

## Gypsies in German Concentration Camps

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The first large-scale arrests of Gypsies\* destined for the concentration camps took place in 1938 during Aktion Arbeitsscheu (Operation Work-Shy). The ostensible purpose of this operation was to proceed against asocial elements who shirked regular work and were a burden on society. Especially targeted were vagrants, beggars, and pimps as well as Gypsies or Gypsy-like itinerants if they had not demonstrated a readiness to take up regular employment or had a criminal record. In fact, the main purpose of Operation Work-Shy appears to have been to provide slave labor for the new economic enterprises the SS had started to operate in or near the concentration camps of Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. As a result of the prevailing hostility toward Gypsies, often the mere fact that someone was without a steady place of residence or job resulted in his or her being labeled asocial or criminal and being subjected to custody in a concentration camp.<sup>1</sup>

The proportion of Gypsies among those arrested as asocials during Operation Work-Shy is not known. It is likely that between 1,500 and 2,000 Gypsies were taken into what was called “preventive custody.” Some of them were released within twelve months, but many others remained in the camps for additional years.<sup>2</sup> According to non-Gypsy inmates who survived, the treatment meted out to the “asocials,” whose camp uniform was marked with a black triangle, was brutal. In the hierarchy of the SS they ranked very low, only above Jews and homosexuals. Their stay in the camps was designed to “educate” them and make them into worthy members of what the Nazis called the “German people’s community.” Many did not survive this schooling, which was accompanied by systematic brutalities. The asocials had a mortality rate higher than that of the political or criminal inmates of the camps.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the new inmates were to be treated in such a way that they could serve as a labor force in the new SS economic enterprises. Then as later, the tension between these two functions of the concentration camps remained

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\* Some authors consider the words “Gypsy” or “Zigeuner” pejorative and substitute a new nomenclature. In fact there is nothing pejorative per se about the words Gypsy (derived from Egyptian) and *Zigeuner* (derived from *atzinganoi*, by which they were called in fourteenth-century Greece), and several Gypsy writers have insisted on the uninterrupted use of the traditional terms in order to maintain historical continuity and to express solidarity with those who were persecuted under this name. I agree with this view.

unresolved.

During the war years the Germans continued to send Gypsies to concentration camps for various perceived offenses; these behaviors, as those before the war, were grouped under the term “asocial conduct.” Others ended up there after completing a prison sentence. Hence the conclusion of the war found Gypsies in practically all the German concentration camps. Information about their fate is preserved from some of the larger camps, though we have only estimates of the number of Gypsies held there. In some cases no records are preserved; in others, Gypsies were registered as asocials rather than as Gypsies. In a few instances Gypsies were marked with a brown triangle, but most Gypsies were given the black triangle used for asocials.<sup>4</sup> Gypsy camp inmates were used for slave labor as well as for medical experiments.

In Dachau in 1944 German doctors conducted experiments on the potability of sea water, experiments for which the Luftwaffe requested forty healthy inmates. Arthur Nebe, head of the criminal police, proposed the use of “asocial *Zigeunermischlinge*” (Gypsies of mixed ancestry) and Himmler approved this suggestion even though *Reichsarzt* Ernst Robert von Grawitz expressed concern that the foreign racial characteristics of the Gypsies might invalidate the significance of the experiments for German men.<sup>5</sup> In early August, forty-four Gypsies in Buchenwald, recently transferred from Auschwitz, were selected for these experiments from a larger group of “volunteers.” According to Ignaz Bauer, a French inmate employed in the infirmary, the victims soon manifested symptoms of starvation and of dying of thirst. They rapidly lost weight and became increasingly agitated; those who started to scream and rave were tied to their beds. When they were close to death they were injected with a preparation that was supposed to prevent their demise. Only the fact that fellow inmates were able to smuggle in food and drink is said to have saved the lives of the persons involved in this torturous experiment.<sup>6</sup>

On November 12, 1943, a transport of 100 Gypsies arrived in the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp from Auschwitz. The prisoners were to be used in experiments conducted by Professor Eugen Haagen using a new typhus vaccine; however the “experimental material” turned out to be unsuitable. Eighteen of the Gypsies were dead upon arrival. Others, as Haagen complained bitterly to his superiors, were in such bad shape as to make them unusable. He therefore had the Gypsies sent back to Auschwitz and requested a second contingent of 100 Gypsies, twenty to forty years old and in good physical condition. This second transport reached Natzweiler on December 12.<sup>7</sup>

