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**THE FORGOTTEN GENOCIDE.**

Lithuanian Roma  
During the Nazi Occupation

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## **Foreword**

All over the world, when commemorating the greatest tragedy of the 20th century – the Holocaust – it is customary to use the expressions “we remember” and “never again”. This is a promise to live and build a new world in such a way that such a crime against humanity will never repeat itself, and that the victims of the Holocaust will not be forgotten.

What is not as known among the general public is that along with the Jews, other people living in Europe were also systematically killed during the Holocaust due to their racial or ethnic origin, physical or psychological condition, beliefs or political views, religion or sexual orientation. One such group was the Roma, who, in most European countries, continue to face discrimination and other difficulties to this day. The stories of the Lithuanian Roma who were persecuted, killed and sent to concentration and forced labour camps during the Nazi occupation are still broadly unknown, and the Roma genocide is often referred to as the “forgotten Holocaust”.

In spreading the word about the Roma genocide, the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania initiates discussions about human rights and Roma during the Holocaust, puts out informational and methodological publications, organises training for educational staff, Lithuanian Roma youth and human rights activists, and contributes to international and non-governmental organisation initiatives. We are pleased with the long-term cooperation with the Roma Community Centre, which initiated the first commemorations of the Roma genocide in Lithuania. The Roma Community Centre has brought together a community whose members actively participate not only in Holocaust commemorations, but also in other events and initiatives related to Lithuania's national minorities, human rights and the strengthening of civil society.

In this publication, we provide information about the Roma genocide in Lithuania and Europe, and present – for the first time in one place – a variety of historical documents and interdisciplinary research material, as well as references to additional resources exploring this topic. We hope that this publication will stimulate discussion about the lesser-known victims of the Holocaust in Lithuania, encourage people to learn more about the Roma genocide, and help preserve the memory of this painful stage in our history.

Department of National Minorities under  
the Government of the Republic of Lithuania  
Director, Dr Vida Montvydaitė

## Introduction

The conclusions published by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania state that the mass arrests of Roma began in Nazi-occupied Lithuania in 1942. Detainees of Romani origin were sent to concentration camps and to work in Germany and France; approximately one thousand Roma were deported from Lithuania in total. Roma were also systematically killed in Lithuania together with the Jews. According to official data, some 500 Roma were killed in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation, or approximately every third Lithuanian Rom.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of detailed data about nomadic Roma victims during the Holocaust, it is surmised that this number may be even higher. However, the topic of the Roma genocide in Lithuania has not been extensively examined, and the memory of this tragedy fades in the context of the Holocaust. According to Aušra Simoniukšytė, a social anthropologist and researcher of Roma culture in Lithuania, there is not a single Roma family in Lithuania that did not lose members during the Nazi occupation. The researcher has no doubt that the Roma are one of the ethnic communities in Lithuania most affected by the war.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, this topic has long been little known in Lithuania – the trauma experienced by the Roma did not become part of the collective memory of World War II, and the memory of the Roma genocide was never institutionalised. With Lithuania's increasing involvement in the activities of various international organisations – especially after the country joined the European Union – different international actors, non-governmental organisations and activists working in Lithuania for the recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide began to talk more both about the situation of Roma in general, and about the fate of Lithuania's Roma during the Nazi occupation. This was due to the growing discourse on Roma rights in the international arena, international pressure, transnational initiatives, the initiative of local actors and the activities of various non-governmental organisations in an effort to gradually introduce the topic of the Roma genocide into the public debate on the Holocaust and 20th century Lithuanian history in general.

The first attempts to introduce the topic of the Roma genocide into the public debate in Lithuania began in 2012, when the International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration at the Memorial Museum of Paneriai was covered by several media sources; that same year, the Ministry of Culture published a leaflet about the Roma genocide in Lithuania. In 2015, an event to mark International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day was held for the first time at the Museum of Genocide Victims.

On 27 June 2019, the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania adopted a decision of historical significance and laid the foundations for a new phase in the commemoration of the Roma genocide in Lithuania by officially declaring 2 August Roma Genocide Remembrance Day. This decision was a result of the work of the Department of National Minorities and non-governmental organisations, as well as Roma rights activists, who formally applied to the Committee on Human Rights in the Seimas with a request to include this day in the Republic of Lithuania Law on Remembrance Days.

Even though the public debate on the Holocaust in Lithuania is still a sensitive issue, and four years had passed from when the European Parliament declared 2 August European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day in 2015 and called on all Member States to do the same, this crucial step marks the integration of the Roma genocide into the official narrative of Lithuanian history. This shows that the discourse about the Holocaust is gradually changing in our country – it is becoming more inclusive, new narratives are emerging about other groups of victims, and the concept of the Holocaust is expanding, thus creating space for testimonies about the Roma genocide.

Becoming familiar with the history of the genocide of the Roma, who were and are part of our society, is important for everyone living in a civil society built on the principles of democracy and human rights. By knowing more about this tragic part of our history, will we be able to take a critical look at the environment that we live in and

<sup>1</sup> Conclusions approved by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania on 2002-06-19, "*Lietuvos romai nacių okupacijos metais*", accessed 2019-12-12, <https://www.komisija.lt/tyrimai/>.

<sup>2</sup> GRITĖNAS, Paulius, "*Romų istorija Lietuvoje: Nuo Meškų akademiją valdžiusio Marcinkevičiaus iki meilės Smetonos laikams*," [www.15min.lt](http://www.15min.lt), 2018-04-08, accessed 2019-12-12, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/istorija/romu-istorija-lietuvoje-nuo-mesku-akademija-valdziusio-marcinkeviciaus-iki-meiles-smetonos-laikams-582-952430>.

impartially assess whether it is truly devoid of structural violence against certain groups of people. Does everyone living in our country have the right to housing, education and healthcare? Do they have the conditions they need to feel safe and live without experiencing discrimination, hatred or physical violence?

