

## **The Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz and the presence of Roma in Jewish concentration camps.**

Known as «**Familienzigeunerlager**», or more simply «**Zigeunerlager**», the section for Gypsies at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was established between the end of February and the beginning of March 1943, following the enforcement of a **decree**, signed on **29 January 1943** by Heinrich **Himmler**.

In the extensive topography of the camp, it occupied an area of the BIIe sector, isolated by an electrified barbed wire fence. As a whole, the “Gypsy camp” consisted of thirty blocks, or barracks, two areas used as kitchens and fourteen brick buildings containing latrines.

In the two years between 1943 and 1944, **20,982 people** were imprisoned, 10,094 of whom were males and 10,888 women and children. In addition to these, there were also 2,000 unregistered deportees. Most of them were of **German or Czech** origin. There were many fewer Polish, Hungarian, Belarus, Ukrainian, Baltic and French Roma.

For those who came from Eastern European countries, which had fallen under Nazi domination, the outlook was death by firing squad, a fate to which all Eastern Jewish communities were being subjected. While, initially, the directives for deportation of Gypsies to Auschwitz only applied to the territory of the Reich, this procedure was subsequently also extended to outlying countries.

As a whole, while around half of the 23,000 deportees spoke German, there were also approximately 4,500 Czech and Slovaks, more than 3,000 Poles, 351 Belgians and 246 Dutch. As was also the norm at the Birkenau Camp, prisoners were treated according to rigid hierarchical criteria which, while facilitating the survival of some, totally annihilated even the last glimmer of hope for others. At the Zigeunerlager, to which Roma of German nationality, the children of intermarriage (the «Zigeunermischling») were transported, living conditions for

those who had been enrolled in the German army and then discharged between 1941 and 1943, differed from those imposed in the rest of the camp. Furthermore, since Birkenau was the main extermination point of the entire group of Auschwitz camps (some forty in all), the initial conditions of the Gypsies imprisoned there were much better than that of other prisoners. Though forced into a sedentary lifestyle, underfed and kept behind electric fences they were, nonetheless, excluded from a series of practices including, first and foremost, the selections that ensured that those considered unfit to work were sent to the gas chambers. They were allowed to remain together as family units and retain their clothes and personal belongings. On entering the camp, unlike others, although their names were not chronicled in work registers, they were nevertheless subjected to humiliating registration and quarantine procedures (which, among other things, meant having all their body hair removed) and subsequently left to their own devices, without being assigned the chores and forced labour meted out to other prisoners. Despite not being granted any form of assistance, birth rates in this camp were fairly high, something almost non-existent in other parts of Auschwitz and the remaining camps. The first child born in the camp was registered on March 11 1943. His birth was followed by another 378 births.

Some of the Gypsy infant population imprisoned was subsequently used by **Joseph Mengele** in his hideous **medical experiments**. This first phase at Zigeunerlager-Birkenau was, however, destined to end due to the racist policies of the Third Reich towards Gypsies becoming increasingly stringent. In **July, 1943**, when **Himmler**, accompanied by Commandant Rudolph Höss, visited the camp, not only was he struck by scenes of overcrowding but also discovered that a rare, leprosy-like disease called Noma was sweeping through the camp, causing the death, above all, of many children. As a result, the SS commandant decided that the time had come to **eliminate its “residents”**.

At the end of May, 1944 , the gypsy camp began to be liquidated. Some surviving German Gypsies were transferred to other camps. On November 9, 1943, some hundreds of young people were moved to Natzweiler; on April 15, of the following year, 1,357 Roma were sent to Buchenwald and Ravensbrück; on May 24, it was the turn of another 226 individuals, who were sent to Flossenburg. The remainder were left in the Camp. **On August 2, 1944**, in the space of just one night, **2,897 people were sent to the gas chambers or crematorium V**. Once cleansed, the barracks were used for Jewish prisoners. A leper colony for women was set-up in section BIIe. From that time onwards, it was as if Zigeunerlager-Birkenau had been wiped off the map, even though news filtered through that at least 800 Gypsies had been sent back to Auschwitz from Buchenwald in October of the same year where, after five days, they were gassed.

While much more is known about what happened at Auschwitz thanks to detailed documentation, many Gypsies also perished at Buchenwald. In the territories of the **“General Gouvernement”** (i.e the districts of Warsaw, Radom, Krakow, Lublin and Galicia) **massacres** were repeated. Those Gypsies transported to the **ghettos of Polish cities** from the West, were subjected to the same treatment as the Jews. In short, they were sent to an extermination camp and killed right away. **Mass murder by firing squads** was also not an infrequent occurrence. In the **Baltic, Belarus and Ukrainian areas** occupied by the German army, regular troops were ordered to carry out cold-blooded extermination, in the name of **repressing vagrancy which was** considered a danger to social order and control of the area. The Commander of the Group of Central Armed Forces (the Wehrmacht was active in Russia with three separate groups of armed forces) **shot anyone unable to provide proof of a fixed abode**. Likewise, in Crimea, the Gypsies were systematically annihilated.

Crimes perpetrated by the German Allies mirrored the German offensive. In **Romania**, in 1941 and 1942, an independent program of elimination was carried out, especially in the recently acquired territories of Transnistria. In **Yugoslavia**,

occupied by German, Italian, Bulgarian and Hungarian troops, out of the 70,000 inhabitants of Romani gypsy origin, many perished, especially in Croatia, in the **Jasenovac** camp where as many as **600,000 people**, of various origins, lost their lives. The collaborationist **regime of Vichy France** interned 30,000 Gypsies who were subjected to forced labour and the same applied to those interned in **Slovakia**.

Claudio Vercelli