The experiment began in January 1944. The Gypsies were divided into two groups

of forty each. One group was vaccinated, the other was not, and both groups then were injected with the typhus bacillus. Dr. Poulson, a Norwegian inmate doctor, who was assigned to watch the development of symptoms among the human guinea pigs, described the conditions as “terrible.” Both groups were kept inadequately clothed in small rooms, without blankets and under horrible hygienic conditions. Some patients developed high temperatures but, miraculously, none died.<sup>8</sup> Sixteen of these same Gypsies were used in June 1944 in experiments run by Professor Otto Bickenbach of the Medical Faculty at the University of Strasbourg; these involved exposure to phosgene gas. Some of the victims received varying amounts of a protective injection; others were sent into a gas chamber unprotected. Four Gypsies in the control group died as a result of the experiment.<sup>9</sup>

In Ravensbrück, Gypsy women and girls as young as eight and ten became the subject of sterilization experiments conducted by Dr. Carl Clauberg in 1945. Dr. Zdonka Nedvedova-Nejedlá, a Czech inmate physician who worked in the camp hospital, testified after the war that most of these sterilizations were performed without anesthesia. “I nursed these children all night after the operation. All these girls were bleeding from the genital and were suffering such pain that I had to give them sedatives secretly.”<sup>10</sup> Dr. P.W. Solobjewa, a Soviet woman physician held captive in the camp, reported that about 100 Gypsy women were sterilized in February 1945, among them twelve-year-old girls. Two of these died two days after the operation.<sup>11</sup> For those who survived, she noted in a recollection authored in 1987, the physical and psychic damage incurred was inestimable.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the proclaimed intent to “reform” inmates and despite pressure from above to use them as a labor force, mortality in the camps, the result of systematic mistreatment, malnutrition, and disease, was always extremely high. Most inmates’ long-term survival depended on finding a special position such as work in the kitchen, in a repair shop, or as a clerk. Conditions were especially harsh in Mauthausen, where a large number of Gypsies were imprisoned. Inmates were given light clothing and wooden slippers and put to work in the stone quarry. This involved carrying heavy stones up 180 steps, known as the “staircase of death” because of the beatings, shootings, and fatal accidents to which the crowded mass of inmates were exposed there. The food was utterly inadequate for the heavy labor performed, and the prisoners suffered other tribulations that could lead to death. The SS guards amused themselves by kicking the prisoners’ caps from their heads. When the victims sought to retrieve their caps—it was forbidden to be without a cap—the guards opened fire and reported the deaths as “shot while trying to escape.” Punishment

for violating the camp rules, such as failing to make beds with the required precision, consisted of beatings or several hours of a cold shower. At first Gypsies were the worst treated inmates. Later Poles and Russians achieved this dubious distinction.<sup>13</sup>

Plans to expel all Gypsies from the Reich had been made as early as 1939, but had come to naught for various reasons.<sup>14</sup> Some 2,500 German and Austrian Gypsies had indeed been sent to the General Government and the Warthegau respectively, but most Gypsies continued to live in the places to which they had been assigned at the beginning of the war. On December 16, 1942, Himmler ordered the deportation of all *Zigeunermischlinge*, considered racially inferior and an asocial element, to a special Gypsy camp in Auschwitz.<sup>15</sup> This directive, known as the Auschwitz decree, led to the deportation of more than 13,000 German and Austrian Gypsies. So-called “racially pure” Gypsies and members of various other categories such as “socially adjusted Gypsies” were exempt from deportation; their number may have been as high as 15,000.<sup>16</sup>

On February 26, 1943, the first large transport of Gypsies arrived in Auschwitz. By the end of 1943, a total of 18,738 Gypsies had been registered by name. Eventually about 23,000 men, women, and children were incarcerated for varying lengths of time. Gypsies from Germany and Austria constituted by far the largest group of inmates. Gypsies from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia—the former western half of Czechoslovakia—numbered about 4,500. The remainder came from various other German-occupied countries in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike the Jews and other victims of the Auschwitz death camp, the arriving Gypsies were not subjected to selection—they were not chosen for either slave labor or the gas chambers. Instead they were put into the newly built Gypsy family camp, so called because entire families were allowed to stay together. In early April 1943, shortly after the establishment of the family camp, camp commandant Rudolf Höß requested a special ration for pregnant women, babies, and small children. This request was sent to Oswald Pohl, the head of the SS Economic-Administrative Main Office (*SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*), which administered the German camp system. Pohl thereupon inquired from Rudolf Brandt, Himmler’s personal secretary, what he should do. The administration of the Auschwitz camp, he wrote, had asked for this special ration on the grounds that “the *Reichsführer-SS* desires it because he has in mind something special for the Gypsies (*weil er etwas Besonderes mit den Zigeunern vorhabe*).” Pohl outlined various types of rations that could be provided and asked Brandt to let him know of Himmler’s wishes. On April 15, Brandt informed Pohl of Himmler’s decision. Pregnant Gypsy

women were to receive a ration equivalent to that provided for women from the East engaged in forced labor; children were to be given a ration midway between that for these women laborers and that provided to German children.<sup>18</sup> According to Höß, these special rations soon stopped “for the Food Ministry laid down that no special children’s food might be issued to the concentration camps.”<sup>19</sup>

As a result of inadequate nourishment and atrocious sanitary conditions in overcrowded barracks, diseases, especially typhus, spread rapidly. In addition to hunger and disease, the inmates suffered from deliberate cruelty at the hands of Kapos and SS guards. Gypsy children and women were also used and died in medical experiments. Still, on the scale of misery that characterized life in the death factory of Auschwitz, the Gypsy family camp did not represent the worst that was possible, and often was the envy of other Auschwitz inmates.<sup>20</sup> The very fact that families were able to stay together helped sustain a measure of morale.