This publication provides information about the Roma genocide in Europe, presents original documents and works of historians which examine the fate of the Roma in Lithuania during World War II, and analyses the ways the Roma genocide is commemorated and the significance of initiatives related to Holocaust remembrance. Readers are given different maps where the Roma detention and killing sites in Europe and Lithuania are marked, as well as a time line with important dates in the historiography of the Roma genocide. The detailed insights of Lithuanian scholars about the Roma in Paneriai, Pravieniškės and foreign labour and concentration camps, as well as the testimonies about both Roma groups and specific individuals during the Holocaust present the extent of the Roma genocide and allow the reader to become acquainted with the lesser-known painful events of World War II. The publication also includes illustrations from various archives and an overview of the latest novels and scientific literature on the subject.

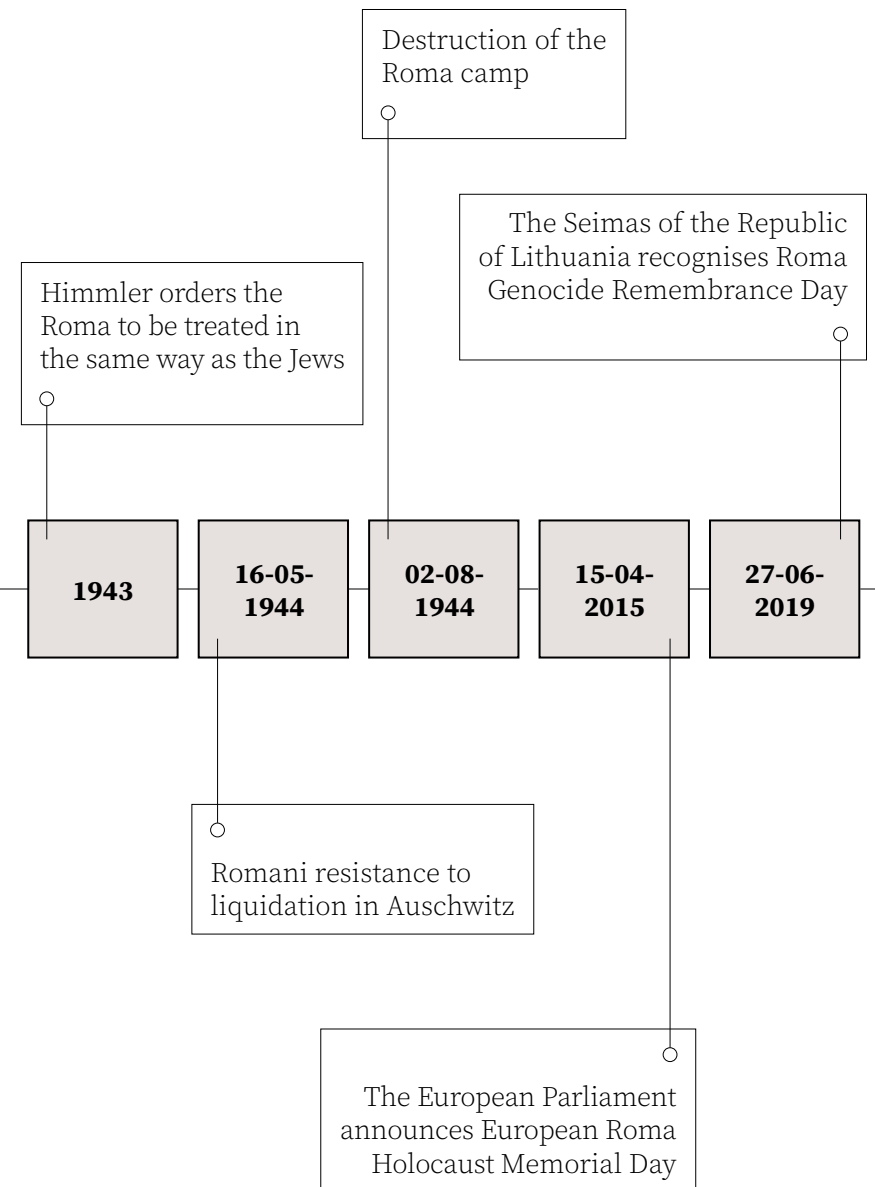
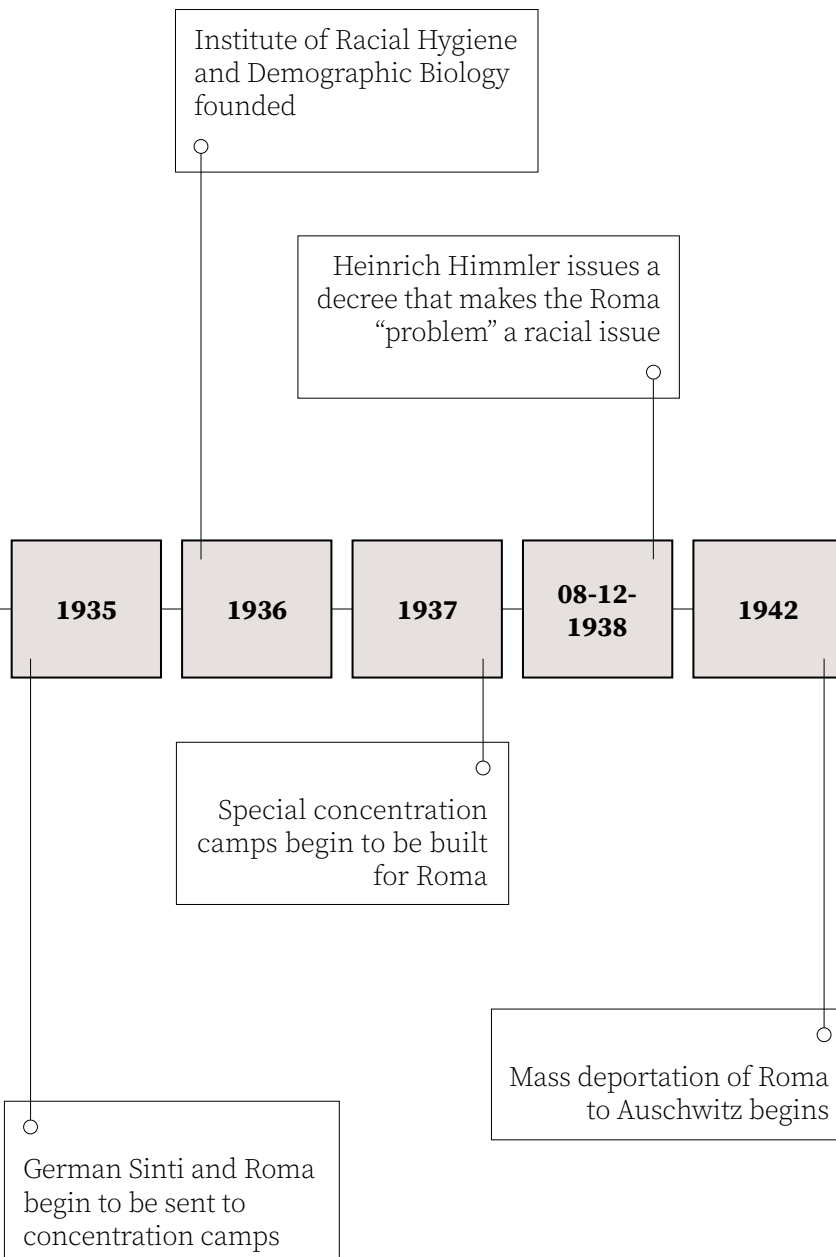
The term “Roma” is used in this publication based on the recommendations made by the Council of Europe, which state that in official documents, Roma are persons belonging to the Roma, Sinti and Kale groups in Europe, including Travellers and the Eastern groups (Dom and Lom), as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies.<sup>3</sup> Given that the term “Gypsy” has been and is used in many European countries in a racist context and/or to incite hatred, it was decided at the First World Romani Congress held in Orpington (United Kingdom) in 1971 to replace the word “Gypsy” with the word “Roma”; as a result, the International Gypsy Committee was renamed the Komiteto Lumniako Romano (International Roma Committee).<sup>4</sup> In this publication, the term “Gypsy” is only used when quoting primary sources.

