

From R. Hoess, "Commandant of Auschwitz. The autobiography of Rudolf Hoess", The World Publishing Company, Cleveland and New York, 1959, pp. 137-140.

The next largest contingents were the gypsies.

Long before the war gypsies were being rounded up and put into concentration camps as part of the campaign against asocials. One department of the Reich Criminal Police Office was solely concerned with the supervision of gypsies. Repeated searches were made in the gypsy encampments for persons who were not true gypsies, and these were sent to concentration camps as shirkers or asocials. In addition, the gypsy encampments were constantly being combed through for biological reasons. The Reichsführer SS wanted to insure that the two main gypsy stocks be preserved: I cannot recall their names. In his view they were the direct descendants of the original Indo-Germanic race, and had preserved their ways and customs more or less pure and intact. He now wished to have them all collected together for research purposes. They were to be precisely registered and preserved as a historic monument.

Later they were to be collected from all over Europe and allotted limited areas in which to dwell.

In 1937 and 1938 all itinerant gypsies were collected into so-called habitation camps near the larger towns to facilitate supervision.

In 1942, however, an order was given that all gypsy-type persons on German territory, including gypsy half-castes, were to be arrested and transported to Auschwitz, irrespective of sex or age. The only exceptions were those who had been officially recognized as pure-blooded members of the two main tribes. These were to be settled in the Odenburg district on the Neusiedler See. Those transported to Auschwitz were to be kept there for the rest of the war in a family camp.

But the regulations governing their arrest were not drawn up with sufficient precision. Various offices of the Criminal Police interpreted them in different ways, and as a result persons were arrested who could not possibly be regarded as belonging to the category that it was intended to intern.

Many men were arrested while on leave from the front, despite high decorations and several wounds, simply because their father or mother or grandfather had been a gypsy or a gypsy half-caste. Even a very senior Party member, whose gypsy grandfather had settled in Leipzig, was among them. He himself had a large business in Leipzig, and had been decorated more than once during the First World War. Another was a girl student who had been a leader in the Berlin League of German Girls. There were many more such cases. I made a report to the Reich Criminal Police Office. As a result the gypsy camp was constantly under examination and many releases took place. But these were scarcely noticeable, so great was the number of those who remained.

I cannot say how many gypsies, including half-castes, were in Auschwitz. I only know that they completely filled one section of the camp designed to hold 10,000. Conditions in Birkenau were utterly unsuitable for a family camp. Every prerequisite was lacking, even it was intended that the gypsies be kept there only for the duration of the war.

[...]

In July 1942 the Reichsführer SS visited the camp. I took him all over the gypsy camp. He made a most thorough inspection of everything, noting the overcrowded barrack huts, the unhygienic conditions, the crammed hospital building. He saw those who were sick with infectious diseases, and the children suffering from noma, which always made me shudder, since it reminded

me of leprosy and of the lepers I had seen in Palestine-their little bodies wasted away, with gaping holes in their cheeks big enough for a man to see through, a slow putrefaction of the living body.

He noted the mortality rate, which was relatively low in comparison with that of the camp as a whole. The child mortality rate, however, was extraordinarily high. I do not believe that many newborn babies survived more than a few weeks.

He saw it all, in detail, and as it really was-and he ordered me to destroy them. Those capable of work were first to be separated from the others, as with the Jews.

I pointed out to him that the personnel of the gypsy camp was not precisely what he had envisaged being sent to Auschwitz. He thereupon ordered that the Reich Criminal Police Office should carry out a sorting as quickly as possible. This in fact took two years. The gypsies capable of work were transferred to another camp. About 4,000 gypsies were left by August 1944, and these had to go into the gas chambers. Up to that moment, they were unaware of what was in store for them. They first realized what was happening when they made their way, barrack hut by barrack hut toward crematorium I. It was not easy to drive them into the gas chambers. I myself did not see it, but Schwarzhuber told me that it was more difficult than any previous mass destruction of Jews, and it was particularly hard on him, because he knew almost every one of them individually and had been on good terms with them. They were by their nature as trusting as children.