

**The Address by Jana Horváthová,  
Director of the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno,  
On the Occasion of  
The Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity  
Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic,  
27th January 2022**

About the Holocaust and the Shoah, a lot has been said, maybe everything has already been said.

And yet, the limited possibilities of words are aptly expressed by the poet Vít Slíva in one of his verses: "...when she draws circles and puts apples in them: then she sees what is left to the fullness of words." There is much we don't know, and we will probably never find out what has been hidden. Namely, the individual experiences of personal tragedies, their depth, their universe. Because, as Primo Levi says:" ...we the survivors are not the true witnesses.... We are those who, through prevarication, skill, or luck, never touched bottom. Those who have, and who have seen the face of the Gorgon, did not return, or returned wordless. "

And Hannah Arendt said:" Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples – if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted. "Yes, Arendt is talking about the Jewish people, but we can imagine the weakest member of the nation in the same place - the Roma. Because their suffering during the Second World War was a real genocide, they lived through the Holocaust, but very often the public does not know or, more often, does not accept this. They do not know or do not want to know that their suffering began much earlier than World War II. **Eternal strangers. Those on the fringes of society. The scourge of the countryside. The gypsy trouble. The gypsy evil. Black Jews.** These and many other labels were given to the Roma and Sinti in pre-war society, and the headlines of the contemporary newspapers illustrate this well. Before the Second World War, the Roma, or at that time exclusively Gypsies, were perceived as foreigners; on the one hand, they were seen from the distorted romanticizing perspective as an exotic element that, in the form of often kitschy paintings and decorations, looked good on the walls of small-town flats; on the other hand, they were seen as an unpleasant nuisance that had to be tamed; tamed and controlled with the help of the gendarmerie. These tendencies were then incorporated into the **1927 Law on Wandering Gypsies**. It was already known at the time that the law contradicted the Constitution in several of its sections, but that also fit in with the relationship of society to this minority, which was very heterogeneous and did not form any kind of whole at the time, even though the majority perceived the gypsies as such. Indeed, it was precisely the absence of a definition of the term "gypsy", the deliberate freedom of its interpretation in the law, and the creation of space for the authorities and the police to take this interpretation into their own experienced hands that caused the law not only to punish so-

called "wandering gypsies", i.e. those who wandered from place to place, but also to punish both the Roma by origin, regardless of their way of life, and non-Roma living in a so-called "gypsy way". All of them were then obliged to carry the so-called Gypsy identity cards, while other citizens were allowed to have common civil identity cards.

The period before the Second World War was also not alien to so-called internment fantasies, and with the rise of Nazism, and thus racist policies in neighbouring Germany, a significant part of the public, especially in the pages of the agrarian press, called for a more radical solution than the aforementioned law and thumbprints in gypsy identification cards. In the archives we find proposals from officials or gendarmes to "set up concentration camps or penal labour units" for gypsies, then they would have a place to live and work and would not bother the surrounding area and decent fellow citizens; there are proposals to sterilise gypsy women, because with their children in their arms they harass the villagers with begging, and there are proposals to tattoo their names directly on their bodies. Many municipalities called for the establishment of camps for 'gypsies'. In the end, before this could be realised, the rest of our territory was occupied by the Nazis, and it soon became compulsory for all gypsies to settle permanently. The municipalities were supposed to create the space for them to settle, but they behaved exactly the opposite, making vigorous efforts to keep gypsies from taking root in their cadastre. Paradoxically, this Nazi-led **settlement effort** produced a curious finding. Already after a year's experience with the settlement of gypsies, the Protectorate newspaper headlines read: **No more wandering. For a year Gypsies have proven to be decent people. Good experience in the settling of gypsies. Gypsies are getting used to work, having managed to overcome even the initial difficulties and to instil in them the principles of hygiene, the rural teachers agree that most Gypsy children have not fallen any further behind other children of the same class. Gypsies learn how to work well. A gypsy is a saviour. Gypsies can also be useful. The first Gypsy lawyer in Moravia. Gypsies like to work. Gypsies will become peaceful settlers, wouldn't they? Satisfactory results so far with the settlement of Gypsies in the Czech West.**