The term “genocide” used in this publication was established by the Genocide Convention in 1951 and means an act “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.”<sup>5</sup> The term “Roma genocide” refers to the persecution and systematic extermination of the Roma in Europe during World War II by Nazi Germany and collaborating regimes and individuals.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe, “*Descriptive Glossary of Terms Relating to Roma Issues*.” 2012-05-12, p. 4. <http://a.cs.coe.int/team20/cahrom/documents/Glossary%20Roma%20EN%20version%2018%20May%202012.pdf>. [Žiūrėta 2019-12-01]

<sup>4</sup> “*Timeline of Romani history*.” Patrin, <https://www.oocities.org/~patrin/timeline.html> [Žiūrėta 2019-12-02]

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, “*Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, No. 1021*,” United Nations Treaty Series, Vol. 78, 1951-01-12, p. 280. [https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280027fac&clang=\\_en](https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=0800000280027fac&clang=_en) [Žiūrėta 2019-12-12].





A Roma woman with Robert Ritter, a German police officer and researcher at the Nazi Racial Hygiene and Demographic Biology Research Centre, 1936.

Source: Bundesarchiv, R 165 Bild-244-71 / CC-BY-SA 3.0



Deportation of Sinti and Roma, Asperg, 22 May 1940.

Source: Bundesarchiv, R 165 Bild-244-48 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

## The Roma Genocide in Europe

Ever since they came to Europe in the beginning of the 14th century, the Roma were persecuted and discriminated against; they held a lower position in society and spent several centuries in slavery in the present-day territories of Romania and Moldova. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Roma faced brutal treatment in the Ottoman Empire and Central Europe; in Western European countries, they were driven out of cities and subjected to cruel corporal punishment and, often, public executions.<sup>6</sup> In times of crisis in European countries (financial, political or social unrest), Roma often became scapegoats who had to absorb the anxiety and anger of the ethnic majority.<sup>7</sup>

In Germany, the Roma way of life was interpreted using racial terminology and speculating about how the Roma were allegedly asocial.<sup>8</sup> Later, the Otto von Bismarck administration, based on the ideas of the Enlightenment, planned to implement strict methods of control and education for Roma in order to eliminate their ethnic differences and thus accelerate their “civil correction” and assimilation.<sup>9</sup> The Weimar Republic set up a strict registration system for Roma to control this group, but unfortunately, this Roma census information was later taken over by the Nazi regime and used as a well-developed administrative tool for monitoring the population and the social and racial characteristics of the residents.<sup>10</sup>

With increasing racial tensions and growing intolerance toward the Roma, the “Gypsy question” of the Third Reich was resolved by reclassifying it from a social problem to a racial problem; this facilitated the establishment and development of the so-called “Gypsy camps” in the 1930s, where Roma were moved to by force.<sup>11</sup> The Roma

<sup>6</sup> “Timeline of Romani history”.

