Unforgetting: The Roma and Sinti Holocaust

During the Holocaust, the Nazis and their collaborators killed over 6 million Jews and 5 million other victims. These other groups included the Roma and Sinti, Afro-Germans, homosexuals, people with mental and physical disabilities, and many more. This paper will focus on the Nazi persecution of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust. This is often referred to as the “Forgotten Holocaust,” because mainstream Holocaust scholarship neglected the Roma and Sinti’s experience during the Holocaust until recently. Current estimates are that the Nazis and their collaborators murdered over 250-thousand Roma and Sinti, a quarter of the pre-war European population.¹ The Roma and Sinti have also never received formal compensation from the German government for what happened to them during the Holocaust.² Despite being the subject of the same racial policies, and later, the same roundups, massacres, and concentration camps as the Jews, how the Roma and Sinti experienced the Holocaust was vastly different from both the Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. This paper argues that it is important and relevant today to reflect on the persecution of minorities during the Holocaust. This paper will demonstrate how Roma and Sinti had distinct experiences during the Holocaust. Furthermore, the Roma and Sinti have a distinct post-Holocaust experience, defined by continued discrimination and a still ongoing fight for compensation.

During the Holocaust, the Nazis wanted to eliminate anyone who was a threat to their “master race.” The most well-known and well-documented was the Nazi persecution of European Jews. Jews were targeted on a number of grounds, such as political, racial, and economic. In contrast, the Roma and Sinti were a “racial threat.” Hancock, however, argues that a lot of scholars fail to recognize the link that the Nazis ideologically associated criminality with Roma and Sinti; the racial threat that the Roma and Sinti posed to German society was rooted in the belief that Roma and Sinti were criminals, and this criminality was a “genetically transmitted and incurable disease,” meaning that it was ideologically racial. Unfortunately, this link between race and criminality meant that post-war recognition was hard to come by, as officials perpetuated the notion that Roma and Sinti “were persecuted under the National Socialist regime not for any racial reason, but because of their criminal and anti-social record” rather than focus on connections the Nazis made between race and criminality. The Nazis were not the first people to persecute the Roma and Sinti. In fact, the Weimar years witnessed the oppression of the Roma and Sinti in Germany as they were banned from entering some public spaces, sent to work camps, and forced to carry around identification cards.

It is no doubt that the Nazis were most concerned with the “Jewish threat,” but in the pre-war years, Nazi legislation and policies targeted both Jews and Roma and Sinti side by side. Nazi legislation began affecting German Roma and Sinti in September 1935 with the Nuremberg Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honour. This legislation banned marriage between Germans and “non-Aryans,” and was aimed specifically at Jews, the Roma and Sinti, and Afro-

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4 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 383.
5 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 383.
6 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 383.
7 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 387.
Germans. By 1937, the Roma and Sinti, alongside Jews, were classified as second-class citizens, and the Nazi regime revoked their civil rights. Furthermore, Heinrich Himmler reasserted the notion that Roma and Sinti had inherent criminality in a decree called “The Struggle against the Gypsy Plague.” In 1938 documents exposing the Nazi desire to rid the German Reich of Roma and Sinti were created; Himmler created the criteria for identifying Roma and Sinti (which went back 3 generations and more strict than Jewish identification) and between June 13 and June 18 in 1938, there was “Gypsy Clean-Up Week.” This week was similar to Kristallnacht, which targeted Jewish people in November 1938, and, as Hancock notes, “it sent a clear message to the general public: there would be no penalty for mistreating Jews and Romanies.” This brief history of the Nazi laws regarding the Roma and Sinti people reveals that the Roma and Sinti were affected by Nazi policy at the same time and in the same manner as the Jews were.

Despite being subjugated to the same racist policies and mass-violence, victims of the Holocaust had distinct experiences throughout. Hair features in a lot of Holocaust testimonies, mainly because upon entry into a camp, bodies were shaved bare. For the Roma and Sinti, hair was a significant part of their culture, so losing it upon arrival in a concentration camp was traumatic. Bubili, a German Romani boy describes the trauma of losing his hair:

“I cried when the prison barber clipped my hair and threw the locks into my lap. ‘A souvenir, Gypsy.’ At sixteen, I was very vain. My black wavy hair had reached to the nape of my neck. How could the Germans do this to me, Bubili, an Austrian Sinti? The barber put his hand on my shoulder to keep me from rising. ‘I’m not finished.’ With a

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8 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 387.
9 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 387.
10 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 387.
11 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 388.
12 Hancock, “Romanies and the Holocaust,” 388.
dull razor, he shaved the rest of my head, my chest, my whole body. When he finished, my whole body ached. I stared at those standing next to me. My father, my uncles, and my cousins were unrecognizable, plucked birds from some strange planet. And I? Without my hair, I was no longer Bubili. I was a piece of wood…. Why did the Germans have to strip us of our humanity? ”13

In Bubili’s testimony, it is clear that his hair meant a lot to him. It was tied into his identity. This is because for Roma and Sinti, the loss of their hair did not only bring about a sense of shame, losing hair was a destruction of their culture.14 Therefore, when they lost their body hair, the Roma and Sinti were victimized in more than just a physical sense. Understanding what these assaults meant specifically to minority groups, such as the Roma and Sinti, demonstrates how these minority groups were victimized by the Nazis.

