

**“I have never heard about the Roma Holocaust”:  
Memory politics around the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti  
in the Czech Republic and the historical awareness of the Roma  
Holocaust among students**

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## Abstract

“I have never heard about the Roma Holocaust” was one of the most common responses from students when they were asked what they learned about the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in school. Situated in the field of memory studies, this thesis considers several “vectors of memory” to analyze the politics of memory around the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in the Czech Republic. The thesis brings our attention to the instances of denial and trivialization of the Roma Holocaust that emerged across the political spectrum during the debates about the former concentration camp for Roma and Sinti at Lety u Písku. It further discusses how Romani history and Romani experiences remain largely omitted or marginalized in history teaching. Lastly, it focuses on the historical awareness of the Roma Holocaust among students and analyses how individuals, such as students, relate to this past. It is concluded that the instrumental misuse of history is happening to further marginalize Roma and justify their discrimination. Students have very low historical awareness of the Roma Holocaust even though most of the students participating in the survey would like to learn more. Students often perceived the lack of attention to Romani history in schools as part of the broader prejudice against Roma. Whereas Romani history was unknown to students, they knew very well all kinds of negative prejudices against Roma. The findings show that there is a strong need to reconsider history curricula and move towards a more inclusive, diverse, and critical history education.

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## Table of contents

Introduction .....	1
1 Brief history of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Europe and on the territory of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia .....	9
2 Lety memorial: Long-lasting mnemonic marginalization and struggle for redress.....	13
3 History teaching: Omission from the textbooks and the historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti among students .....	25
Conclusion.....	32
Bibliography .....	34
Annex .....	39

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Even though Romani people are part of the European history for many centuries, their history and culture are rarely mentioned in the school curricula. During my high school studies in the Czech Republic, I took several seminars on modern history, but I graduated without ever learning about the history of Romani people. At the end of my high school, I did not even know that on the territory of the Czech Republic there were several concentration camps for Roma during World War Two or that Romani people were enslaved in the past.

Romani people still face discrimination and racism in many European countries. Across Europe, Roma are discriminated in access to education, housing, employment, and health care, and governments often fail to protect Roma against racially motivated crimes.<sup>2</sup> The same racist assumptions against Roma that were present in Europe in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are endorsed in today's Europe not only by the extremists, but also by a large part of the public<sup>3</sup> and some mainstream politicians. Denial or trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti<sup>4</sup> is part of the broader marginalization of Roma. For many years, Roma representatives were denied access to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.<sup>5</sup> And in Europe, the European Parliament recognized the Roma Holocaust only in 2015.<sup>6</sup> Even nowadays, as Birga Meyer points out, one of the narratives that often surrounds the remembrance of the Holocaust is that even though Roma

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<sup>1</sup> Versions of parts of this thesis focusing on the Lety memorial were submitted at Central European University as final papers for the courses – 'Dark Legacies: Coming to terms with Europe's 20<sup>th</sup> century' on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2020 and 'Sociological approaches to Romani studies' on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *"We ask for justice" Europe's failure to protect Roma from racist violence* (London: Amnesty International, 2014), [https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/08042014\\_Europes\\_failure\\_to\\_protect\\_Roma\\_from\\_racist\\_violence.pdf](https://www.amnesty.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/08042014_Europes_failure_to_protect_Roma_from_racist_violence.pdf) and Amnesty International, *Left out: Violations of the rights of Roma in Europe* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 2010), <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/36000/eur010212010en.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *A Persisting Concern: Anti-Gypsyism as a Barrier to Roma Inclusion* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Sinti is a distinct ethnic group of Roma speaking a sintish dialect of Romani with words taken from German. - Jana Horváthová et al., *Lety: the announcement of landscape-architectural competition Lety u Písku: memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia*. (Brno: Museum of Romani Culture, 2019), 30.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome: An Account of Gypsy Slavery and Persecution*, 2nd rev. ed., (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, 1987), 4.

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament, 'European Parliament Resolution of 15 April 2015 on the Occasion of International Roma Day – Anti-Gypsyism in Europe and EU Recognition of the Memorial Day of the Roma Genocide during World War II' (Brussels, 15 August 2015), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0095\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2015-0095_EN.html).

are recognized as victims of the Holocaust, they appear as ‘marginalized Other, the victim named but not accounted for.’<sup>7</sup>

That the struggle for recognition is still ongoing is also manifested by the fact that the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, opened in Berlin only in 2012, is currently under threat because of a railway construction. At the same time, a new memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti is supposed to be opened in 2023 in a small village Lety u Písku in the Czech Republic. The double story of, on the one hand, continuing marginalization, and on the other hand, ongoing struggle for recognition led by Romani activists and their allies, has been shaping the public remembrance of the Roma Holocaust for years. Until its closure in 2017, the pig farm in Lety, built on the site of the former concentration camp for Roma and Sinti, was one of the major symbols of the lack of recognition of the Roma Holocaust in Europe.<sup>8</sup> Lety is a place that witnessed clashes of different memory narratives, and with the new memorial, it will continue to shape the debates and the public remembrance of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti.

During the debates about the closure of the pig farm at Lety, there was something that Eviatar Zerubavel calls a “mnemonic battle” over the “correct” way to interpret the past.<sup>9</sup> As Zerubavel writes, these battles are fought over what “ought to be collectively remembered.”<sup>10</sup> If we look at the Lety case, we can see that one of the narratives was not only about pushing a certain way to interpret the past – for instance, that Lety was “only a labour camp and not a concentration camp”<sup>11</sup> – but also about completely excluding certain historical events from the public remembrance.

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<sup>7</sup> Birga U. Meyer, ‘The Universal Victim – Representing Jews and Roma in a European Holocaust Museum’, in *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, ed. Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist Plewa (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 82-3.

<sup>8</sup> Huub van Baar, ‘The Way Out of Amnesia?: Europeanisation and the Recognition of the Roma’s Past and Present’, *Third Text* 22, no. 3 (May 2008): 373.

<sup>9</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, ‘Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past’, *Qualitative Sociology* 19, no. 3 (1996): 195.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>11</sup> Czech Television, ‘Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus’ [The Camp at Lety evokes emotions for a long time. It was trivialized by Babiš, Ransdorf or Klaus], ČT24 - Czech Television, 7 February 2018, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/2382997-tabor-v-letech-vyvolava-emoce-uz-dlouho-zlehcovali-jej-babis-ransdorf-ci-klaus>.

As early as 1882, Ernst Renan said that nationalism needs not only remembering of the common past but also forgetting of the violence that happened.<sup>12</sup> Public amnesia, or rather ignorance, regarding the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti and their fate at Lety was there during the communist regime and some decision-makers want it to continue even today. Lety was for years a site that the “public memory has expressly avoided”, something that Nancy Wood calls *lieu d’oubli*.<sup>13</sup> The Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti was often called ‘forgotten’, but as historian Renata Berkyová aptly points out, ‘forgotten’ is not the right word to use. It was not forgotten but ignored by the public.<sup>14</sup> The processes of exclusion of Romani experience from the dominant narratives can thus reveal some broader societal dynamics, because as Zheng Wang points out in the book *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict*, “what individuals and countries remember and what they choose to forget are telling indicators of their current values, perceptions, and future objectives.”<sup>15</sup>

With the framework of politics of memory, we can better understand why the history of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti is still trivialized, because politics of memory focuses on the relationship between memory and power and on the question why certain memories are marginalized when others enter the public domain and the national memory narratives.<sup>16</sup> We can also understand the politics of memory as a “communicative paradigm”,<sup>17</sup> meaning that the narrative has to be accepted by the broader public in order to be successful.<sup>18</sup> As Wang summarizes, the instrumental misuse of history is happening in order to gain popular support and to justify discrimination of certain groups.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ernst Renan, ‘What Is a Nation?’, in *Nationalism in Europe: From 1815 to the Present: A Reader*, ed. Stuart Woolf (London: Routledge, 1996), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Wood, *Vectors of Memory: Legacies of Trauma in Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Renata Berkyová for Romea.cz, debate after the screening of the LETY documentary, 13. 5. 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/sdruzeniromea/videos/339870231100011>.

<sup>15</sup> Zheng Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable, Memory Politics and Transitional Justice* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, *Vectors of Memory*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Peter J. Verovšek, “Collective Memory, Politics, and the Influence of the Past: The Politics of Memory as a Research Paradigm”, *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4, no. 3 (2016), 535.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict*, 13.

The process of mnemonic exclusion was also elaborated by Aleida Assmann who says that national “political memory” (the mediated, institutionalized top-down memory) is dependent on selection and exclusion and also on the “level of patriotic and ethnic fervor.”<sup>20</sup> Political memory relies among others on public narratives, monuments, and education.<sup>21</sup> The mnemonic exclusion of Roma can be seen on all these levels - the public narratives often trivialize the Holocaust of the Roma and reiterate the racist stereotypes; the construction of memorials to the victims of the Holocaust of the Roma was for many years rejected by decision-makers, and the history of Roma is almost completely omitted in Czech history textbooks.<sup>22</sup> The “ethnic fervour” that Assmann mentions is high in the Czech Republic especially in relation to Romani people. Surveys conducted by the Czech Academy of Sciences reveal that around 70% of Czechs have antipathy towards Romani people.<sup>23</sup>

I draw on Assmann’s conception of political memory and I focus on the public narratives surrounding Lety and on the education about the subject. Besides the Lety memorial, the other ‘vectors’ of memory<sup>24</sup> considered here are the history teaching and the historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti among students. In the first case study on the Lety memorial, I analyse the statements of Czech politicians that deny or trivialize the existence of the concentration camp for Roma and Sinti at Lety.

