

Roma Memoirs: the Other Genocide

A documentary by Henriette Asséo, Idit Bloch, and Juliette Jourdan

Roma witnesses and image archives found in Europe.

Roma Memoirs, the other genocide, a film written by Henriette Asséo, Idit Bloch, and Juliette Jourdan, directed by Juliette Jourdan and Idit Bloch, Kuiv Productions, 2011, 75 min.

Documentary “Roma Memoirs”, Fata Dedic, Antoine Lagrené, Milka Goman, Willi Horwath, Ceija Stojka, André Pierdon

In this documentary about the persecution of Sinti and Roma people under Nazi rule in various Nazi-occupied European countries, witnesses are interviewed within a historical framework illustrated by archival footage.

With the frustrations of the November 1918 defeat¹, the search for a scapegoat began with the Roma. Their heritage was forgotten, and they were seen as separate, dangerous citizens. Obsessively concerned with the “decline of the German people”, the Nazis declared 90% of them to be “undesirable racial mongrels”, due to their numerous mixed marriages with people of “low value”, according to Robert Ritter's classification². They were victims of forced sterilization. Mayors “threw” them into camps (*Zigeunerlagern*)³, whether they were settled or nomadic.

The fact that they were Catholic or Protestant didn't help, the churches did little to help them. In 1938 and 1939, men and adolescent boys were sent to Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and Mauthausen, and women were sent to Ravensbrück for forced labor.

Arthur Nebe, head of the Kripo⁴ and commander of the Einsatzgruppe B⁵, was responsible for their extermination.

The Roma shared the same fate as the Jews. The small “Jewish” girl in the film *Night and Fog*⁶ was, actually Roma child Settela Steinbach, who was deported with her family from Westerbork⁷ to Auschwitz on May 19, 1944.

In the film shot by prisoner Rudolf Breslauer, Steinbach is commanded by Gemmeker⁸, the camp leader. <http://www.auschwitz.nl/en-exposition/deportation/westerbork-1942-1944/breslauer>

Ceija Stojka, Willi Horwath, Hugo-Adolf Höllenreiner, Milka Goman, Antoine Lagrené, André Pierdon, Fata Dedic, Jan Istvan, and Bairam Ibragimova, who were children at the time, recount how their lives took a drastic turn.

This film combats the idea of “a nomadic people without a homeland”. These witnesses were settled people. They had a house for the winter, they went to school, and some, in the summer, took to the road to go to fairs and markets.

Ceija Stojka was born in Austria in 1933. She expresses the pain of deportation through a very vivid and violent painting. She claims to overcome her anger through painting. Her father and grandfather were horse traders, called Lovara. They spoke *řomanes*. Due to persecution, the family moved to Vienna in 1939.

The Gestapo first took his father to the Dachau camp. He sent a card with a coded message: “Here, they kill everyone.”. He died in Mauthausen. One day, in the early morning, the Gestapo came to round them up: her mother, brothers, and sisters. They were sent first to prison, to **Elisabeth Promenade**⁹. Then, in April 1943, they were deported in cattle cars to Auschwitz-Birkenau to “the family camp”, where they were given a red blanket full of lice. She became Z-6399. “We were numbers”. Ceija’s younger brother Ossi did not survive long. They were very hungry. She remembers that one day, her mother found a leather belt which she softened with her teeth to feed Ossi. She was transferred to Ravensbrück, then to Bergen-Belsen.

Past present, five former Ravensbrück prisoners are interviewed: Ceija Stojka (Austria), Lidia Rolfi (Italy), Aat Breur (Netherlands), Stella Kugelman Griez (Russia), and Antonina Nikiforova (Russia). The film was written and directed by Anet van Barneveld and Annemarie Strijbosch in 1996.

Ceija Stojka, *Wir leben im Verborgenen - Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* (We lived in hiding. Memories of a Roma, Picus Verlag, 1988, 154 p.

Documentary by Karin Berger about Ceija Stojka, 85 min.

Ceija Stojka & Unter den Brettern hellgrünes Gras, Der Österreichische Film / Edition Der Standard (Darsteller), Karin Berger (Regisseur)

► **Ceija Stojka, Roma artist**, Exhibition at the Salle des Machines gallery at La Friche from 03/11/2017 to 04/16/2017, La Friche de la belle de mai, Marseille. “*I dream that I live*”