Between April and July 1944 about 3,500 Gypsies considered fit to work were transferred to various concentration camps in Germany. On August 2, the remaining 2,898 inmates—most of them sick, older men, women, and children—were gassed. Strong circumstantial evidence suggests that the decision to kill the Gypsies deemed unable to work was made by Höß, who in May had resumed command of Auschwitz with the special mission to prepare facilities for the murder of the Hungarian Jews. The first transport of Hungarian Jews arrived in Auschwitz on May 16, and by May 24 more than 100,000 Jews had been gassed. Yet the capacity of the gas chambers and crematoria soon proved insufficient for this huge influx, and temporary housing had to be found for those who could not be killed immediately. It appears that the Gypsy camp was liquidated in order to make room for these Hungarian Jews. That Hungarian Jews were housed in the former Gypsy camp is confirmed by several witnesses.<sup>21</sup>

About 23,000 Gypsies, defined as asocial *Mischlinge*, had been put into the family camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, apparently without much forethought about their ultimate fate. Of this total, more than 5,600 were killed in the gas chambers, and about 3,500 were moved to other camps. That leaves approximately 14,000 who died in the Gypsy camp from disease, medical experiments, or maltreatment, or who were murdered by guards. Altogether then, at least eighty-five percent of the Gypsies sent to Auschwitz died there as a result of their incarceration.<sup>22</sup> And yet despite this extremely high rate of mortality, confinement in the Auschwitz Gypsy family camp was not tantamount to a sentence of death nor was it meant to be such a sentence. The purpose of sending the Gypsies to

Auschwitz was to rid society of their presence, not to kill them. If a program of annihilation had been in effect, it would have made little sense to wait more than a year to murder them. Why provide special rations, even for a short while, to pregnant women and children? Keeping the Gypsies alive for seventeen months cost precious and scarce wartime resources as well as manpower. Deportation to Auschwitz was not part of a plan to annihilate all Gypsies; instead it probably represented the lowest common denominator among the notions of various Nazi officials concerned with Gypsy policy. Responding in part to steadily increasing hostility toward the Gypsies among all parts of the population, these officials had gradually adopted more radical views and had come to agree on taking decisive measures in confronting the “Gypsy problem.”

Höb has written that the Gypsies were to be kept in Auschwitz until the end of the war and then were to be released,<sup>23</sup> and such a scenario is not inconceivable. We know that some of those involved with making Gypsy policy had contemplated putting the Gypsies into areas of the East not needed for German settlers. In 1942, when the deportation to Auschwitz was decided upon, a German victory in the East and the consequent availability of vast new territories still seemed a real possibility. The expulsion of about 2,500 German Gypsies into the General Government in 1940 had resulted in disruptions since most of the deported eventually regained their freedom of movement. These kinds of problems were prevented by putting the deported Gypsies into a camp. The question of how many could survive the rigors of such a camp apparently was of no interest to anyone in authority, for the individuals involved were considered asocial and racially inferior elements to whose death the regime and most of society was supremely indifferent.

The incarceration of German and Austrian Gypsies in concentration camps, including the special Gypsy camp in Auschwitz, involves parallels to the fate of the Jews, but also important differences. Unlike the Jews, Gypsies were never subjected to an overall plan for physical annihilation. Nazi policy toward the Gypsies lacked the kind of single-minded fanaticism that characterized the murderous assault upon the Jews. Gypsies were viciously persecuted and many died, but they were not the chosen victims of the Holocaust.