In the second case study, I discuss the omission of Romani history from history textbooks within the politics of memory framework and I expand my analysis beyond the top-down memory narratives by adding findings from a survey among students on their historical awareness of the

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<sup>20</sup> Aleida Assmann, “Memory, Individual and Collective”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 215–16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>22</sup> Michal Schuster, “Dějiny Romů ve výuce dějepisu [History of Roma in history teaching]”.

<sup>23</sup> CVVM - The Public Opinion Research Centre and Milan Tuček, “The Czech Public’s Views of Ethnic Groups Living in the Czech Republic – March 2019” (Praha, April 2019), <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/other/relations-attitudes/4910-the-czech-public-s-views-of-ethnic-groups-living-in-the-czech-republic-march-2019>.

<sup>24</sup> In this context, the term ‘vector’ of memory was first used by Henry Rousso in the 1990s in his book *The Vichy Syndrome*. – in Wood, *Vectors of Memory*, 5.



Roma Holocaust.<sup>25</sup> Here, I take more of a bottom-up approach towards memory. With the questionnaire method, I draw on Jeffrey Olick's conception of "collected" memory that focuses on what individuals remember,<sup>26</sup> or in this case, on the historical awareness of the past among individuals.<sup>27</sup> Olick writes that "'memory' occurs in public and in private, at the tops of societies and at the bottoms, as reminiscence and as commemoration, as a personal testimonial and as national narrative, and that each of these forms is important."<sup>28</sup> I do not analyse the private memory in terms of personal testimonials,<sup>29</sup> but I find Olick's conception useful for acknowledging the role of individuals within remembrance and commemoration.<sup>30</sup> For this reason, I include the findings from the questionnaire as a second element that complements the analysis of the top-down political memory with insights into how individuals, such as students, relate to this past.

The thesis is situated in the field of memory studies, but analysing the memory is not possible without knowing the history itself. One of the most important systematic works on the persecution of Roma was published by Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, who began their work on this topic in the 1970s.<sup>31</sup> But the historiography dealing with the Nazi persecution of Romani people had not proliferated until the 1990s and the 2000s.<sup>32</sup> Historians writing about the Holocaust

<sup>25</sup> On the importance of history education for collective or public memory see Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures," *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 333-48.

<sup>27</sup> The dichotomy of public vs. private (or top-down vs. bottom-up) cultures of remembrance and historical consciousness was also elaborated by Harald Welzer in Harald Welzer, "Collateral Damage of History Education: National Socialism and the Holocaust in German Family Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (2008): 287-314.

<sup>28</sup> Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures," 346.

<sup>29</sup> For these, see for instance, Milena Hübschmannová, ed., *Po Židoch Cigáni: svědectví Romů ze Slovenska, 1939-1945*, Vyd. 1, 30 sv (Praha: Triáda, 2005); Ceija Stojka, *Žijeme ve skrytu: vyprávění rakouské Romky* (Praha: Argo, 2008); Josef Serinek, *Vzpomínky Josefa Serinka*, ed. Jan Tesař, První vydání, Česká cikánská rapsodie (Praha: Triáda, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> A similar approach of analysing the private perceptions of the Holocaust can be found in Günther Jikeli, 'Perceptions of the Holocaust Among Young Muslims in Berlin, Paris and London', in *Perceptions of the Holocaust in Europe and Muslim Communities*, ed. Günther Jikeli and Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2013), 105-31.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, *Gypsies under the Swastika*, 2. ed., Interface Collection 8 (Hatfield: Univ. of Hertfordshire Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Karola Fings and Donald Kenrick, eds., *The Gypsies during the Second World War*, Interface Collection 12-13 ([Paris] : Hatfield, Hertfordshire, U.K.: Gypsy Research Centre; University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997); Michael Zimmermann, 'The Wehrmacht and the National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies', *Romani Studies* 11, no. 2 (December 2001): 111-35, <https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2001.6>; Ian Hancock, 'Romanies and the Holocaust: A Re-Evaluation and Overview', in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 383-96.

and Roma, however, differed in their understanding of the Holocaust and its uniqueness.<sup>33</sup> Some of the authors claimed that the Holocaust was unique only for the Jewish experience and excluded Roma into the category of marginal “others”.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, many authors acknowledged that Roma shared the fate of Jews because Roma, too, were supposed to be exterminated because they were marked “racially inferior”.<sup>35</sup>

The exclusion of Roma from the Holocaust narrative was challenged most strongly by Ian Hancock who argued that those historians who exclude Roma from the Holocaust can do so only by deliberately overlooking historical facts.<sup>36</sup> In my thesis, I use the term Roma Holocaust (even though several other terms are used in different contexts, such as the Romani genocide, or Romani words Porajmos, or Samudaripen) because I agree with Hancock that the extermination of Roma during the Second World War cannot be excluded from the Holocaust narrative. Avoiding using this term can suggest establishing a certain hierarchy among the victims.<sup>37</sup> Another reason for using the term Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti instead of the term Romani genocide is that there were many genocidal attacks on Romani people in the past, and by using the term Holocaust it is clear which of the genocides we are referring to.<sup>38</sup>

The 2015 publication *Education for Remembrance of the Roma Genocide* shows on the one hand, what little attention the Roma Holocaust still receives in schools, and on the other hand, the big effort, stemming mainly from the Roma organizations and civil society, to rectify it<sup>39</sup> and ensure

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<sup>33</sup> Slawomir Kapralski, ‘Why Teach About the Romani Holocaust?’, in *Why Should We Teach about the Holocaust?*, ed. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Leszek Hońdo (Cracow: Jagiellonian University, Institute of European Studies, 2005), 90–91.

<sup>34</sup> Among these authors belong Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Hancock, ‘Romanies and the Holocaust: A Re-Evaluation and Overview’; Zimmermann, ‘The Wehrmacht and the National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies’; Kenrick and Puxon, *Gypsies under the Swastika*.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Hancock, ‘Responses to the Porrajmos: The Romani Holocaust’, in *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, ed. Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 75–102.

<sup>37</sup> Anna Míšková, contribution to the discussion during a webinar after the lecture by Ethel Brooks, “The Roma Holocaust and the history of Roma Resistance” *European Roma Institute for Art and Culture*, October 6, 2020, <https://eriac.org/barvalipe-roma-online-university/>.

<sup>38</sup> Emran Elmazi, *ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Esteban Acuña C., and Piotr Trojański, eds., *Education for Remembrance of the Roma Genocide: Scholarship, Commemoration and the Role of Youth*, Second and extended edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron - Filip Lohner, 2015).

that Romani people do have a “worthy place among the victims”.<sup>40</sup> While there are studies focusing on the awareness of the Roma Holocaust among teachers and their attitudes toward teaching about it,<sup>41</sup> there is a lack of data about the historical awareness among students and their stances on learning about the Roma Holocaust. This thesis aims to address this by analysing the answers of students to an online questionnaire. Given the limitations in scope, the focus is solely on students in the Czech Republic that are in their last or last but one grade of high school. The questionnaire was mainly distributed among students attending comprehensive Gymnasiums. These parameters were chosen because these students are finishing their comprehensive education and because students of Gymnasiums still have history classes. These students are thus able to comment and reflect on their overall experience with history teaching.

The questionnaire was distributed online between September 2020 - February 2021 with the help of class teachers and it was filled by 385 students from 38 different schools from 11 different towns in the Czech Republic. Prior to distributing it among students, the design of the questionnaire was consulted with Michal Mižigár, Roma activist and educator from the Czech Republic, and two experts from the Museum of Romani Culture. It consisted of some yes/no questions and some open-ended questions focusing on the students’ experience with learning about the subject and their stances toward learning about the history of the Roma. It is very important that history teaching includes Romani perspectives and Romani voices, several questions on students’ experience with hearing personal testimonies were thus also included. The analysis of the responses combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The set of yes/no questions gives us the percentage of students that, for instance, never learned about the Roma Holocaust in school,

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<sup>40</sup> Andrzej Mirga, ‘For a Worthy Place Among the Victims: The Holocaust and the Extermination of Roma During World War II’, in *Why Should We Teach about the Holocaust?*, ed. Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs and Leszek Hońdo (Cracow: Jagiellonian University, Institute of European Studies, 2005), 93.

<sup>41</sup> Michelle Kelso, “‘And Roma Were Victims, Too.’ The Romani Genocide and Holocaust Education in Romania”, *Intercultural Education* 24, no. 1–02 (24 May 2013): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2013.768060>. Karen Polak, “Teaching about the Genocide of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust: Chances and Challenges in Europe Today”, *Intercultural Education* 24, no. 1–02 (24 May 2013): 79–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2013.782688>.

and the set of open-ended questions is interpreted qualitatively by comparing the responses, looking for recurring themes, and interpreting their meanings.