The questions of how municipalities can contribute to changing the situation of the Roma made a lot of sense at the beginning of the Protectorate (they still do today), even though the time was not right to ask them. Even then, the publicist and special education teacher, František Štampach, wrote insightfully: "Gypsies do not hold the key to crime. **The key to crime** within the community **hold** its citizens and their homes. The gendarme and the policeman are not a menace where the moral community has matured to the basic civic virtues: self-respect, diligence, honesty. Gypsies among honest citizens must necessarily become honest. The key to crime lies with the municipalities that realize that Gypsies, when harnessed to honest work and service for the community, will grow into a positive component and their positive qualities, of which there are enough, will be deployed in the service of the whole."

As soon as the reorganization of the Protectorate authorities and their full connection to the Nazi occupation apparatus was completed at the beginning of the summer of 1942, all the anti-German regulations already applied in Germany were applied here. Based on the claims of Nazi so-called researchers in the field of eugenics, the so-called Gypsy race was labelled as hereditarily anti-social. Thus, on an explicitly racial basis, the so-called „Gypsies" and „Gypsy-mixed" people have been separated from the rest of society. In quick succession, some of them were interned in the so-called Gypsy camps at Lety u Písku and Hodonín u Kunštátu, where entire Roma families were forcibly sent. Seven months later, systematic mass transports of the entire Roma population from the Protectorate to Auschwitz-Birkenau began, to whose newly opened Gypsy camp entire families were sent. Of the 22,000 Roma and Sinti from all over Europe, more than 20,000 lost their lives there, and it was our Roma who were a significant group.

Heda Margoliová Kovályová, a writer and translator, imprisoned by the Nazis and persecuted by the Communists, has many insightful thoughts in her memoirs, including this one: 'When I was young, I knew things were passing by, but only today do I understand what that means. The real, pure past is what pulled at my mother's mind as she sang the national anthem "Where My Home Is" to her dying nephew. No one will ever know. **The past is what leaves no memory.**

The Museum of Romani Culture (MRC) is trying to ensure that the genocide of the Roma and Sinti, the so-called unknown or rather suppressed Holocaust, is not a thing of the past, but becomes part of our history. Currently, there is a new permanent exhibition in Hodonín u Kunštátu. The Roma and Sinti Holocaust Memorial in Moravia ends with another remarkable idea, in the words of Nicholas Winton: "There is a difference between passive and active good. The latter, in my opinion, means to dedicate time and energy to mitigate pain and suffering. It requires one actively seeks those that suffer and are in danger; not just to live an exemplary passive life without doing evil. "

The MRC is building a memorial in **Lety u Písku**, too. In our beautiful country, we have a large number of valuable cultural monuments, ancient castles and chateaus that are falling into decay and require financial injections. And yet, even in today's difficult times, let us not forget the almost **30-year struggle for Lety u Písku. In order for the memorial to actually be built on that site, we need your support, the Roma need our support!** I keep hearing from Romani ranks the call for acceptance by this society, I keep hearing an offended and sometimes defiant voice calling for an end to the disparagement. That voice is at least as old as the First Republic. The victims have become victims and are silent, but we speak for them, their fates cannot be a forgotten past, we want them to become part of our history, where they truly belong.

I want to end on a positive note; it is said to be characteristic that Holocaust survivors often speak of hope, of forgiveness - in short, they think positively. Ms Heda Margoliová Kovályová

was like that, too: "Evil is never absolute, there is always someone who survives, one survives by the will to live and the hope for a better life. As long as he breathes, he still has a future. I can still remember the worst moments, when everything around me was being cut down and when we saw the most terrible atrocities, but something moved inside me and I thought, "And yet I stay alive, yet there is life."

Jana Horváthová,

Museum of Romani Culture, 27 January 2022