### Notes

1. Hans Buchheim, “Die Aktion ‘Arbeitsscheu Reich,’” *Gutachten des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 1966), 2: 189–91.
2. For some individual cases see Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 31–35.
3. Falk Pingel, *Häftlinge unter SS-Herrschaft: Widerstand, Selbstbehauptung und Vernichtung im Konzentrationslager* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1978), p. 87.
4. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, translated by William Templer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 23.
5. Grawitz to Himmler, June 28, 1944, Nuremberg document NO-179, National Archives (hereafter NA) Washington, RG 238, box 4; Brandt to Grawitz, July 8, 1944, Bundesarchiv (hereafter BA) Berlin, N 19/1584.
6. Affidavits by Ignaz Bauer, Fritz Pillwein, and Josef Tschofenig, Nuremberg document NO-910, 911, 912, NA Washington, RG 238, box 21; affidavit by Karl Höllenreiter, Nuremberg document NO-3961, *ibid.*, box 73; affidavit by Dr. Franz Blaha, Nuremberg document PS-3249, *ibid.*, box 49.
7. This account is based on testimony and documents used by a French military court sitting in Metz, summarized in Hauptstaatsarchiv Wiesbaden, Abt. 518, Nr. 4654, vol. 1.
8. *Ibid.* See also the recollection of the French inmate physician Dr. Henri Chretien, Nuremberg document NO-3560, NA Washington, RG 238, box 68.
9. Sabine Schleiermacher, “Die Stiftung ‘Ahnenerbe’: Menschen als Material für ‘exakte’ Wissenschaft,” in *Menschenversuche: Wahnsinn und Wirklichkeit*, edited by Rainer Osnowski (Cologne: Kölner Volksblatt, 1988), pp. 80–82.
10. Nuremberg document NO-875, NA Washington, RG 238, box 20.
11. Institut für Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung/Zentrales Parteiarchiv, Berlin, St 63/72, cited by Ludwig Eiber, “*Ich wusste es wird schlimm:*” *Die Verfolgung der Sinti und Roma in München, 1933–1945* (Munich: Buchendorfer, 1993), p. 93.
12. Cited by Thomas Rahe, “Aus ‘rassischen’ Gründen verfolgte Kinder im Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen: Eine erste Skizze,” in Edgar Bamberger and Annegret Ehmman, eds., *Kinder und Jugendliche als Opfer des Holocausts* (Heidelberg: Dokumentationszentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma, 1995), p. 141.

13. Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes, Vienna, Nr. 1371. On Mauthausen generally see Gordon Horwitz, *In the Shadow of Death: Living Outside the Gates of Mauthausen* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

14. Christopher Browning, "Nazi Resettlement Policy and the Search for a Solution of the Jewish Question, 1939–1941," *German Studies Review* 9 (1986): 504–5. See also Lewy, *Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, pp. 67–70.

15. No copy of this decree has been found. The implementing regulations, *Einweisung von Zigeunermischlingen, Rom-Zigeunern und balkanischen Zigeunern in ein Konzentrationslager*, issued on January 29, 1943, can be found in a collection of decrees issued in 1941 by the Reichskriminalpolizeiamt and known as *Erlasssammlung Nr. 15*.

16. Most of the literature on the subject maintains that the exemptions provided in the Auschwitz decree were essentially ignored and that only a handful of Gypsies escaped deportation. Among recent authors to repeat the false observation that the Auschwitz decree ordered the deportation of *all* German and Austrian Gypsies is Gabrielle Tyrnauer, "The Fate of the Gypsies in the Holocaust," in *The Widening Circle of Genocide*, edited by Israel W. Charny (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1994), p. 229. For a critical discussion of this matter see Lewy, *Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, pp. 148–49.

17. Waclaw Dlugoborski, "On the History of the Gypsy Camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau," in State Museum of Auschwitz Birkenau, *Memorial Book: The Gypsies at Auschwitz-Birkenau* (Munich: Saur, 1993), 1:3.

18. Pohl to Brandt, April 9, 1943, Brandt to Pohl, April 15, 1943, BA Berlin, NS 19/180, pp. 3–4.

19. Rudolf Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz: The Autobiography of Rudolf Höss*, translated by Constantin FitzGibbon (Cleveland, Ohio: World, 1959), p. 139.

20. For example, see Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1947), p. 112.

21. Randolph Braham, "Hungarian Jews," in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 465; Krystyna Zywulska, *I Came Back* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1951), p. 179; testimony of Erich Bruchwalski, *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen Ludwigsburg*, 402 AR-Z 47/84, vol. 3.

22. This tabulation is based on figures provided by Dlugoborski, "On the History of the Gypsy Camp," p. 4; Bernhard Streck, "Zigeuner in Auschwitz: Chronik des Lagers B II e," in *Kumpania und Kontrolle*, edited by Mark Münzel and Bernhard Streck (Giessen: Focus,



1981), p. 128; Michael Zimmermann, *Rassenutopie und Genozid: Die nationalsozialistische 'Lösung der Zigeunerfrage'* (Hamburg: Christians, 1996), p. 494 n. 212. Slightly different figures are given by Tadeusz Szymanski, "The 'Hospital' in the Family Camp for Gypsies in Auschwitz-Birkenau," in *Nazi Medicine*, edited by International Auschwitz Committee (New York: Howard Fertig, 1986), pt. 3, pp. 41–3. The difficulty of arriving at more precise numbers is stressed by Franciszek Piper, head of historical research at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, in "The Number of Victims," in Gutman and Berenbaum, eds., *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p. 70.

23. Höss, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, p. 115.