Findings from the questionnaire can have practical contribution for the discussion about the awareness of the Roma Holocaust in the Czech Republic as more than 80% of students indicated that they did not learn about Romani history in school and 95% of them have never heard a personal testimony of someone who survived the Roma Holocaust, while more than 80% of students indicated that they consider it important to learn more about the Holocaust of the Roma and Romani history in schools.

In the first chapter, I briefly outline the history of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Europe and in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia. The second chapter presents the case study on the Lety memorial and the trivializing narratives and instances of denial of the existence of Lety concentration camp. The last chapter is dealing with history teaching as another “vector of memory” and discusses the omission of Romani history from history teaching and the historical awareness of the Roma Holocaust among students and their experience with learning about the subject.

## 1 Brief history of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Europe and on the territory of the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia

Romani people were almost completely annihilated during the Second World War. Around three quarters of the Roma and Sinti population perished during the Holocaust in Europe and in some areas, such as today's Czech Republic, the Roma population was decimated.<sup>42</sup> Roma and Sinti were persecuted in all states occupied by Nazi Germany and its allies after 1939.<sup>43</sup> They were subjected to forced sterilizations and mass deportations leading to mass murder. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, tens of thousands of Roma were executed by *Einsatzgruppen* in the occupied Soviet territories.<sup>44</sup> Entire Roma caravans were killed at Babi Yar near Kiev, the site known because of the large massacres of Jews.<sup>45</sup> Around five thousand Austrian Roma deported to the Łódź ghetto in late 1941 died of typhus or were gased to death at the Chelmno camp.<sup>46</sup> In December 1942, Heinrich Himmler ordered a European-wide deportation of Roma to Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>47</sup> Many Romani people, particularly children, were subjected to the heinous experiments of Joseph Mengele in Auschwitz.<sup>48</sup> All but a few Roma who were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau were murdered in the camp.<sup>49</sup>

In Czechoslovakia, discrimination of Roma and Sinti was in practice already before the Nazi occupation. In 1927, in the first Czechoslovak republic, a discriminatory law against Roma came into force.<sup>50</sup> Based on this law, Roma had to have “gypsy identity cards” so that the state

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<sup>42</sup> Lecture by Ethel Brooks, “The Roma Holocaust and the history of Roma Resistance” at Barvalipe Roma Online University, European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 6 October 2020, <https://eriac.org/barvalipe-roma-online-university/> (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Celia Donert, *The Rights of the Roma: The Struggle for Citizenship in Postwar Czechoslovakia*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 30.

<sup>44</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt, ed., *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration*, Studies on War and Genocide, volume 17 (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>48</sup> Hancock, *The Pariah Syndrome*, 74.

<sup>49</sup> Weiss-Wendt, *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Act No. 117/1927 Coll. “On Wandering Gypsies” available in Czech at “Zákon č. 117/1927 Sb. z. a n. “O potulných Cikánech” ze dne 14. července 1927”, Holocaust.cz, accessed 23 April 2020, <https://www.holocaust.cz/dejiny/pronasledovani-a-genocida-romu/pronasledovani-a-genocida-romu-v-ceskych-zemich/pronasledovani-a-genocida-romu-2/zakon-ze-dne-14-cervence-1927-o-potulnych-cikanech/>.

could register them as “Gypsies”. Moreover, “wandering Gypsies” were banned from entering certain areas.<sup>51</sup> In 1938, after many Roma had to leave the occupied borderland, overtly racist and inhuman proposals on what to do with displaced Roma were discussed in the press.<sup>52</sup> The proposals included the creation of concentration camps for Roma and Roma women sterilization.<sup>53</sup> Such attitudes expressed the same idea that was pronounced by Robert Ritter from the Nazi Institute of Racial Hygiene. Ritter stated: “We have identified the Roma as totally primitive people of ethnic origin, whose mental retardation renders them incapable of real social adaptation... The Gypsy question can only be resolved when... reproduction of this population [...] is stopped once and for all.”<sup>54</sup> Historians from the Museum of Romani culture thus point out that when the persecution of Roma escalated, the general public did not perceive it in a negative way and that the later Nazi extermination plans “could draw on long-standing and significant social assumptions.”<sup>55</sup>

In March 1939, two weeks before the Nazi occupation, the Second Czechoslovak Republic adopted a law on disciplinary labour camps for “work-shy” adult men.<sup>56</sup> On the basis of this order, the camp at Lety was constructed. The camp went through several stages. First, it was a “disciplinary labour camp” for adult men, where not only Roma were incarcerated. But in March 1942, the camp was transformed into a collection camp for “gypsies and people with gypsy way of life”.<sup>57</sup> From August 1942, it functioned as the so-called “Gypsy camp” for all people with “gypsy blood”.<sup>58</sup> From that time, whole Roma families (men, women, elderly, children) were incarcerated there. Lety was one of several concentration camps for Roma and Sinti on the territory of the

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.; Zdeněk Šípek, ‘Cikánské Legitimace v Čechách v Meziválečném Období [Gypsy Identity Cards in the Czech Lands during the Interwar Period]’, *Český Lid* 76, no. 3 (1989): 133.

<sup>52</sup> Zdeněk Šípek, ‘Tzv. Cikánská Otázka Od Mnichova Do Konce Roku 1939 [The so-called Gypsy Question from Munich until the End of the Year 1939]’, *Český Lid* 79, no. 2 (1992): 162.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Ellie Keen, *Right to Remember: A Handbook for Education with Young People on the Roma Genocide*, ed. Rui Gomes, Second edition (Council of Europe, 2017), 19.

<sup>55</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Order No. 72/1939 Coll. “On Disciplinary Labour Camps” available in Czech at ‘Vládní nařízení ze dne 2.3.1939 o kárných pracovních táborech’, epravo.cz, accessed 23 April 2020, <https://www.epravo.cz/vyhledavani-aspi/?Id=7708&Section=1&IdPara=1&ParaC=2>.

<sup>57</sup> Museum of Romani Culture, ‘History | Lety Memorial’, Memorial Lety u Písku, accessed 23 April 2020, <https://letypamatnik.cz/en/historie/>.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Protectorate. Another camp was at Hodonín near Kunštát in Moravia and others were located in Liberec in the Northern Bohemia.

Before the war, there were diverse groups of Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti differing in their way of life and their social status (ranging from poor labourers, musicians, horse traders, to affluent traders and well-educated personalities).<sup>59</sup> Despite the anti-Roma legislation, on many places, Roma and Sinti were achieving social advancement, but this process was brutally disrupted by the concentration camps<sup>60</sup> and almost complete annihilation of all Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti.

Conditions in both concentration camps, Lety and Hodonín, were catastrophic. Extreme malnourishment, hard forced labour (that even children had to endure), and enormous overpopulation in uninsulated wooden barracks constituted the everyday reality.<sup>61</sup> The camps were guarded by Czech guards who often inflicted cruel punishments.<sup>62</sup> Because of the horrendous conditions in the camps, the epidemic of typhoid and spotted fever broke out there in winter 1942 and killed many Roma prisoners.<sup>63</sup> It is estimated that about 1,300 people passed through Lety and 326 people died there including 241 children.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, in December 1942, transports of Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp began. First transports from Lety and Hodonín departed in December 1942.<sup>65</sup> Later, they were delayed by the epidemic, but in March 1943, mass transports of those who survived the typhoid departed to Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp.<sup>66</sup> As historians from the Museum of Romani Culture write, the camps at Lety and Hodonín were part of the “final solution’ to the Gypsy

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<sup>59</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 31. Tomáš Holomek was the first Rom studying at the Law Faculty of the Charles University in 1932. During the war, he escaped to Slovakia and hid there from the concentration camps.

<sup>60</sup> Karel Holomek, testimony for the Memory of Nations oral history archive, Prague, 6 March 2015, <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/holomek-karel-1937>.

<sup>61</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 41–42.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>64</sup> Museum of Romani Culture, ‘Lety u Písku. Památník Holokaustu Romů a Sintů v Čechách [Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia]’, Museum of Romani Culture, accessed 23 April 2020, <https://www.rommuz.cz/pamatniky/lety-u-pisku/>.

<sup>65</sup> Ctibor Nečas, *Holocaust českých Romů* [Holocaust of the Czech Roma] (Praha: Prostor, 1999).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

question.”<sup>67</sup> After the transports of Roma prisoners ended, the camp at Lety was burnt and buried with lime.

The Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti were decimated during the Holocaust as 90% of them were murdered. After the end of the war, only 583 Roma and Sinti returned home,<sup>68</sup> but they encountered resentment from their former neighbours and their houses had often been sold or destroyed.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 38, 47.

<sup>68</sup> Council of Europe, ‘Factsheet on the Roma Genocide in Czech Republic’, Roma Genocide, accessed 23 April 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-genocide/czech-republic>.

<sup>69</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 49.



