

“Unrestricted, unfettered discrimination” starts when people understand that the Romani people they interact with are members of the community they referred to as “Gypsies”

(Matache et al., 2020)

Roma In the Holocaust.

“The persecution of “Gypsies” which had lasted for centuries culminated in genocide under the Nazi regime. Defined as a “problem”, “asocials” and “racially inferior”, the Roma were arrested and murdered in the German Reich and in the German-occupied territories” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.1)

On December 16, 1942, Heinrich Himmler gave out the directive that all “Gypsies” still living in the “German Reich” were to be deported to Auschwitz. The “Auschwitz Decree” was the final revelation of a plan which had existed de facto since 1938 and had been partially carried out already, namely the complete extinction of “Gypsies” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.6).

“Himmler’s deportation order was directed against all “Gypsy half-breeds, Rom-Gypsies and Balkan Gypsies”, the “degree of half-breeding” being no longer of importance. The exception of a small group of “racially pure Gypsies”, who were to be used as “museum exhibits” in Himmler’s open-air museum, existed only on paper” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.6).



A Roma or Sinti girl imprisoned in Auschwitz. Pictures taken by the SS for their files (Wiener Holocaust Library Collections)

“In the so-called “Gypsy family camp” Auschwitz, more than 20,000 Roma, who had, in the vast majority come from “collecting camps” in Germany, Austria, Poland, Bohemia and Moravia, were perched together in the smallest of places. 32 wooden barracks, each of which should originally have been used for 52 horses, were used as accommodation. Up to 600 Roma were put in one such barrack. Accordingly, the sanitary circumstances were disastrous. Already after a few months hundreds of Roma had died from malnutrition, epidemics and forced labor” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.6).



Alsacian Romani women and children in the Rivesaltes military camp, c. 1941-1942
Credit: United States Memorial Museum, Courtesy of Friedel Bohny-Reiter

“Roma were used for the most difficult clay- and building work within the camp. The hunger epidemic “Noma” raged among the children. Additionally, the camp system was marked by internal power structures. Political internees were at the upper end, Jews and Roma at the lower end of the hierarchy. Stereotypes and prejudices were taken over by the camp community... The identifications set down by the SS made quick recognition possible. Roma wore a brown or black triangle, the inmate number preceded by a “Z” (for “Zigeuner”) was tattooed to the forearm” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.6).

“Of all the Auschwitz camps, the “Gypsy camp” had the highest mortality rate. 19,300 people lost their lives there; 5,600 were gassed, 13,700 died from hunger, illnesses, epidemics and medical experiments. The latter were used in order to prove the fateful influence of “race” and heredity” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.7).

“The imagination of the doctors charged with this task, foremost Josef Mengele, knew no bounds. Roma were injected with saline solutions and typhus bacillus, the doctors tried out color pigments and heart injections in order to examine the eyes of twins. Hereby, the doctors, members of the SS and the army acted from a sense of science widespread in the general population... Auschwitz is just one of many concentration camps in which the Roma were murdered, partially before and systematically after the “Auschwitz Decree”. In addition, the second component of the extinction policy was carried out, namely forced sterilization, both within the camps and in hospitals outside. Thousands of Roma, mostly women and girls, had to suffer this operation, often without anesthesia. Many died during the operation.” (Council of Europe, n.d., p.7)

“Murders of uncountable victims, at mass executions like the gas chambers, were not documented at all. Research has to rely on estimations; whatever their testimony, a number of at least 250,000 victims is considered highly probable” (Council of Europe, n.d., p. 8).

Stereotypes about Roma

“Roma are freedom loving, easy going, and carefree nomads, wearing colorful clothes and lots of golden jewelry. They are passionate dancers, gifted artisans, and great musicians. Their women are beautiful and seductive like Georges Bizet’s Carmen or Esmeralda from the ‘Hunchback of Notre Dame’. They tell fortune and can curse you if you do not give them any money. They are poor and beg. They do nothing to improve their own situation and steal geese and chickens. They prefer to live on welfare than to work. They have more children than they can feed and clothe. One day they will probably “out-baby” the majority population. Girls get married at a very early age, the men beat their wives and exploit their children. At night they dance around camp fires and sometimes they steal babies in order to sell them. They do not have a religion, are dirty, and a burden to society. They do not want to integrate and marginalize themselves. They are most happy when they are away from non-Roma. They do not want to be citizens of the country they live in and whenever they migrate, they ruin the reputation of the country that they have come from. They like to live close to trash dumps and their houses are very dirty. They are afraid of water, allergic to soap, and do not know how to use a water toilet. They are a source of disease. They do not know how to read and write, and somehow are not interested in learning it or in going to school. They must be mentally deficient. Maybe they are not even human beings. They live in huge family groups and do not mind to share one room with ten people. They are greedy and never satisfied. They are lazy and untrustworthy. They are genetically predestined to become thieves and drug dealers. And anyway, the term ‘Roma’ is just an invention and they are actually called Gypsies” (Gregor, 2013, p.186).

Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming



Is It ok to call Roma Gypsies?

In most languages, “gypsy” is considered insulting and is rejected by Roma organizations. “Roma” is the right word to use for all related groups, regardless of their country of origin. It became the accepted global term in 1971, when representatives of Roma communities adopted a flag, anthem and international day (8 April)-Amnesty International



Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming (photo by Katie Grote for the Exponent)

“A significant feature of social stereotypes is that they, as collective images in our head that have only a weak link with the observable reality, are extremely resistant to changes despite information that contradicts them” (Gregor, 2013, p. 189).



Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming

“The social stereotypes are implanted in our heads in the process of growing up in a specific society and in a specific social milieu together with the language that we learned at home, in school and in the social networks in which we participated”

(Gregor, 2013, p. 184).



Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming (From the NSU archives)

“Nowadays images about Roma and Travelers include several criminal stereotypes: they are regarded as beggars, thieves, swindlers, pickpockets, trespassers, rowdies, dirty, immoral, con-man, trickster. In addition, they are considered unsocial, social misfits, dishonest, lazy, workshy, layouts and parasitic deviants. Based on the stereotype that Roma children are unteachable, they are often refused admission and are sent to schools meant for mentally disabled. Many people see Roma as riff-raffs (social marginals) living on the edge of town, as idlers ill-disciplined and in general they have been deemed lawless, depraved and irreligious. The same stereotypes about Roma find expression in the terms employed in many languages and their popular slangs” (Gregor, 2013, p p.185).

Romani Realities In America

“Historically, some laws have forbidden Romani people from staying in one place, thus barring regular school attendance. Additional factors known to affect school attendance are stigma and the fear of interactions with the non-Romani people with racist attitudes towards Romani culture and traditions” (Matache et al., 2020).

“Legal provisions also ensured their marginalization. Some city and state statutes imposed disproportionate regulatory burdens on Romani people, requiring them to be in possession of a license as a precondition for legal residence. Even today, law enforcement warns the public about “gypsy scams.” Policing of Romani people in the United States continues to be discriminatory, and Romani people remain the only minority to have active police task forces that explicitly target their supposed crimes” (Matache et al., 2020)

“The majority of Americans are not aware much of the time that this is a distinct ethnic-group called ‘Gypsies’ or ‘Roma’. However, when non-Roma consider Romani Americans as “a lifestyle” rather than a group of people, that belief can lead to ignorance and biases that damage the social, economic, and political rights of Romani people; this phenomenon also points to risks involved for those who do identify themselves as Romani people” (Matache et al., 2020)



Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming (From the NSU archives)

Romani in American Education Systems

“In the United States, expert Ethel Brooks, a renowned Romani American scholar, told us that her mother and her mother’s generation were not allowed to go to school: “...not by her parents but by the larger community she had grown up in. They were thrown out

because they were ‘Gypsies.’ So,” she continued, “my mother never had access—that generation didn’t have the kind of access to education that perhaps subsequent generations did.” Therefore, some Romani families, and communities, feared the institution of school as a repository for unceasing oppression and rejection. This background is crucial to contemporary understanding of educational disadvantage among Romani Americans” (Matache et al., 2020, p. 36).

Although the people around them in higher education know little about them, some Romani Americans have encountered “a lot of discrimination in education, in school, through my life, personally.” One said her worst experience was attending Berklee College of Music, where “dealing with being a Roma was terrible.” As Jud Nirenberg concluded, “maybe, in the future, some schools would take proactive measures to have Roma on campuses, to think about us when they think about diversity” (Matache et al., 2020, p. 44).



Example of NSU’s tradition of dressing in stereotypical Romani costumes for homecoming (From the NSU archives)

The portrayal of Romani people on American television, by Hollywood, and in other media, often includes images of itinerancy, wandering, and tents. Though these images reflect important elements of some Romani groups’ history, the majority of Romani people globally now live settled lives, including in North America. In the United States, specifically, as expert Petra Gelbart points out, various state laws simply did not allow “Gypsies”: “That certainly affected anybody who was trying to have any sort of semi-itinerant existence, or may have possibly created more itinerant existences than there would have been if they were allowed to settle.” These negative images still affect Romani Americans who live in mobile homes” (Matache et al., 2020)

According to expert Ethel Brooks, police task forces that specialized in “Gypsy crime” seem to have been “established across the country,” even though their legality is questionable: Law enforcement officers that focus on the people they call ‘Gypsies’ or Gypsy crime are in violation of the constitutional protection afforded Romani Americans or ‘Gypsies’ who are shielded as a group from this kind of discrimination under the terms of the 1964 Civil Rights Act” (Matache et al., 2020, P.61)

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