<sup>7</sup> MARGALIT, Gilad, *Germany and Its Gypsies: A Post-Auschwitz Ordeal* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 14-16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>10</sup> Götz Aly et al., *The Nazi Census: Identification and Control in the Third Reich* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> MARGALIT, *Germany and Its Gypsies*, 31-35.

were the only group of people who, like the Jews, were persecuted and systematically killed for racial reasons. Between 12 and 18 June 1938, a “Gypsy clean-up week” took place throughout Germany that was organised similarly to Kristallnacht, a pogrom carried out against Jews that same year. This was the beginning of the radicalisation of the Nazi “Gypsy policy”, which led to the deportation of Roma to Auschwitz-Birkenau and other labour and concentration camps by the Reich during World War II and the destruction of the Roma camp in 1944.<sup>12</sup>

In January 1940, the first large-scale Nazi actions in the Roma genocide were recorded: 250 Roma children were killed at the Buchenwald concentration camp, where they were used as guinea pigs to test the efficacy of Zyklon B, the pesticide later used in gas chambers. In June 1940, Hitler ordered the liquidation of “all Jews, Gypsies and communist political functionaries in the entire Soviet Union.”<sup>13</sup>

In July 1941, Himmler issued his criteria for biological and racial evaluation, according to which the background of each Roma family was to be investigated going back three generations. On 16 December 1942, Himmler ordered the deportation of all remaining Sinti and Roma in Europe to a concentration camp; shortly thereafter, instructions were given to treat Roma in the same way as the Jews.<sup>14</sup> The regulation implementing this order that was released on 29 January 1943 stated that the place of exile would be Auschwitz. This led to the establishment of the “Gypsy Family Camp” at Auschwitz-Birkenau known as the Zigeunerlager.<sup>15</sup> The deportation of the Roma began in February 1943 and continued until July 1944. The Sinti and Roma imprisoned in the camp came primarily from Germany, Austria, the Protectorate of Bavaria and Moravia, and Poland, with smaller groups arriving from France, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia/Croatia, Belgium, Lithuania, Hungary, as well as Norway and Spain.<sup>16</sup>

Incarcerated by Nazi officers, the Roma were subjected to violence, coercion, torture and brutal medical experiments. At the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, the Roma were put in a special section known as the “Gypsy Family Camp”. In this special camp, the Roma, unlike the other prisoners, were not split up by gender and age, and families could stay together. While most of the Roma imprisoned in the camp could wear civilian clothing, they were all required to wear a dark brown or black triangle sewn to their clothing. Their camp numbers, prefaced with the letter Z,

were tattooed on their left forearms. The insufficient amount of food and lack of space in the overcrowded premises led to a dramatic deterioration in hygienic and sanitary conditions, which led in turn to frequent epidemics. These epidemics resulted in an extremely high mortality rate among the Roma imprisoned in the Gypsy Family Camp.<sup>17</sup> It is known that in March 1943, a group of approximately 1,700 Polish Sinti and Roma (men, women and children) were brought to Auschwitz from Białystok – when several of them were found to have typhus, the entire group was sent directly to the gas chamber.<sup>18</sup>

From 1943 to 1944, the infamous Nazi pseudoscientist Josef Mengele was the head physician at the Gypsy Family Camp. In the laboratory set up at the camp, Mengele performed many pseudoscientific experiments, often with Roma – most of them children – forced to act as guinea pigs. Mengele was particularly interested in identical twins; he injured them and even performed surgery on them in an attempt to connect their bodies and circulatory systems. To make sure the experiments ran smoothly, Mengele opened a “kindergarten” at the Gypsy Family Camp for Roma under the age of six so he had a group to select his victims from. At first, the children in the kindergarten received better food, and high-ranking SS officers and civilians would have their picture taken with them during trips to Auschwitz, but this was purely a propaganda move that did not save the children from Mengele’s experiments. Convinced that the racial characteristics of Roma were innate, Mengele sent their body parts and tissue samples to Berlin for pseudoscientific research.<sup>19</sup> In similar experiments, Nazi doctors forced Roma to inhale toxic gases, infected them with viruses and bacteria, performed surgery

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>13</sup> “*The Holocaust O Porrajmos*,” Patrin Web Journal, accessed 2019-02-01, <http://www.oocities.org/~patrin/genocido.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “*Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) in Auschwitz*,” Auschwitz.org, accessed 2020-01-01, <http://auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/sinti-and-roma-gypsies-in-auschwitz/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> “*The National Socialist Genocide of the Sinti and Roma*,” Documentation and Cultural Centre of German Sinti and Roma, accessed 2019-12-01, <http://www.sintiundroma.de/en/sinti-roma/the-national-socialist-genocide-of-the-sinti-and-roma/extermination/medical-experiments/mengeles-experiments-in-auschwitz.html>.

on them without anaesthesia, and sterilised women and children with X-rays.<sup>20</sup>

The Gypsy Family Camp existed for 17 months. It is estimated that approximately 23,000 Roma men, women and children were imprisoned in the camp. Some 21,000 people were registered in the camp (including the more than 370 children estimated to have been born there).<sup>21</sup> Researchers believe that 19,000 to 23,000 Roma were killed in Auschwitz.<sup>22</sup>

Although the persecution experienced by the Roma in Nazi Germany and the Nazi-occupied or collaborating countries differed slightly (they were detained, deported or exterminated locally), the Roma community suffered both within the territory of the Third Reich and beyond its borders. The situation outside of Nazi Germany during World War II was no better than it was inside the country – according to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Nazi-occupied Europe, Roma were initially arrested and sent to forced labour camps set up by the Nazis in present-day Germany and Poland, where they often perished due to the unbearable working conditions or became victims of Nazi atrocities.<sup>23</sup>

The degree of persecution varied depending on the situation in different countries. For example, in Nazi-occupied Soviet territories, Roma were treated the same way as Jews and communists; in the Baltic States, the Nazis had particularly active mobile killing squads that killed Roma on the spot.<sup>24</sup> Intense measures to eradicate Roma were taken in Yugoslavia, where about 90,000 were killed,<sup>25</sup> and in Nazi-occupied Serbia, Roma were shot and gassed to death in 1941 and 1942, with the total number of victims estimated to be anywhere from 1,000 to 12,000.<sup>26</sup> The puppet Independent State of Croatia established in parts of what was previously the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which had been occupied by Axis forces, set up a system of concentration

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) in Auschwitz."

<sup>22</sup> "Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939-1945," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed 2019-12-01, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005219>.