## 2 Lety memorial: Long-lasting mnemonic marginalization and struggle for redress

The former concentration camp for Roma and Sinti at Lety u Písku is one of the sites that on the one hand, witnesses the exclusion of the memory of the Roma Holocaust survivors from the dominant memory narratives and the marginalization of their suffering, and on the other hand, manifests the struggle and achievements of Romani activists for redress. During the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, public remembrance of the Roma Holocaust was a taboo.<sup>70</sup> The memory of it was preserved within families of the Roma Holocaust survivors but ignored on the official level and by the public.<sup>71</sup> Roma were forced to assimilate, Romani children were segregated and placed in “special schools” for children with mental disabilities, and many Roma women were sterilized without any informed or voluntary consent.<sup>72</sup> Neither the authorities nor the general public were interested in what happened to the Roma during World War Two, and especially, there was no interest in opening the discussion about how the Roma were tortured by the Czech Protectorate gendarmes at Lety and Hodonín. Roma Holocaust survivors thus often hid their memories to avoid stigmatization and rejection.<sup>73</sup> After the war, someone from the Roma Holocaust survivors, whose family was killed in the camp, put a wooden cross with a crown of thorns on the place where the prisoners from Lety were buried,<sup>74</sup> but after a few years, it was cut down.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Helena Sadílková, Michal Schuster, and Milada Závodská, ‘Holocaust Romů’ [The Holocaust of the Roma], *Dějiny a Současnost*, no. 9 (2015), <http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2015/9/holocaust-romu/>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Struggling for Ethnic Identity: Czechoslovakia’s Endangered Gypsies*, A Helsinki Watch Report (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992), 21.

<sup>73</sup> Jana Horváthová, interview by Lukáš Matoška, Czech Radio Vltava, 8 April 2019, <https://vltava.rozhlas.cz/jana-horvathova-clovek-je-otevrenejsi-kdyz-je-citove-zaangazovany-do-utrpeni-7889847>.

<sup>74</sup> Renata Berkyová, „2. díl. Kříž s trnovou korunou v Letech objednali pozůstalí, hlasy proti výstavbě vepřína vyslyšeny nebyly“ [The cross with a crown of thorns was ordered by the survivors; voices against the construction of the pig farm were not heard] *Romea.cz*, 12. 12. 2018, <http://www.romea.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/2-dil-kriz-s-trnovou-korunou-v-letech-objednali-pozustali-hlasy-proti-vystavbe-veprina-vyslyseny-nebyly> (accessed 14. 5. 2021).

<sup>75</sup> Jindřich Šídlo and Jan Brabec, ‘Konečné Řešení Na Česko-Německý Způsob’ [The Final Solution in the Czech-German Way], *Týdeník Respekt*, 3 October 1994, <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/1994/40/konecne-reseni-na-cesko-nemecky-zpusob>.

Even though ignored by the public, the Roma and Sinti survivors were coming to the place to commemorate their lost relatives.<sup>76</sup> In 1968, there was a large unpublic reverent act.<sup>77</sup> In 1969, the Union of the Gypsies-Roma led by Tomáš Holomek was established and actively fought for the official recognition of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti.<sup>78</sup> They established the tradition of public commemorative acts at Hodonín u Kunštátu and they planned to open a memorial also at Lety, but in 1973 the Union was abolished by the communist party.<sup>79</sup>

The disrespectful attitude towards the Roma was then reflected in what happened to the site at Lety after the Union was abolished. In the 1970s, a large-scale pig farm was built on the site of the former concentration camp for Roma and Sinti. Protest of the Roma Holocaust survivors against the fact that the pig farm stands on the site where their families were killed and tortured were ignored by the authorities.<sup>80</sup> The pig farm then remained in operation even after the Velvet Revolution in the newly democratic regime. In the 1990s, the story of Lety was brought to the public attention by an American writer, Paul Polansky, who played a key role in starting the public debate about the closure of the pig farm. But even after the case attracted media attention, the mayor of Lety sold the remaining plots on which the former concentration camp was located to the private company despite undoubtedly knowing the history of the site,<sup>81</sup> and subsequently, the Czech governments were for years saying that there is not enough money for the purchase and liquidation of the farm.

In 1995, a small memorial was officially unveiled near the pig farm in the presence of president Václav Havel. During the unveiling Havel said:

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<sup>76</sup> Berkyová, „2. díl. Kříž s trnovou korunou v Letech objednali pozůstalí“.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Kristina Dientsbierová, “On the 50th anniversary of Czechoslovakia's short-lived Union of Gypsies-Roma, community members recall its hopes“ *Romea.cz*, 4. 9. 2019, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/on-the-50th-anniversary-of-czechoslovakia-apos-s-short-lived-union-of-gypsies-roma-community-members-recall-its-hopes> (accessed 14. 5. 2021).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Renata Berkyová for Romea.cz, debate after the screening of the LETY documentary, 13. 5. 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/sdruzeniromea/videos/339870231100011>.

<sup>81</sup> Renata Berkyová, „3. díl: Devadesátá léta v Letech vydláždila cestu k téměř půl miliardě“ [The 1990s at Lety paved the way for almost a half a billion] *Romea.cz*, 20. 12. 2018, <http://www.romea.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/3-dil-devadesata-lea-v-letech-vydlazdila-cestu-k-temer-pul-miliarde> (accessed 14. 5. 2021).

Even today we can sometimes hear people calling for sending the "Gypsies to the gas chambers". Even today we can observe the indifference to these displays. [...] We know the horrors that racism produces. Let's not allow them to be repeated! [...] To forget either the camp at Lety or the similar camp at Hodonín would mean not just forgetting this criminal assault, but forgetting the values against which it was perpetrated.<sup>82</sup>

He was the first and last president that gave such a speech at Lety. His successors, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman, then only encouraged prejudices against the Roma rather than countering them. On the same day when Václav Havel was unveiling the memorial, several racist attackers invaded a house of a Roma family with small children.<sup>83</sup> The attack was fatal for the father of the family and the court later refused to classify the attack as racially motivated,<sup>84</sup> which was something emblematic in the new democratic regime. The systematic discrimination of Roma was continuing after the Velvet Revolution<sup>85</sup> with nationalistic anti-Roma sentiments and racist attacks against Roma seeing a huge increase in the 1990s.<sup>86</sup>

For many years, the smell from the pigs surrounded the small memorial and disrupted the dignity of yearly reverent acts. The farm was closed only recently after more than twenty years of struggle of the Roma activists for its closure. Soon,<sup>87</sup> a new memorial to the Roma and Sinti will replace the pig farm, but the long-lasting dispute over the closure of the pig farm revealed the clashing memory narratives that relate to this site. Several politicians (including mainstream and high-ranking politicians) publicly denied the existence of the Lety concentration camp and trivialized the situation of Roma during World War Two.<sup>88</sup>

The recurrent narrative that was appearing in the statements by some of the Czech politicians was saying that "there has never been a concentration camp at Lety", that there was

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<sup>82</sup> Speech by the President of the Republic, Václav Havel, on the occasion of the opening of the memorial to Roma at the site of the former Gypsy internment camp, Lety u Písku, 13 May 1995, translation by Gwendolyn Albert available at <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/vaclav-havel-s-1995-speech-at-the-unveiling-of-the-lety-memorial> (accessed 26 April 2020).

<sup>83</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 53.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> The discrimination was continuing on many levels, besides not acknowledging crimes as racially motivated, we can mention also segregation in education, or the continuing practice of Roma women's sterilization.

<sup>86</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Struggling for Ethnic Identity*, 2–3; Romani Rose, 'The Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust and Today', *UN Chronicle*, no. 4 (2006): 66–68.

<sup>87</sup> Opening of the new memorial is planned for 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Czech Television, 'Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus'.

“only a labour camp for people who avoided work”.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, not all the politicians supported these claims, but this narrative was promoted by quite influential decision-makers and hence became widespread also among the public.<sup>90</sup> As historian Renata Berkyová points out, the story of Lety does not end with the planned opening of the new memorial because the trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti is still present in the Czech Republic.<sup>91</sup> To give some concrete examples of such statements, we can start in 2005. In April that year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation of Roma in the EU, which among other things called “on the Commission and the authorities to take all necessary steps to remove the pig farm from the site of the former concentration camp at Lety u Písku and to create a suitable memorial.”<sup>92</sup> The Czech MEP, Miloslav Ransdorf (Communist Party, KSČM), voted against the resolution and stated: “As a historian, I know that [...] no real concentration camp has ever been there.”<sup>93</sup> The MEPs from the centre-right Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) also voted against the resolution citing the mention of Lety as the reason for their rejective stance, because the mention was “misleading”.<sup>94</sup> The then president of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus, also contributed to the debate. He agreed with Ransdorf and stated:

It turns out that it is more complex with the camp. It was originally a labor camp for those who refused to work, not only Roma. It is not really a concentration camp in the sense in which each of us subconsciously understands the word concentration camp and sees Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and these things.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Czech Television, ‘Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus’.

<sup>90</sup> “LETY”, documentary film by František Bikár, Viola Tokárová, and Renata Berkyová, 2019; and Berkyová for Romea.cz, debate after the screening of the LETY documentary, 13. 5. 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/sdruzeniromea/videos/339870231100011>.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> European Parliament, ‘European Parliament resolution on the situation of the Roma in the European Union’, P6\_TA(2005)0151 (Brussels, 28. 4. 2005), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2005-0151&language=EN&ring=P6-RC-2005-0272>.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Czech Television, ‘Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus’.