<http://www.lafriche.org/fr/agenda/ceija-stojka-artiste-rom-620>

Antoine Lagrené comes from a French family of musicians, spanning many generations. While they were in Germany, Antoine’s father felt the danger and they returned to France near Valenciennes, where they had family. They had a house in Pont-de-la-Deule and traveled with

three or four families for work. There was no problem finding places to rest, but they always had to show the “big” anthropometric notebook¹⁰ with their photographs and fingerprints, as ordered by Bertillon¹¹. Even the 15-month-old baby had its fingerprints in the book. The Rom, already under house arrest, were imprisoned. Antoine’s family was “collected” in Douaisis during the roundup of November 23, 1943, and sent to Mechelen. He was 13 years old. Then the Roma were deported by convoy Z. “We are being taken to a camp,” the Jews said. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, there was no selection¹² on arrival. His mother gave birth at the family camp in Birkenau, but the baby only lived a month. They were in a “windowless swamp stable.” Mengele ran experiments on him: he received injections in the chest for several days, but he did not know what was in the injections. After the Romani Uprising of May 16, 1944¹³, he was sent to the Little Camp in Buchenwald, where a schoolmaster taught him to read. They had no time to be afraid, work was killing them. His mother was sent to Ravensbrück.

Hugo Höllenreiner, from Munich, went to school where he was called “Zigeuner”¹⁴. His father, a horse trader, asked his children to be quiet. At home, they spoke *řomanes*. One day, their horses were confiscated. Their father was drafted for the French campaign¹⁵. He got his pilot’s license and the two boys played with his badges when he came home on leave. He brought them chocolate.

On March 16, 1943, they were deported to the family camp in Birkenau. Considered “war material”, along with his brother, Hugo was a victim of Mengele’s experiments. One day, Gypsies in soldiers’ uniforms arrived at Auschwitz. They believed they were all going to die from being gassed. Panic reigned at the family camp. Their mother reassured them.

Polish inmate and camp secretary Tadeusz Joachimowski warned them of the upcoming extermination. Hugo saw his father with a pickaxe on his shoulder. There were around fifty men with pieces of scrap metal, glass, stones, and knives. It was the Romani Uprising of May 16, 1943¹⁶. The SS retreated. Those who were able to work were transferred to other camps. He was transferred to Ravensbrück, Mauthausen, and then to Bergen-Belsen where he stepped over corpses. He was freed by the English. He was 11 years old.

André Pierdon, from a Roma fairground family from Ille-et-Vilaine, who had a carousel, joined the Resistance. He transported weapons, then he entered a *maquis*¹⁷ in Poitou. He participated in the liberation of Niort.

Bernard Ageneau, the Montreuil-Bellay camp guard, confirms that the Montreuil-Bellay camp was immense, it was 2 kilometers long and the Roma at the camp lacked everything. He speaks about the electrified wire fence through which Roma people tried to escape. As for the other witnesses, they also experienced very harsh conditions. Austrian Willi Horwath was taken to the

Lackenbach camp, Czech Jan Istvan to the Letti camp, Italian Milka Goman remembers being thrown into a train and especially, lice swarming everywhere. In the USSR, where the Einsatzgruppen¹⁸ and the Wehrmacht¹⁹ operated, Bairam Ibragimova saw the graves and the earth that “breathed”. Fata Decic from Croatia remembers the bodies of children thrown into the water that prisoners were drinking. The fascists cut off women’s fingers and ears to take their jewelry. They killed them one after the other. There was blood everywhere.

Through these testimonies, we clearly see a difference in treatment between Gypsies coming from the West and those coming from the East.

Film clips show the work of **Ritter** and his assistant **Eva Justin**, who, speaking Romani, gained the trust of the Roma people. The filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl worked on the film *Tiefland* from 1940 to 1941. The film is based on Eugen d'Albert's opera, in which she herself plays the role of a Roma woman. While filming, she involved around sixty Sinti and Roma people, including many children, to evoke a “Spanish” atmosphere. The Roma, who played extras, were then deported to Auschwitz where they were murdered, but “she didn’t know that”.

They had difficulty having their nationality recognized, and were not compensated because they could not prove racial persecution because they had been rounded up as “asocial”²⁰, says Hugo.

Ritter Robert Dr., *Rassenforscher, Leiter des Reichsgesundheitsamtes (RHKF), Rassehygienische und Kriminalbiologische Forschungsstelle des Reichsgesundheitsamtes*
Justin Eva, *Rassenbiologische Forschungsstelle des RHKF*

At the Nuremberg Trial, SS-Einsatzgruppenleiter²¹ Otto Ohlendorf declared that there was no difference in treatment between Jews and Roma. Ritter was acquitted, Eva Justin was able to continue her research. Arthur Nebe and the **Kripo** were not convicted at Nuremberg.

As witnesses to extreme violence, some of these adults, who were once children, do not wish to harbor feelings of hatred. Even as fear lingers, they remain dignified in the face of the misfortune that has befallen them.