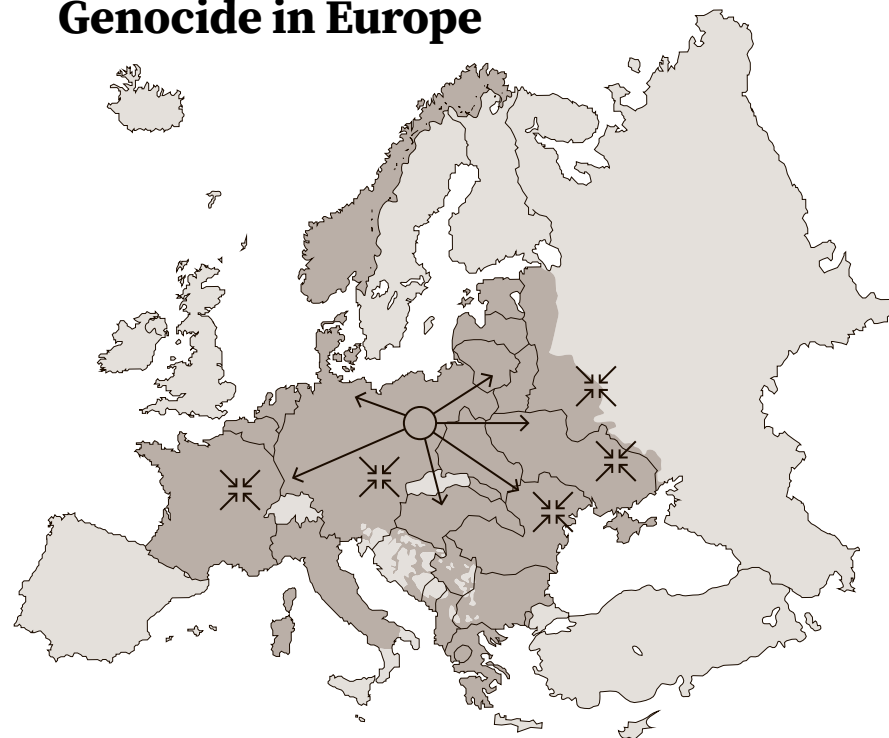
<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.




<sup>25</sup> "The Roma Genocide," Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative, accessed 2019-12-09, <http://2august.eu/the-roma-genocide/>.

<sup>26</sup> "Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939-1945."

## Directions of the Roma Genocide in Europe



### Occupied Europe: September 1943

-  Country under occupation or allied with Germany (1943)
-  Policies and actions against the Roma carried out by German parties
-  Policies and actions against the Roma carried out by local (national) parties

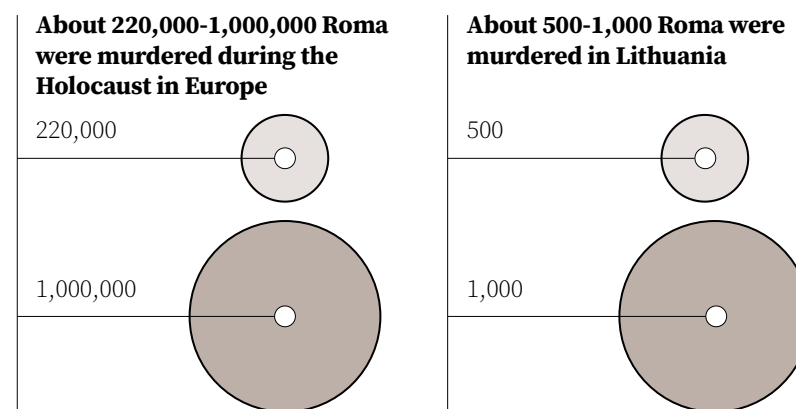
Prepared according to: *Right to Remember - A Handbook for Education with Young People on the Roma Genocide* (second edition), Council of Europe, 2016 publication in English.

camps that annihilated virtually the entire Roma population (according to historians, around 25,000 people).<sup>27</sup> Another one of Germany's Axis partners, the Romanian regime, deported Roma from Romanian territory to Transnistria, which was then under Romanian administration.<sup>28</sup> In 1941 and 1942, approximately 26,000 Romanian Roma were forcibly relocated to this territory, thousands of whom "died from disease, starvation, and brutal treatment."<sup>29</sup> The number of Roma killed during the war in Romanian-occupied areas is as high as 36,000.<sup>30</sup> The Roma living in France were persecuted both in the part of the country administered by the government of Vichy, which was subordinate to the Nazis, and in the part occupied by Nazi Germany. The Roma from France (as well those from Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands) were sent to labour and concentration camps in Germany, where somewhere between 16,000 and 18,000 perished.<sup>31</sup> As part of anti-Roma policies in Italy, Roma were detained, and most of them were sent to labour and extermination camps. The same fate befell the Hungarian Roma, and the Roma in Slovakia were "forced into labour brigades, expelled, and murdered by their Slovak countrymen."<sup>32</sup> In Poland, the Roma were put in the ghettos and later deported to labour and extermination camps, where 25,000 – or more than 60 per cent of them – died.<sup>33</sup>

The lack of information on the number of Roma in pre-war Europe and the poor documentation of Roma massacres still make it difficult to estimate the number of Roma victims of Nazi persecution. For example, in the Soviet Union and the Balkans, mobile killing squads (sometimes on their own initiative) would travel from one settlement to another, tracking down and destroying – mostly by shooting – Roma living in remote areas and villages, without leaving any official documents or records about the nature and scale of these massacres.