<sup>94</sup> BBC Czech, ‘Klaus Komentoval Rezoluci EP o Discriminaci Romů [Klaus Commented on the Resolution of the EP on the Discrimination of Roma]’, BBC Czech, 29 April 2005, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/czech/domesticnews/story/2005/04/050429\\_cz\\_eu\\_lety\\_1455.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/czech/domesticnews/story/2005/04/050429_cz_eu_lety_1455.shtml).

<sup>95</sup> Václav Klaus, ‘Rozhovor prezidenta republiky Václava Klause pro Lidové noviny’, interview by Petr Kolář, *Lidové Noviny*, 14 May 2005, <https://www.klaus.cz/clanky/1469>.

Denial and trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma were appearing across the political spectrum. The claims came from the communist party politicians, from the mainstream and high-ranking politicians, and indeed, from the extreme-right, too. In 2006, the far-right National Party (NS) had an aggressive campaign against Roma and unveiled a ‘counter-monument’ at Lety that promoted the narrative that Lety was only a labour camp and not a concentration camp.<sup>96</sup> The leader of the party, Edelmanová, made some disgraceful statements such as that Roma themselves were to be blamed for their deaths and that “such people are not worthy of monuments; we build memorials to those who managed to achieve something.”<sup>97</sup> The National Party represented the very extreme of the political spectrum, but the statements made by Edelmanová did not differ significantly from the statements of some mainstream politicians, such as, for instance, the president Klaus.

The instances of denial continued over time. In 2016, Andrej Babiš, the then minister of finance and current prime minister, reiterated the narrative while claiming: “What the morons say in the newspaper that the camp at Lety was a concentration camp is a lie. It was a labour camp [for those who did not work].”<sup>98</sup> Moreover, the last years before the closure of the pig farm were marked by statements of politicians from a new xenophobic party Freedom and Direct Democracy that has a substantive representation in the parliament. One MP of the party, Miloslav Rozner, said: “Undoubtedly, I would never throw half a billion crowns out of the window for liquidating a functioning company because of a non-existent pseudo-concentration camp.”<sup>99</sup> The leader of several subsequent xenophobic parties, former senator and current deputy speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Tomio Okamura, made similar statements about Lety several times. In 2014, he said that “according to the available information, the myth of the Roma concentration camp is a lie.

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<sup>96</sup> van Baar, ‘The Way Out of Amnesia?’, 379.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in van Baar, 380.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Czech Television, ‘Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus’.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

There was a labour camp for those who avoided work [...] No one was killed in the camp.<sup>100</sup> And later he added: “This camp was not enclosed with a fence and [...] the people there essentially enjoyed freedom of movement.”<sup>101</sup>

All these statements represent a clear falsification of history. They intentionally deny that since 1942, when the labour camp at Lety was transformed into a concentration camp, whole Roma families, including pregnant women, elderly, and children, were incarcerated in horrendous conditions there, and later transported to the Auschwitz extermination camp. But how is it possible that the politicians were using the false claim that “it was only a labour camp” to justify having a pig farm on the site of the former camp in the first place? Whereas the communist labour camps, where political prisoners were incarcerated during the 1950s in Czechoslovakia, are the symbol of persecution and crimes of communism, when these politicians speak about incarcerating the Roma in labour camps they pretend to be “debunking the myth” of persecution of the Roma during World War Two. It is hard to imagine that any politician would use the same logic if a pig farm would be standing on a site of the former communist labour camp for political prisoners. The fact that they use this narrative in relation to the Roma demonstrates the widespread racism in the Czech Republic.

The first theme present in the statements claiming that Lety was “only a labour camp” can gain popularity for politicians because the prejudice saying that Roma do not want to work and live only on welfare is very widespread in the Czech Republic. Roma are portrayed as being “always work-shy” and it is suggested that, in the past, this “Roma problem” was cleverly solved by establishing labour camps. It misuses the present-day stereotypes, and it does not render the current and persistent discrimination of Roma unacceptable. Quite on the contrary, this narrative encourages the view that Roma themselves are to be blamed for their exclusion and that if they ended up in the camp during World War Two it was their fault because they were “asocial”. This

<sup>100</sup> Miloslav Janík, “Koncentrák to nebyl,” *popírá Okamura romský holocaust v Letech*, Echo24.cz, 2 August 2014, [//echo24.cz/a/wZpRG/koncentrak-to-nebyl-popira-okamura-romsky-holocaust-v-letech](http://echo24.cz/a/wZpRG/koncentrak-to-nebyl-popira-okamura-romsky-holocaust-v-letech).

<sup>101</sup> Czech Television, “Tábor v Letech vyvolává emoce už dlouho. Zlehčovali jej Babiš, Ransdorf či Klaus”.

narrative thus reiterates the racism of the Nazi policies. Claiming that the Roma were responsible for their fate because they were “asocial” is inherently racist and in accordance with the Nazi ideology. During the war, Roma and Sinti with different social statuses and ways of life were persecuted all simply for being Roma.<sup>102</sup> The racist claim accusing Roma of being “asocial” was present also in the post-war Western Germany where Sinti and Roma survivors were denied compensations for their persecution by the Nazis.<sup>103</sup> Instead of recognizing Roma as victims of the Nazis and their racial policies and providing compensations, West-German judges had been ruling in favour of the perpetrators, including Robert Ritter and Eva Justin from the Nazi Institute of Racial Hygiene, until the 1980s.<sup>104</sup>

A further misrepresentation of the history came with comparing Lety to other concentration camps and arguing that Lety was not like them.<sup>105</sup> Lety concentration camp was not different to other concentration camps throughout the Nazi-occupied territories except for the fact that the prisoners were guarded and tortured by the Czech Protectorate gendarmes. It did not have any gas chambers, but neither did Buchenwald (the concentration camp, which Klaus mentioned as representing the horrors of World War Two). And in all the concentration camps, prisoners were used for slave labour. In Auschwitz, those who were not able to work, were sent to death. As in other concentration camps, Roma at Lety perished because of diseases (such as typhus), malnutrition, exhaustions, beatings, and torture. Those who survived were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. One of the Roma Holocaust survivors, who was incarcerated in both Lety and Auschwitz, recalls that at Lety it was worse for her, because she was more exposed there and the fact that they were tortured by Czech guards was devastating for her.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Donert, *The Rights of the Roma*, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Günter Saathoff, Preface to Julia Von dem Knesebeck, *The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2011), x.

<sup>104</sup> Weiss-Wendt, *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> See the statement by Václav Klaus quoted above.

<sup>106</sup> Čeněk Růžicka speaking about his mother in his testimony for the Memory of Nations oral history archive, Hradec Králové, 25. 2. 2020, <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/ruzicka-cenek-1946>.

It is worrying that there is a sense of unseriousness in the statements of Czech politicians about Lety. Klaus later realized that he was misrepresenting the history, and as a gesture of apology he took patronage over one exhibition about Lety in Prague organized by the Committee for the Compensation of Victims of the Roma Holocaust,<sup>107</sup> but it was his original statement that gained more public attention and the narrative of Lety as “only a labour camp” became generally widespread,<sup>108</sup> so that the Roma activists and historians constantly needed to prove during the debates that what happened at Lety was part of a genocide.

The second theme present in the debates, saying that Roma are not worthy of investing so much money into the demolition of a functioning company and construction of a memorial, is related to the same goals mentioned above – gaining popular support and encouraging ongoing discrimination of Roma. In the 1990s, when the debate started, the majority of locals from Lety were especially afraid of the closure of the pig farm and considered it as “sheer nonsense.”<sup>109</sup> When the government decided in 1994 to build a small memorial near the pig farm, the then mayor of Lety said to journalists that he would understand it in the case of Lidice<sup>110</sup> or Auschwitz, but not in the case of Lety.<sup>111</sup> As the analysed narrative about Lety reveals, even today, there is this sense that what happened to the Roma during World War Two was lesser to the other crimes of Nazis, such as the Lidice massacre, for instance. Even today, the almost complete extermination of the Roma and Sinti is trivialized in the public.

Both themes within the narrative fulfil the function that Wang summarizes in *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict*<sup>112</sup> since they are instrumental in justifying the ongoing discrimination of Roma. Stepping out of the amnesia and public remembrance of the fate of the Roma and Sinti during World War Two would require admitting the share of responsibility of Czechs for the tragic

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> “LETY”, documentary film by František Bikár, Viola Tokárová, and Renata Berkyová, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Šídlo and Brabec, ‘Konečné řešení na česko-německý způsob’.

<sup>110</sup> Czech village which was completely destroyed by the Nazis in 1942 after the assassination of Heydrich. Men from Lidice were killed, and women transported to concentration camps.

<sup>111</sup> Šídlo and Brabec, ‘Konečné řešení na česko-německý způsob’.

<sup>112</sup> Wang, *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict*, 13.



fate of Roma during these events and to challenge the current racist stereotypes, but this is something these politicians refuse. It is both the personal anti-Roma prejudice of the political actors involved, and the instrumental misuse of the widespread anti-Roma sentiments in the society for political purposes, that play a role in this public trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma. The fact that the struggle of Romani activists for the closure of the pig farm took so long was clearly showing that holding racist stereotypes against Roma was a standard attitude even among the political elite in the Czech Republic. It is worrying that, after more than 70 years, Romani people constantly need to prove that they were persecuted by the Nazis for being Roma and to convince the public that their genocide needs to be recognized.