Nicole Mullier

<https://www.cercleshoah.org/spip.php?article289>

¹ On November 11th, 1918, the armistice was signed between the Allied Powers and the Central Powers. The latter, including Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria, ultimately conceded defeat, ending World War I. *This Day in History, November 11, 1918: World War I Ends* | *American Battle Monuments Commission*. <https://www.abmc.gov/multimedia/videos/day-history-november-11-1918-world-war-i-ends>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

² Robert Ritter was a German doctor and Nazi Germany's foremost expert on categorizing Roma and Sinti racially. *Robert Ritter*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/robert-ritter>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

³ German for Roma camp. Barac, Terezina. Conversation. 28 Feb. 2024.

⁴ Nazi Criminal Police tasked with investigative duties. *The Nazi Kripo (Criminal Police)*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-kripo-criminal-police-1>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

⁵ A mobile killing squad deployed by Nazi Germany tasked with carrying out mass killings in the occupied territories of Eastern Europe. *Einsatzgruppe B in Eastern Belarus*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/context-sheet-7.pdf>.

⁶ The film *Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais in 1956, showcases archival footage to depict the atrocities of the Holocaust.

⁷ A transit camp for Jews in the Netherlands. *Westerbork*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/westerbork>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

⁸ Albert Konrad Gemmeker, Westerbork camp leader. *Westerbork*. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/westerbork>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

⁹ Elizabeth Promenade was a Gestapo prison in Vienna, Austria. Hochhaüsl, Sophie. *Spatial Histories of Dissidence: Imagination, Memory, and Resistance in Istanbul, Vienna, and Santiago de Chile, 1938-1945*. ARQ, 2020, https://www.scielo.cl/pdf/arq/n105/en_0717-6996-arq-105-40.pdf.

¹⁰ Anthropometry, developed for law enforcement, categorized individuals and marginalized groups, notably 'dangerous' nomads, with the 1912 introduction of anthropometric identification cards. "Le carnet anthropométrique d'identité 'nomades.'" *Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration*, Palais de la porte dorée, <https://www.histoire-immigration.fr/collections/le-carnet-anthropometrique-d-identite-nomades>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

¹¹ Alphonse Bertillon was a French criminologist and anthropologist. He developed the initial system of physical measurements, photography, and record-keeping, enabling law enforcement to identify habitual criminals. "Visible Proofs: Forensic Views of the Body: Galleries: Biographies: Alphonse Bertillon (1853–1914)." *National Library of Medicine*, National Institutes of Health, <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/visibleproofs/galleries/biographies/bertillon.html>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

¹² Upon arrival at camps, deportees underwent a selection process conducted by camp officials to determine those destined for either immediate execution or forced labor. "Selection." *Holocaust Centre North*, <https://hcn.org.uk/glossary/selection/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

¹³ On May 16, 1944, over 600 Roma prisoners staged a rebellion by barricading themselves in their barracks, arming with makeshift weapons crafted from tools at the equipment warehouse. "The Romani Uprising in Auschwitz." *ENRS*, European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, <https://enrs.eu/news/the-romani-uprising-in-auschwitz>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

¹⁴ A pejorative term to describe Roma and Sinti people. Barac, Terezina. Conversation. 22 Apr. 2024.

¹⁵ Also known as the Battle of France, the French Campaign (May 10–June 25, 1940) was a German invasion of France and the Low Countries, ultimately leading to the occupation of France by the Nazis. Hart, Basil Liddell. "Battle of France". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 Apr. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-France-World-War-II>. Accessed 21 April 2024.

¹⁶ Also known as Romani Resistance Day, when over 600 Roma stood up to the Nazi SS in Auschwitz-Birkenau and delayed the liquidation of the Roma camp by fighting off the soldiers sent to take them to gas chambers. “16 May 1944 – a Day to Remember.” *Roma and Travellers*, Council of Europe, 15 May 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/-/16-may-1944-a-day-to-remember>.

¹⁷ The maquis were guerrilla bands that were part of the Resistance. *France - Resistance, WWII, Liberation* | *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/France/The-Resistance>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

¹⁸ Units charged with killing Jews and Soviets behind the frontlines. Mullier, Nicole. “Le Langage Des Camps de Concentration.” *Cercle d’étude de La Déportation et de La Shoah*, 29 Aug. 2009, <https://www.cercleshoah.org/spip.php?article72>.

¹⁹ The Wehrmacht was the unified armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945, encompassing the army, navy, and air force. Ray, Michael. “Wehrmacht”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 17 Feb. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Wehrmacht>. Accessed 21 April 2024.

²⁰ Roma were classified by the Nazis as “asocial”, meaning they did not fit into the social norm. They were forced to wear black triangle badges at concentration camps. ‘Asocials.’ *Holocaust Memorial Day Trust*, <https://www.hmd.org.uk/learn-about-the-holocaust-and-genocides/nazi-persecution/asocials/>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

²¹ Einsatzgruppen leader. Barac, Terezina. Conversation. 28 Feb. 2024.

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