Not surprisingly, the information found in different sources on the number of victims of the Roma genocide varies greatly. For example, according to the Open Society Foundation, the Nazis and their collaborators killed between 300,000 and 500,000 Roma in occupied Europe. The International Roma Youth Network provides calculations that at least 500,000 European Roma were victim of persecution, which accounts for approximately 80 per cent of all of the Roma living in European countries during the Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum agrees that there is a lack of clarity on

the number of victims of the Roma genocide, but supports a more moderate method of counting the victims and claims that approximately 220,000 – or 25 per cent – of the Roma living in Europe died at the hands of Nazi Germany and its allies. However, some scholars argue that there were even more Roma victims than is currently thought. The renowned academic and Roma researcher Ian Hancock maintains that the extent of the persecution of the Roma by the Nazis remains underestimated, so the actual number of victims of the Roma genocide may be in excess of one million.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the extent of the Roma genocide has not yet been accurately assessed suggests that the topic is still largely unexplored and unknown, and that the different interpretations of the fate of the Roma during the Holocaust continue to influence conflicting perceptions of the Roma genocide, both in modern society and among scholars.



<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "The Roma Genocide."

<sup>29</sup> "Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939–1945."

<sup>30</sup> CARTNER, Holly, *Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Persecution of Gypsies in Romania: A Helsinki Watch Report*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1991), 13.

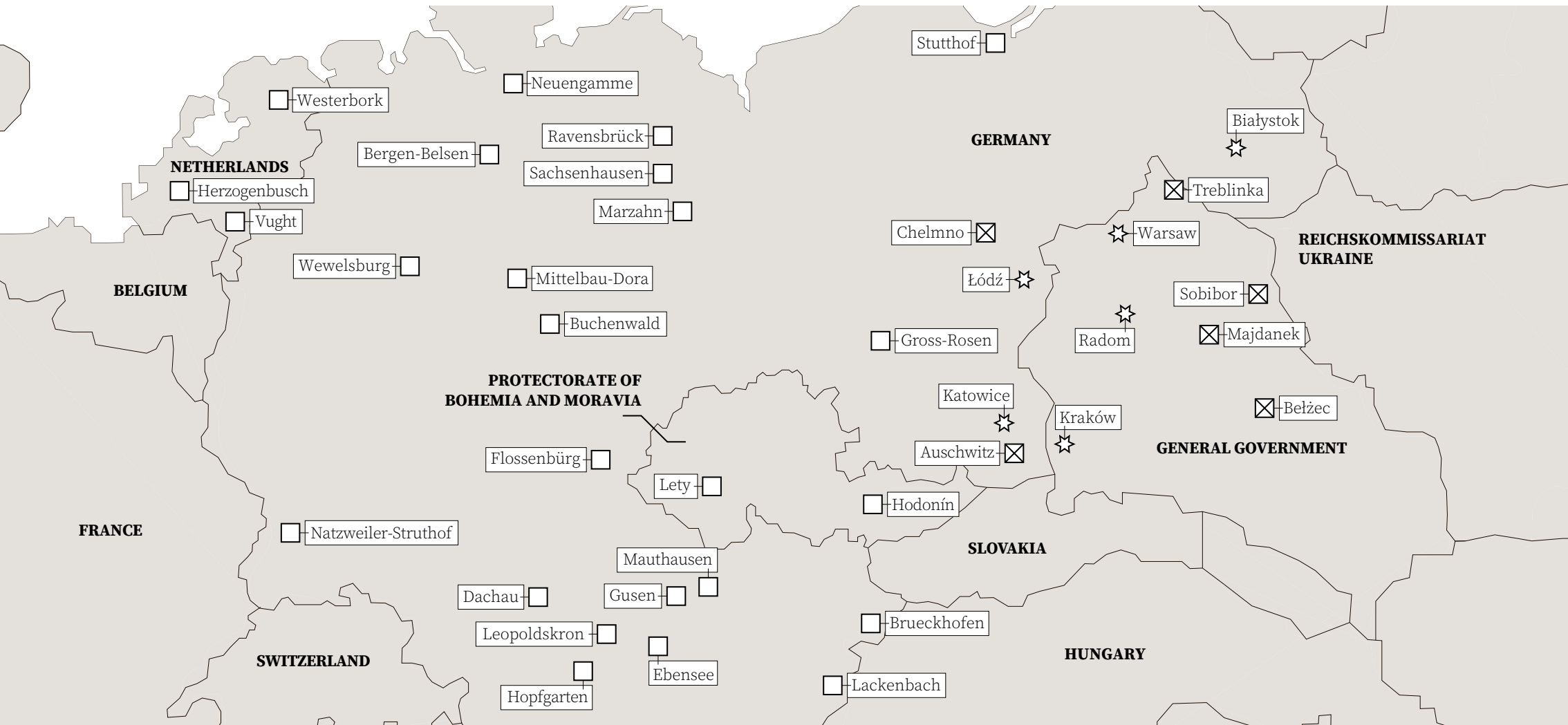
<sup>31</sup> "Gypsies," Shoah Resource Centre, The International School for Holocaust Studies, accessed 2019-02-03, [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%206324.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/microsoft%20word%20-%206324.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> "The Roma Genocide."

<sup>34</sup> HANCOCK, Ian, "500 000 Romani Holocaust Victims? There Could Have Been Twice That", Romea.cz. (2014-09-22), accessed 2019-01-01, <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/ian-hancock-500-000-romani-holocaust-victims-there-could-have-been-twice-that>.

