December 1942, Heinrich Himmler ordered the deportation of German and Austrian Sinti and Roma to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a slave labour and death camp.

In the extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, *section BIIe* was known as the Zigeunerlager or Gypsy Family Camp. Men, women and children were imprisoned together, forced into slave labour and tortured. Dr Josef Mengele took a particular interest in Roma children and made them subject to horrific ‘medical’ experiments.

## Roma resistance

The Nazis planned to murder the 6,000 Roma occupants of the Gypsy family camp on 16 May, 1944. Members of the resistance in the camp warned the Roma and on the morning of the 16th, the Roma prisoners refused to report for Roll Call and ceased cooperating with the Germans. They barricaded themselves into buildings armed with hammers, pickaxes and stolen shovels. They made wooden stakes with the slats of their beds and the children collected stones. The SS arrived in the afternoon to take 6,000 Roma to the gas chambers but they were met with fierce resistance. The SS were caught by surprise and retreated. Fearful of the resistance spreading throughout the camp they imposed even harsher punishments and starvation rations on the Gypsy camp.

A week later the Nazis removed 1,500 of the strongest Roma to Buchenwald concentration/labour camp and two days later Roma men and women were removed to Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg camps. Less than 3,000 Roma remained in the Gypsy Family Camp at Auschwitz, many of them children.

In the middle of the night of the 2nd August 1944, the SS returned. They faced resistance and needed reinforcements but eventually 2,897 Roma were loaded into trucks and taken to gas chamber V where they were murdered. Their bodies were buried in pits next to the crematorium. In total, 23,000 Roma were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The 2nd August has been declared:  
**International Remembrance Day of the Roma genocide during the Holocaust**

**Roma people passed through slavery, the Holocaust, starvation and injustice. It is important for people to recognise what has happened to the Roma community. It is important for the generation coming after me to know what has happened to our people and to not allow this to happen again. It is important to live in solidarity with others and to have the courage to say we are Roma.**

Gabi Muntean, Roma Worker, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

It is estimated 500,000 Roma and Sinti were murdered in concentration camps or by mobile death squads during the Nazi era. At least another 500,000 were displaced.

### Roma song

This song, in the Romani language, was created by a group of Polish Roma who were captured in a town by the Nazis. They knew other Roma were heading towards the town with their families. They created this song to warn them of the fate that awaited them if they entered the town. They sang it repeatedly as a warning and thus saved many Roma lives.



*Marzahn internment camp for Roma*

### Duda Chaciol

Widziałem motyla jak w górę się wbił,  
miał skrzydła zranione sączyła się z nich krew,  
chciał walczyć, lecz nie mógł, bo brakło mu sił,  
ten promyk słoneczny w górę się wbił.

Ref: Och dali doli Romale,  
oj so pes kerel,  
bo foro juz na dur i duda chacion.

Oj syr jame preskiras,  
oj syr jame daras.  
A soskie tume traden, pe zamaryben dzian.

Ref: Oh dali doli Romale,  
Oj so pe kerel,  
bo foro już na dur i dua chcion,  
bo foro już na dur i duda chacion.

### The Burning Barn

Translated by Vanessa Paszkowska

I saw a butterfly as it was raising up in the air,  
It had wounded wings, soaked in blood,  
It wanted to fight, but was out of breath,  
The sunrays were hitting the land.  
Further, further Romale, what is happening?  
The town is not too far,  
The town is in flames.  
Oh, how do we pay (with our lives)?  
Oh, how much we are scared,  
But why are you going there?  
You will walk into death.  
Further, further Romale, what is happening?  
The town is not too far,  
The town is in flames.  
The town is not too far,  
The town is in flames.

# Testimonies of Roma Holocaust survivors

**The Porajmos:** Under Nazi rule during the Second World War, the Roma were persecuted, detained and executed as part of the Holocaust. Roma call the genocide of the Roma during the Nazi Era the Porajmos which means the 'Devouring' in Romani language.

## Christian Pfeil (Germany)



Christian Pfeil

I am a Holocaust survivor and Sinti from Germany. Back in May 1940, my entire family was deported from our hometown of Trier to the camps in German-occupied Poland simply because they were Sinti. My eldest sister Berta was 12 when she was deported to the camps and my youngest brother Ludwig was just 3 years old.

My siblings told me that all the children – even the very young ones – had to do hard forced labor in the camps, such as building roads and digging trenches. There was almost nothing to eat, potato peelings were a feast. Whenever there was dry bread – and it was very dry – it was shared out among us. We suffered from great hunger throughout the years and the fear of freezing to death or being murdered.

I myself was born in the Lublin ghetto in the beginning of 1944. My mother had to take me to work wrapped in a piece of cloth and lay me next to her in the snow during the winter months. It was a miracle that I and my immediate family survived. When asked how this was possible after five and a half years in camp, my parents said: *"O Baro Deve un i Debski Dai his pas mende."* God and the Mother of God were with us.

However, many of my close relatives did not survive the Holocaust. Many were gassed and murdered in Auschwitz.

## Edward Paszkowski and Krystyna Paszkowski (Poland) as told by their great granddaughter, Vanessa Pazkowska



Edward Paszkowski



Krystyna Paszkowska

My great grandfather, Edward Paszkowski survived the massacre of 77 Roma in the village of Karczew, in Northern Poland. The remains of the victims were left strewn in a mass grave. No acknowledgement of this atrocity has been forthcoming and there is yet to be a marker and memorial erected on the site.

My great grandmother, Krystyna Paszkowska, survived a Roma Ghetto in Silece where she met my great grandfather. They married and had 7 children. My parents came to Ireland in 1999 and my sister and I were born here.

Last year, 2024, we returned to Poland for the 80th anniversary of the genocide of the Roma people during the Holocaust, in 1944. This tragedy has impacted Roma communities around the world to this day.

# Importance of remembering the Roma genocide today

**Many Roma, including our own children, are not aware of the genocide and its impact. It is crucial we keep the memory of these atrocities which have shaped our identity alive. Everyone needs to know about the genocide of Roma and Sinti and it needs to be included in lessons on the Holocaust and the Nazi era.**

Roma Simonic, Roma Community Worker, Pavee Point

2024 marked 80 years since the end of the Second World War – less than a lifetime. As we read this booklet, printing presses all over the world are churning out publications promoting racism, hatred and distortion and denial of the Holocaust. Accurate, irrefutable information provides us with the tools to challenge this. It is important to remember the Holocaust and the genocide of the Roma people. Racism, hatred and discrimination have not gone away and Roma continue to face systemic racism across Europe and in Ireland. We all have to learn to hold out the hand of friendship, respect and acceptance, and work in solidarity to promote justice and protect human rights.

It is important to advocate for:

- Inclusion of Porajmos in national and European education systems.
- Recognition of Roma genocide victims.
- Combating anti-Roma racism across Europe and in Ireland.

## Points for Personal Reflection:

- Why do you think it is important to remember Roma genocide?
- In what ways do you think the Roma genocide could be commemorated?
- What personal ways will you remember? (small ceremonies in your school/places of work can make a big impact, such as lighting a candle, reading a poem)
- How has what you have learned informed you about the impacts of racism and discrimination on Roma and other communities today?

**On this day of remembrance, we are called not only to reflect on the past but also to confront the present. The same dangerous forces that led to the atrocities of the Roma Genocide are still present in many parts of the world today. How shameful it is, that in 2024, the Roma and Sinti communities across the world continue to face discrimination, marginalization, and deep-rooted racism, denying them the full enjoyment of their rights and dignity"**

Michael D Higgins, President of Ireland



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