The persistent strong anti-Roma sentiments keep the Roma discriminated or excluded socially, economically, and also mnemonically. The “mnemonic battle”<sup>113</sup> over Lety was not only about pushing a certain interpretation of the past, but also about omitting certain historical events from the dominant memory narrative. These politicians made clear in their statements that the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti from Bohemia and Moravia is not something that ought to be remembered. They portray the Roma Holocaust as dubious and not worthy of memorials. Rejecting the closure of the pig farm and the construction of a new memorial to the memory of the Roma and Sinti was a gesture indicating that Roma had no place in the dominant national narrative about World War Two.

In 2017, the Czech government made the decision to purchase the farm, enable its liquidation, and make the site available for the construction of the new memorial.<sup>114</sup> Since 2018, the site is maintained by the Museum of Romani Culture and the demolition of the farm’s premises should begin soon. The new memorial is expected to open in 2023.<sup>115</sup> As many Romani activists

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<sup>113</sup> Zerubavel, ‘Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past’, 195.

<sup>114</sup> Museum of Romani Culture, ‘History | Lety Memorial’, Memorial Lety u Písku, accessed 10 December 2020, <https://letypamatnik.cz/en/historie/>.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

stated, the fact that the Czech governments were not willing to close the farm for so long was very emblematic for the general approach of the Czech state and society towards Romani people.

Čeněk Růžička, who comes from a family of the Roma Holocaust survivors and who established the Committee for the compensation of the Romani Holocaust in the Czech Republic, stated: “To have a pig farm on the site of a concentration camp is a symbol of how Roma are treated in the Czech Republic.”<sup>116</sup> Another Romani activist Josef Miker stated: “Our government promises us year after year that the pig farm will be removed and that a dignified monument will be built on the site where the concentration camp for Roma was located. And there is still nothing, you can see that the pig farm still stands here and this shows what respect the Czech government and the majority society have for their Romani fellow citizens.”<sup>117</sup> Even though Čeněk Růžička’s family, including his mother, was imprisoned and tortured at Lety, he learned about the history of the camp only in the 1990s, thanks to the work of the German journalist, Markus Pape, because his mother had never spoken about it before.<sup>118</sup> Since then, he started his twenty-year long struggle for the closure of the pig farm and played an important role in the process.

Besides Čeněk Růžička, Josef Miker together with Miroslav Brož and their Romani grassroots organization Konexe were successful in gaining international attention to the case of Lety. Over the years, they organized several blockades at the Lety farm to demand its closure and they connected with other Romani organizations around Europe to raise awareness about Lety and mobilize support for their case abroad.<sup>119</sup> In 2014, Konexe, together with the European Grassroot Antiracist Movement (EGAM), organized the first international commemoration day at Lety which

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<sup>116</sup> Andrew Connelly, ‘Pig Farm Takes Centre Stage in Battle for Roma History’, accessed 13 December 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/3/31/pig-farm-takes-centre-stage-in-battle-for-roma-history>.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Odstraňte vepřín v Letech! žádali aktivisté u bývalého koncentráku pro Romy’ [‘Remove the pig farm at Lety!’ demanded activists], TÝDEN.cz, 24 June 2017, accessed 10 December 2020, [https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/odstrante-veprin-v-letech-zadali-aktiviste-u-byvaleho-koncentraku-pro-romy\\_435634.html](https://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/domaci/odstrante-veprin-v-letech-zadali-aktiviste-u-byvaleho-koncentraku-pro-romy_435634.html).

<sup>118</sup> Růžička, testimony for the Memory of Nations oral history archive, Hradec Králové, 25. 2. 2020.

<sup>119</sup> Miroslav Brož, ‘Konexe v Letech u Písku, Aneb Proč Se Bude Bourat Prasečák’ [Konexe at Lety u Písku: Why the pig farm will be demolished], romea.cz, accessed 13 December 2020, <http://www.romea.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/miroslav-broz-konexe-v-letech-u-pisku-aneb-proc-se-bude-bourat-prasecak>.

was attended by Romani activists from 14 European countries.<sup>120</sup> Besides raising awareness of the issue through the transnational NGO networks, Konexe demanded action from the European Union.<sup>121</sup> One of the key moments of the struggle came in 2015 when Konexe and EGAM started the international campaign Dignity for Lety and its manifesto was signed by 83 Members of the European Parliament from 20 EU countries.<sup>122</sup> The largest international reverent act at Lety u Písku in 2017 was attended by almost 300 people from 15 countries and on that occasion, the chairman of EGAM Benjamin Abtan stated that “Lety is the international symbol for the disrespect towards the victims of the Holocaust” and that “Lety is the shame of the Czech Republic.”<sup>123</sup>

The struggle of Romani activists fits well into the conceptualization of human rights change by Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, who show with their ‘spiral model’ how transnational advocacy networks help to create pressure on the norm-violating government both from below by supporting grassroots organizations and from above by “shaming” the government and raising the awareness of the issue on the international level.<sup>124</sup> Růžička also mentioned that the ‘shaming’ of the Czech governments on the international level played a crucial role for the final closure of the pig farm. Since the early 2000s, some Members of the European Parliament organized around Růžička and supported the calls of Romani activists to close the pig farm.<sup>125</sup> Moreover every year during the reverent acts at Lety, ambassadors from different countries gave their speeches there calling on the Czech government to finally close the farm.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Miroslav Brož, “Lety Pig Farm Case” in Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Acuña C., and Trojański, *Education for Remembrance of the Roma Genocide*, 184.

<sup>121</sup> Open Letter from the Konexe civic association to the citizens and institutions of Europe, 10 May 2014, Konexe, accessed 10. 12. 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/konexe-english/open-letter-from-the-konexe-civic-association-to-the-citizens-and-institutions-o/469182099892176>.

<sup>122</sup> ‘Manifesto “Dignity for Lety”’, *EGAM - European Grassroots Antiracist Movement*, 5 October 2015, accessed 10. 12. 2020, <http://www.egam.eu/manifesto-dignity-for-lety/>.

<sup>123</sup> Romea.cz, ‘Reverent act at Lety u Písku’, 24.6.2017, ‘ZÁZNAM: Pietní Shromáždění v Místě Bývalého Koncentračního Tábora v Letech u Písku’, Romea.cz, accessed 14 December 2020, <http://www.romea.cz/cz/zpravodajstvi/domaci/primy-prenos-pietni-shromazdeni-v-miste-byvaleho-koncentracniho-ta-bora-v-letech-u-pisku>.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Risse and Kathryn Sikkink, “The socialization of international human rights norms into domestic practices: introduction” in Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge University Press, 1999): 1-39.

<sup>125</sup> Huub van Baar, *The European Roma: Minority Representation, Memory, and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality* (Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam, 2011): 287.

<sup>126</sup> Růžička, testimony for the Memory of Nations oral history archive, Hradec Králové, 25. 2. 2020.

Nowadays, the site of the former concentration camp at Lety is finally without pigs waiting for its new memorial and museum. The Museum of Romani Culture is working on the educational programs and exhibition that will be part of the memorial to raise the awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in the Czech Republic. For many years, Konexe were saying that “If we see the pig farm at Lety as a symbol of Czech Anti-Gypsyism, it is then the biggest memorial in the Czech Republic.”<sup>127</sup> Now, the way is open for Lety to represent “the fight for memory which was to be replaced”<sup>128</sup> from the Romani perspective and to become a “place where memory becomes an active part of society and its discourse,”<sup>129</sup> or what Pierre Nora called *lieu de mémoire*, the place “where memory crystallizes”.<sup>130</sup> The construction of a new memorial represents an important step towards the mnemonic inclusion of Romani people or as Huub van Baar would say, an important step on the “way out of amnesia.”<sup>131</sup> There are many hopes that the new memorial will be influential in reaching especially the young generation. As Růžička formulated in relation to the generation of students and pupils: “[My wish is] that they put the prejudices that they have, for instance, from their parents, behind them and start behaving differently. This is what I wish. And the place [at Lety] has a certain persuasive ability to help them do so.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Brož, “Lety Pig Farm Case”, 186.

<sup>128</sup> Horváthová et al., *Lety*, 11.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>130</sup> Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*’, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

<sup>131</sup> van Baar, “The Way Out of Amnesia?”

<sup>132</sup> Čeněk Růžička for Romea.cz, debate after the screening of the LETY documentary, 13. 5. 2021.

### 3 History teaching: Omission from the textbooks and the historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti among students

*“I have never heard about the Holocaust of the Roma.”*

*“I know that the Romani people were also concentrated in camps during the Second World War, but in the school, I heard it almost only incidentally, so I know nothing about it, which I regret because I would like to know it.”*

- Students' responses to the questionnaire

Schools, with their state-designed national history curricula, play a significant role in shaping the political memory. Stearn, Seixas, and Wineburg argue that with the universal, compulsory schooling, where everyone is “exposed to school accounts of the past” during the formative years, schools can have more impact on the public memory than museums and monuments do.<sup>133</sup> According to these authors, schools can thus be considered as “the major site for the construction of collective memory in contemporary society.”<sup>134</sup> If we understand the nation as an ‘imagined community’,<sup>135</sup> history teaching can play an important role in the constant re-imagining necessary for maintaining the national sense<sup>136</sup> and in contributing to the everyday banal nationalism.<sup>137</sup> Seixas writes that history education shapes the group identity and the understanding of “who is marginalized and who is excluded from the group.”<sup>138</sup>

History teaching is unavoidably related to current political and social purposes,<sup>139</sup> values, and narratives. Debates and disputes about the ways how to teach history and tell the past are not uncommon and history education can become part of “cultural wars”<sup>140</sup> or “war of textbooks”.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg, *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, 2.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>135</sup> This concept developed by Benedict Anderson in Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016).