## Persecution of the Roma, 1939-1945



Concentration camps
 X Extermination camps
 ☆ Ghettos

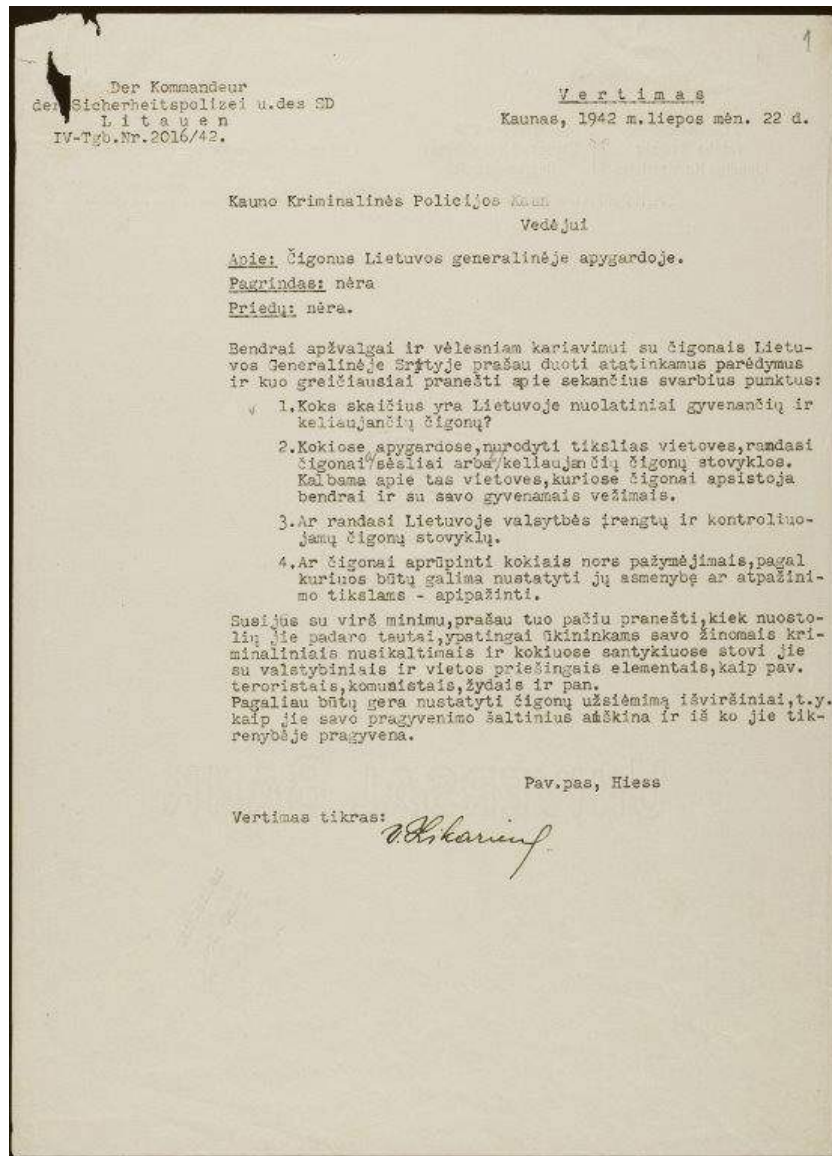
The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has marked select Roma killing sites at the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka concentration camps, and detention sites at Bergen-Belsen, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen and Ravensbrück.

Prepared according to: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

# Map of the Largest Holocaust Sites in Europe

Map of the Largest Holocaust Sites in Europe.  
Prepared according to: Dennis Nilsson  
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Document from the Lithuanian Central State Archives (hereinafter – LCSA) f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 1.

Dr. Arūnas Bubnys

## Persecution of the Roma in Lithuania

According to the Lithuanian census of 1923, there were only 284 Roma living in the Republic of Lithuania (excluding the Polish-occupied Vilnius region).<sup>35</sup> It is very likely that not all of the Roma living in Lithuania at that time were registered due to their nomadic lifestyle. It is likely that some 1,500 persons of Roma origin might have been living in Lithuania, including the Vilnius region, during World War II.<sup>36</sup>

On the eve and in the early days of the German-Soviet war, German Security Police and SD (security service) task forces received orders from the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) to kill not only Jews, but Roma as well. The latter, like Jews, were persecuted for racial reasons (because they were Roma). However, there were very few Roma in Lithuania (about a thousand) and it was extremely difficult to register and control them. Most Lithuanian Roma were nomadic, and there were few sedentary families. The 1 December 1941 report of German Security Police and SD Task Force 3/A about the massacres in the Baltics does not contain any data on the Roma killed in Nazi-occupied Lithuania. On 12 January 1942, Ostland SS-Gruppenführer and Police Commander Georg Jedicke and Reichskommissar for Ostland Hinrich Lohse decided that *as the Roma people circulating in this country transmit communicable diseases such as typhus, they are an unreliable element and do not want to settle or to work according to the demands of the German administration, comparative measures are to be taken against them as are taken against the Jew*.<sup>37</sup>

We have very little information about the repression of Lithuanian Roma in the second half of 1941. As an example, we can cite the case of Leon Wysocki (b. 1922) from Kaunas. In August 1941, Wysocki was taken for forced labour to Nazi-occupied Austria and was imprisoned at the Ebensee sub-camp. From 4 August 1944 until

<sup>35</sup> "Lietuvos gyventojai: pirmojo 1923 m. rugsėjo 17 d. visuotinio gyventojų surašymo duomenys," Kaunas, 1923, p. XXXVI.

<sup>36</sup> *Lietuvių enciklopedija* (Boston, 1954), t. 4: 184.

<sup>37</sup> *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje* (V., d. 1, 1965) 40; Ostland SS-Gruppenführer and Police Commander Georg Jedicke's 1942-01-12 letter on the Roma question, LCSA, f. R-659, ap. 1, b. 1, l. 222.

his release on 6 May 1945, he was detained in the Mauthausen concentration camp (prisoner No 58631). Wysocki managed to survive, and returned to Lithuania in August 1945 through the Grodno NKVD filtration camp.<sup>38</sup>