Roma and Sinti throughout the Holocaust were subjected to forced sterilization during the Holocaust. Mrs. Vilmos Holdosi remembers arriving in Dachau concentration camp:

“Women did all this and there was a doctor who looked at everything . . . well, you know, everything. He was the one who gave me this injection, not just to me but to all of us—we all got these injections. It hurt so much. You see, they stuck this big needle into my . . . body . . . you know what I mean. Everything went dark, my dear. I fell off that examination table. Well, they kicked me aside and the next one came. In those eight months they stuck that big needle in me just once, but I didn’t have my . . . monthly thing, you know, for a year.”15

13 Friedman, The Other Victims, 11-12.
Holdosi describes the process of being sterilized. One significant reason sterilization was a perpetration against the Roma and Sinti women, is because of the importance of fertility in Roma and Sinti culture.\textsuperscript{16} Julia von dem Knesbeck suggests “the inability to find a place within the community and the inability to play a role in the passing on of culture and traditions mattered much more than any physical pain caused by sterilisation.”\textsuperscript{17} This loss of culture and tradition features significantly in Roma and Sinti testimonies as sterilization was a large part of Nazi policy towards this minority group.\textsuperscript{18} The Nazis wanted to destroy the culture of both Jews and Roma and Sinti, but they were able to do this in different ways.

During the Holocaust, the victims of the Holocaust were the victims of verbal abuse. In particular, the Roma and Sinti were the victims of racial slurs. Bubili recalls working in one of the camps and being called a racist name:

“Mauthausen was famous for its quarry with 180 steps, ironically called “the stairway to heaven.” The prisoners had to carry stones up the steps. We were so weak, skeletons. The stones rubbed against our skin and left our legs raw. “Run, run, you Congo nigger,” the guards shouted, flailing us with their whips. The steps were covered with the blood from wounded prisoners. Those who slipped fell to their death. I always tried to be in the center of the column so if I slipped, I wouldn’t plunge over the side.”\textsuperscript{19}

This racial slur was a jab at the darker colour of some Roma and Sinti’s skin, and said to highlight their perceived racial inferiority. This type of racial slur was not only thrown around during the Holocaust; unfortunately, Roma and Sinti today are still the victims of verbal abuse. Janko is the

\textsuperscript{16} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 60.
\textsuperscript{17} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 60.
\textsuperscript{18} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{19} Friedman, \textit{The Other Victims}, 21.
son of a Holocaust survivor, and when his father was asked about how the Roma were treated in Germany after the war, Janko said: “‘We are Europe’s nегros,’” and spoke about encounters with neo-Nazis who still use the same language after the war.\textsuperscript{20} This incident demonstrates the ongoing racism towards Roma and Sinti today, but it also shows how racial slurs were a distinct part of the Holocaust experience of the Roma and Sinti.

Not only did the Roma and Sinti have distinct experiences during the Holocaust, their post-Holocaust experiences were also distinct. Mainstream Holocaust scholarship failed to acknowledge the Roma and Sinti until near the end of the century. There are several reasons for this, most of them tied into prejudices against the Roma and Sinti that prevailed before, during, and after the Holocaust. One is the fact that “testimonies about Romani experiences during the Holocaust often reach us refracted through a Jewish lens.”\textsuperscript{21} This meant that racist biases against Roma and Sinti prevailed in some Jewish testimonies of the Holocaust. Furthermore, after the war, the systems that were put in place to persecute the Jews were dismantled, however, European countries kept their files on the Roma and Sinti until the 1950s.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover, in post-war Germany, the “Gypsy problem” still remained for the German police and they used the Nazi files to continue their surveillance and expulsion of the Roma and Sinti.\textsuperscript{23} Looking at society, Germans felt that the Nazi policies on criminality (manifested through the persecution of the Roma and Sinti), was “one of the ‘good’ or ‘effective’ sides of National Socialism.” \textsuperscript{24} As a result, “many Germans accepted the fight against a group widely perceived to be essentially ‘criminal’, and some might have even

\textsuperscript{20} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 69.
\textsuperscript{23} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 47.
\textsuperscript{24} Von dem Knesbeck, \textit{The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany}, 47.
applauded rather than condemned measures undertaken against Roma.”25 All this together has led to the persecution of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust to be both ignored and forgotten.

In conclusion, the persecution of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust has been ignored and forgotten by mainstream scholarship for decades. However, by acknowledging these racist measures taken after the Holocaust, scholars can begin to reflect on the persecution of minorities during the Holocaust. The Roma and Sinti had distinct experiences during the Holocaust, which means that their experiences during the Holocaust is different from the Jewish experiences that are the primary focus of Holocaust scholarship. As shown in this essay, the removal of hair meant something different to Roma and Sinti, the forced sterilization of Roma and Sinti women meant a loss of culture and tradition, and the Roma and Sinti were victims of racial slurs before, during, and after the Holocaust. Therefore, it is important and relevant today to reflect on the persecution of minorities, such as the Roma and Sinti, to understand how people were victimized in the Nazi regime and how racist attitudes prevailed afterwards. Reflecting on the persecution of minorities means that these minority groups – whether or not through government compensation – can have their Holocaust experience recognized and heal as a community.

Bibliography