<sup>136</sup> Catherine Doherty, “Re-imagining and re-imagining the nation through the history curriculum” At “*Changing climates: Education for sustainable futures*”, the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Conference, 30 November – 4 December, 2008, Queensland University of Education, Brisbane.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 6-7. The concept of ‘banal nationalism’ comes from Michael S. Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2010).

<sup>138</sup> Peter Seixas, “Schweigen! Die Kinder! or Does Postmodern history have a place in the schools?” In: Stearns, Seixas, Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, 23.

<sup>139</sup> Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, 8.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>141</sup> Karina Korostelina, ‘War of Textbooks: History Education in Russia and Ukraine’, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2 (1 June 2010): 129–37.

History teaching can be less or more diverse and critical. It can reinforce nationalistic feelings or challenge them. It can pursue a narrow nationally centred narrative or, on the contrary, emphasize diversity and equal human rights. It always depends on the narrative of the past that is included in the textbooks and national curricula. And what narrative prevails is revealing about the current values in the society. For these reasons, history teaching is an important ‘vector of memory’.

A recent study by the Council of Europe shows that Romani history remains largely omitted from history curricula.<sup>142</sup> The marginalization of Roma in the textbooks and curricula is a Europe-wide issue with some positive exceptions especially from Germany. The study shows that “when Roma are mentioned in textbooks, the text is mainly placed in textboxes and margins”<sup>143</sup> and “there is nearly no language representing Roma as an integral part of the respective national society.”<sup>144</sup> The study concludes that “Roma voices are marginalised, if not ignored, and [...] only a few textbooks include sources from Roma authors or stories from Roma witnesses. Roma are seldom portrayed within the context of a diverse society.”<sup>145</sup> The Czech Republic is one of the European countries whose history curricula does not mention Roma at all<sup>146</sup> and mentions of Roma were found in only 30% of textbooks analysed there.<sup>147</sup>

Usually, the only mention about Romani people in Czech history textbooks is in relation to their persecution during the Second World War. But this mention usually does not exceed the length of one sentence stating that besides Jews, Roma, and homosexuals were also persecuted by the Nazis.<sup>148</sup> This mention is highly insufficient given the fact that hundreds of thousands of Roma and Sinti were murdered in concentration camps and by *Einsatzgruppen* during the Second World War, and that in some countries, such as today’s Czech Republic, 90% of their pre-war Roma

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<sup>142</sup> Council of Europe, “The Representation of Roma in European Curricula and Textbooks”, a joint report commissioned by the Council of Europe to the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in partnership with the Roma Education Fund 2020, <https://repository.gei.de/handle/11428/306>.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>148</sup> Michal Schuster, ‘Dějiny Romů ve výuce dějepisu [History of Roma in history teaching]’, paper presented during the 10th congress of Czech historians, University of Ostrava, September 2011.

population was exterminated. Moreover, Romani perspective, in the form of personal testimonies and examples of resistance, is completely missing.

Earlier, the Council of Europe stated that omission of historical facts is also a misuse of history and emphasized that history teaching should do everything possible to prevent recurrence or denial of the Holocaust, genocides, crimes against humanity, and other violations of fundamental human rights.<sup>149</sup> The recognition of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti and the historical awareness of these crimes is considered as one of the key steps for combating antigypsyism. The Czech Republic is one of the countries where antigypsyism is especially high,<sup>150</sup> and yet little effort has been done here by the authorities to redress this through more inclusive educational curricula and textbooks. Recently, the Ministry of Education entered into a discussion with the textbooks' publishers and experts from the Romani community to talk about addressing the problems found in the report by the Council of Europe.<sup>151</sup> However, it yet remains to be seen if this step will lead to real results. As Jana Horváthová from the Museum of Romani Culture says, the Museum of Romani Culture is supposed to be part of the textbooks' authorization process for more than 10 years, but in the past five years they never received a single textbook to evaluate its content relating to Romani people.<sup>152</sup>

There are many projects nowadays that aim to enhance the historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti among educators, students, and the public throughout Europe,<sup>153</sup> and many materials, including testimonies of the survivors and stories of resistance, are accessible for educators, but all these projects remain extra-curricular (voluntary) and dependent on the pro-

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<sup>149</sup> Council of Europe, 'Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on History Teaching in Twenty-First-Century Europe', Rec(2001)15 (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 6 August 2002), [https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result\\_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680909e91](https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680909e91).

<sup>150</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *A Persisting Concern*, 20.

<sup>151</sup> Josef Mačí, „Školní učebnice se změní. Stereotypyzují Romy.“ [The history textbooks will change. They portray the Roma stereotypically], *Seznam Zprávy*, 4 May 2021, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/skolni-ucebnice-se-zmeni-stereotypizuji-romy-152775> (accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>152</sup> Jana Horváthová quoted in Mačí, „Školní učebnice se změní. Stereotypyzují Romy.“.

<sup>153</sup> Karen Polak et al., 'Report on IOE and IHRA Committee on the Genocide of the Roma Expert Meeting and Conference on the Genocide of the Roma 10 – 11 May 2014' (London: Institute of Education, University of London, May 2014), 2, <https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Report-on-the-Conference-on-the-genocide-of-the-Roma.-IOEIHRA-London-May-2014.pdf>.

active engagement of individual teachers. Even though, there has been a lot of effort to redress the marginalization, denial, or trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma, the impact on students is not yet really evident.

My findings from the questionnaire show that students in the Czech Republic have very low historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti. Only half (55%) of the 385 students participating in the survey said that they heard about the Roma Holocaust, but the majority also wrote that they know almost nothing about it and when they recalled hearing about it in the school, they said that it was mentioned only briefly and peripherally. More than 80% of students did not know any of the sites of the former concentration camps for Roma and Sinti; 95% of students responded they have never heard any personal testimony of a Roma Holocaust survivor. Only one student recalled the name 'Růžička' because as he explained, he participated in a lecture by Čeněk Růžička about the Holocaust and the history of Lety. No one knew the name of Josef Serinek, the Roma partisan who escaped from Lety and fought against the Nazis, which also indicates that the stories of Romani resistance remain unknown among students. More than 80% of students also indicated they did not learn about Romani history in school.

"I have never heard about the Holocaust of the Roma," "This is the first time I hear about the 'Holocaust of the Roma'," "There is not much talked about it," "I know nothing about it" - these were the most common responses from the students. The answers clearly show that in education, there is much more to be done to enhance awareness of the Roma Holocaust. This resonates with the recent ERIAC public discussion among Ethel Brooks, Anna Míšková from the Museum of Romani Culture, and Emran Elmazi from the Centre for Sinti and Roma in Heidelberg, where all the scholars agreed that transmitting the awareness and the knowledge of Romani experiences to the non-Roma is still a work in progress.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Subsequent discussion to the lecture by Ethel Brooks, "The Roma Holocaust and the history of Roma Resistance" at Barvalipe Roma Online University, European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 6 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/EuropeanRomaInstituteERIAC/videos/705687573385932> (accessed 25 May 2021).



A great majority of students (more than 80%) indicated they consider it important to include Romani history into the curricula. Many students thought that the widespread prejudices were the reason behind the lack of attention to Romani history (e.g., “Because of the stigma, we do not learn about it.”) Majority of students stated that they would like to learn more, and one often mentioned reason for it was also that they wanted to challenge the widespread negative prejudices that they carry or encounter. Here are some of the students’ responses: “I do not know anything about Romani history, so I think that it should be included in the curricula. Maybe it would help, so that Romani people would not feel so ignored and there would be more respect towards them from people who are rude and arrogant to them and are full of prejudices.” “It is a part of our history. [...] I think it would help with creating greater cohesion.” “Majority of Czechs perceive Romani people negatively, but they do not realize what they had to, and have to still, endure.” “Romani people are part of the broader European history, and they should have their rightful place in it.” “Because this is the first time I hear about it, someone probably does something wrong.” The student who participated in the lecture by Čeněk Růžička, the Roma Holocaust survivor, wrote that “if the history would be known more by the public, it would help create greater understanding.” Another student’s comment also resonated with Růžička’s wish mentioned above as he or she wrote: “Among the older generations, there remains racism that should not be transmitted to the new generations.” These responses show that there certainly is a will and interest among students to learn more about Romani history and to challenge the antigypsyism and prejudices that are so widespread in the Czech Republic.

Some responses revealed that the instances of denial or trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma entered the consciousness of individual students. One of the students mentioned “labour camp” for Roma near Lety. Another student indicated as a source of his knowledge about the subject a speech by Tomio Okamura, one of the xenophobic politicians who was denying the existence of the Lety concentration camp. This student called Okamura “the best politician in the Czech Republic”. This response is a warning sign that in case that history teaching does not include

the Holocaust of the Roma and Romani history into its curricula, the space can be taken by xenophobic politicians who deny or trivialize the Roma Holocaust.

One of the students openly endorsed the Holocaust of the Roma as he or she wrote: “Where I live, they behave stereotypically, so this is why, unfortunately, I think that it would be better in the world if Hitler completed their extermination.” Another student commented: “I do not want it to sound racist, but I just don’t agree with the mixing of cultures. Moreover, they are parasites, and I haven’t met any single normal person among them.” And another student said: “I am not one of those who would support the cries of all kinds of minorities and the struggle for their rights, and especially not of the Gypsies (cikánů). [...] I do not approve of any genocide, but this one is not exactly bothering me the most.”

Students who expressed the worst racist attitudes and their personal animosity towards Roma also indicated that they have no interest in learning about Romani history. This indeed poses a great challenge to history teachers. To teach about the history of Romani people and to know how to address the present-day anti-Roma sentiments expressed by students are not the same tasks,<sup>155</sup> but it is certainly a challenge that needs to be dealt with.

Students were also asked what they knew about Romani people and these responses revealed that in a great majority of cases the negative prejudices were the baseline. The negative prejudices were mentioned in most of the students’ responses. In some cases, the students mentioned they do not completely agree with the prejudices, but it was still the main thing they “knew” about Roma. As one student wrote: “I know nothing about Romani history or culture. The only thing I have ever noticed were racist slurs and prejudices.” In many cases, the students explicitly agreed with the harmful prejudices and the racism against Roma and in their responses, there were these recurring comments: “We call them Gypsies (cikáni),” or “They don’t work; they live on our welfare and steal.” This only shows how important it is to have a more inclusive

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<sup>155</sup> Karen Polak, “Teaching the Roma Genocide. “Society Never Regarded Me as an Individual”, in *Education for Remembrance of the Roma Genocide: Scholarship, Commemoration and the Role of Youth*, ed. Anna Mirga-Kruszelnicka, Esteban Acuña C., and Piotr Trojański (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron - Filip Lohner, 2015), 162.

education. If students would learn more about Romani history and culture, they would be able to think about something else than the negative stereotypes. But because Romani experiences and perspectives are missing within history teaching, the only thing most of the students “know” are racist prejudices that they hear all around them.

As discussed above, history teaching can be less or more inclusive, diverse, and critical in its curricula and the responses from students reveal that the way education stands now in Czech schools is rather Czech-centric helping with creating the sense of nationhood. By ‘telling the common past’, history education can create boundaries between different identities<sup>156</sup> and exclude or marginalize certain histories, while promoting others. The national sense in relation to history was echoed in several responses from the students who did not understand the history of Romani people as part of the broader history that should be taught in schools but were mentioning learning “our”/ “Czech history”. These are some of the comments from students who indicated that they did not think Romani history should be part of history teaching in schools: “No one will learn about the history of a minority.” “Czechs learn Czech history.” “I think it is more important to know our history.” “It did not significantly influence the formation of our state as some other more important areas of history.”

The understanding of the history education among students is rather nationally centred and it points out the problem that history teaching should be much more critical, diverse, and inclusive in talking about other nations, groups, and minorities, to provide a broader picture of history than the narrow nationally centred one. As historian Jan Křen wrote: “The biggest part of our history is not nationalistically Czech. [...] Germans and Jews are an integral part of it, as well as Roma, who belong to it too, but about whom we also learn nothing from the Czech history teaching.”<sup>157</sup> Some of the students were aware of it and one of the students concluded: “In general, we should learn more about the minorities.”

<sup>156</sup> Peter Seixas, Introduction to Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 5–6.

<sup>157</sup> Jan Křen, *Bílá místa v našich dějinách?* (Praha: Lidové noviny, 1990), quoted in Ctibor Nečas, *Holocaust českých Romů*, 7.

## Conclusion

The marginalization of Roma takes place on several different levels. Roma face discrimination across Europe and their civil, political, and socio-economic rights are often violated. It should not be neglected that the marginalization also takes place in the form of exclusion from national narratives of the past. The memory and history of Roma and Romani experiences are often excluded from the dominant memory narratives. Moreover, instances of denial and trivialization of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti are not uncommon.

Drawing on the literature from the field of memory studies, I considered several “vectors of memory” to analyse the memory politics around the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in the Czech Republic. The first “vector” considered are narratives trivializing or denying the Holocaust of the Roma that emerged during the debates over the closure of the pig farm that was built on the site of the former concentration camp at Lety u Písku, a small village in the Czech Republic.

The pig farm at Lety was for many years one of the major symbols of the lack of recognition of the Roma Holocaust in Europe. For years, Romani activists advocated for the closure of the farm but encountered rejection from decision-makers and statements from politicians that trivialized or denied the existence of the concentration camp. Lety is a place to which clashing memory narratives relate. It is a place where “where memory crystallizes”.<sup>158</sup> The “mnemonic battle”<sup>159</sup> over Lety was revealing about the broader societal and power dynamics in the Czech Republic. Analysing the instances of denial and misrepresentations of history through the lenses of memory politics, I concluded that the instrumental misuse of history by the politicians is happening in order to take advantage of the widespread anti-Roma sentiments for political purposes, and justify the ongoing discrimination of Roma.

History teaching was the second “vector of memory” analysed because schools can be considered as one of the major sites where people can internalize the accounts of political collective

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<sup>158</sup> Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, 7.

<sup>159</sup> Zerubavel, ‘Social Memories: Steps to a Sociology of the Past’, 195.

memory. State-designed curricula and schools' accounts of the past can be perceived as an articulation of the national dominant memory narratives to which everyone is exposed during the years of compulsory education. The Czech Republic is one of the European countries that does not mention Roma in the history curricula at all despite the fact that the Czech Republic has a high number of citizens who identify as Roma and at the same time, it is one of the countries where antigypsyism is especially high. Roma history remains either completely omitted or mentioned only peripherally in the textbooks.

To complement the analysis of the top-down political memory and politics of memory around the Roma Holocaust, in the final part of the thesis, I shifted my attention to the bottom-up memory 'vector' by analysing how individuals, such as students, relate to this past and what is their historical awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti. Students have very low historical awareness of the Roma Holocaust. Only half of the students heard about it, but even then the students admitted that they know almost nothing. More than 80% of students indicated that they did not learn about Romani history in school and 95% of them have never heard a personal testimony of someone who survived the Roma Holocaust. More than 80% of students indicated that they consider it important to learn more about the Holocaust of the Roma and Romani history in schools and there was an often-mentioned perception that the reason behind the lack of attention is the widespread prejudice against Roma. While Romani history and experiences were unknown to students, the main thing that students "knew" about Roma were the negative stereotypes that are widespread in the Czech Republic. The findings make a case for the need to reconsider history education in schools and move towards a more inclusive, diverse, and critical history teaching in which Romani history would be an integral part of it.

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## **Annex: Questionnaire for high school students (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade) - (translated from Czech)**

PARTICIPATION IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE IS VOLUNTARY AND ANONYMOUS

Dear students,

thank you for participating in this questionnaire. The research focuses on the awareness of the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti among students of the last two grades of high school and your experience with learning about the subject. It is part of my master's thesis at Central European University. The whole questionnaire takes about 8-10 minutes. It is not an exam, and the results are fully anonymous, so, please, answer genuinely based on your personal experience.

Thank you very much for your help.

Kind regards,

Johana Černochová

**Name of the school:**

**Grade:**

1. Have you ever learned about the history of the Romani people?

YES ☐ NO ☐

2. Have you ever heard about the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti?

YES ☐ NO ☐

If yes, where did you hear about it:

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3. Do you know how many Czech and Moravian Roma were exterminated during the Second World War?:

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4. Do you think that there were any concentration camps for Roma on the territory of today's Czech Republic (the then the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia)?

YES ☐ NO ☐

5. Do you know some places of the former concentration camps for Roma and Sinti?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Please name the ones you know:

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6. Have you ever heard any personal testimonies of contemporary witnesses and Roma and Sinti Holocaust survivors?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you be interested in hearing such testimonies?

YES ☐ NO ☐ Other:

Explain why yes/no:

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7. Do you know any concrete names of contemporary witnesses or survivors?:

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8. Do you know any sites of memorials to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Is yes, write which ones do you know:

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Have you ever visited any of the memorials?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Would you be interested in visiting any of the memorials to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti?

YES ☐ NO ☐

9. Would you like to learn more about the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in school? Would you like to know more about the subject?

YES ☐ NO ☐

10. Do you think is important to learn about the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti and about the history of Roma in general?

YES ☐ NO ☐

Please explain why yes/no:

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11. Do you have any Roma friends or acquaintances?

YES ☐ NO ☐

12. What do you know about Romani people?:

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Space for your comments:

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**Thank you very much for filling up this questionnaire!**

If you have any questions about the questionnaire or about the research, you can contact me  
here: **[cernochova\\_johana@student.ceu.edu](mailto:cernochova_johana@student.ceu.edu)**