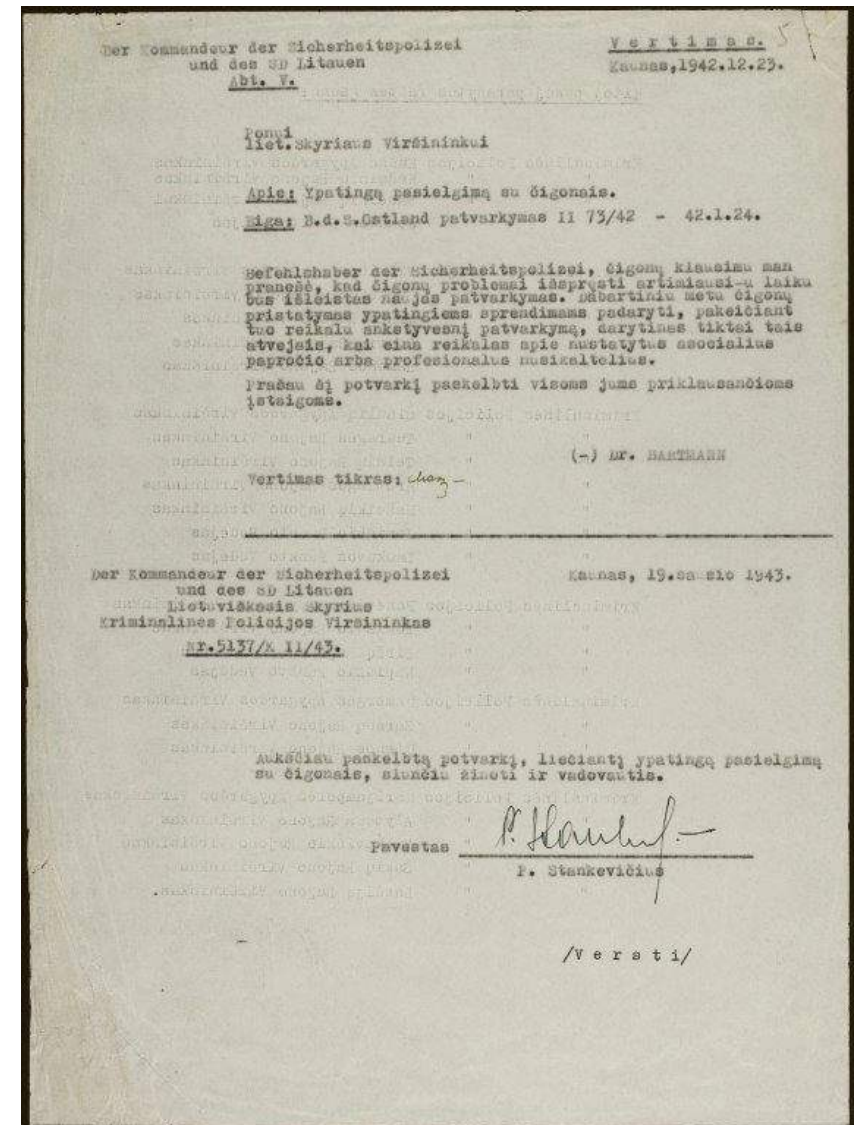
The arrests of Lithuanian Roma were carried out later than those of communists, Soviet activists and Jews. More active persecution of the Roma only began in 1942. The Nazis were far less concerned about Roma than they were about other categories of persecuted persons due to their negligible number and social influence. The situation of the Lithuanian Roma who were not nomadic was also made easier by the fact that since they were sedentary, they were not categorised as “asocials”. On 18 November 1942, the commander of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania ordered all Lithuanian Roma to be brought to the Ežerėlis camp and for their property to be confiscated. County police chiefs were sent orders to register and detain Roma who were living in the county without a permanent place of residence. They were to be brought in for peat excavation work. Sedentary Roma with a permanent job were allowed to live in freedom, but had to be reported monthly to the German Security Police and the SD.<sup>39</sup> On 25 November 1942, Otto Bellmann, head of the Panevėžys District SS and police, sent an order to the police chiefs of Panevėžys, Rokiškis and Biržai counties to detain the Roma in those counties and send them to Panevėžys.<sup>40</sup> On 23 December 1942, Dr Fritz Bartmann, chief of Department V (criminal police) of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania, wrote a letter to the chief of the Lithuanian Security Police regarding the treatment of Roma. This letter said that *at present, the delivery of gypsies for special solutions* [i.e. to be killed], *replacing the previous arrangement in this matter, should be done only in cases when dealing with identified asocial persons or professional criminals*.<sup>41</sup> This meant that the racial killing of Roma was to be discontinued. Only Roma who had committed criminal offences were to be killed. However, the registration and mobilisation of Roma in forced labour camps was not done.

<sup>38</sup> L. Wysocki's 1945-08-08 questionnaire, Lithuanian Special Archives (hereinafter – LSA), f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 668, l. 1-2 ap.

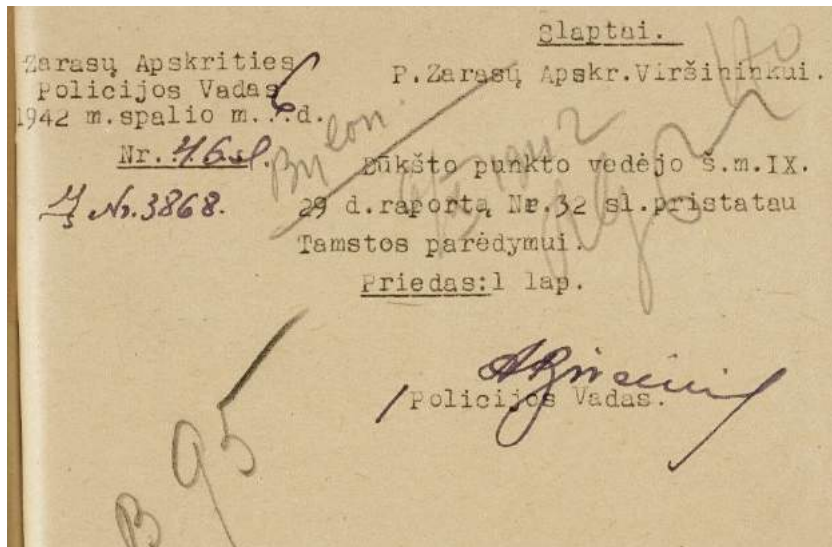
<sup>39</sup> *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje*, V., d. 2, 1973: 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

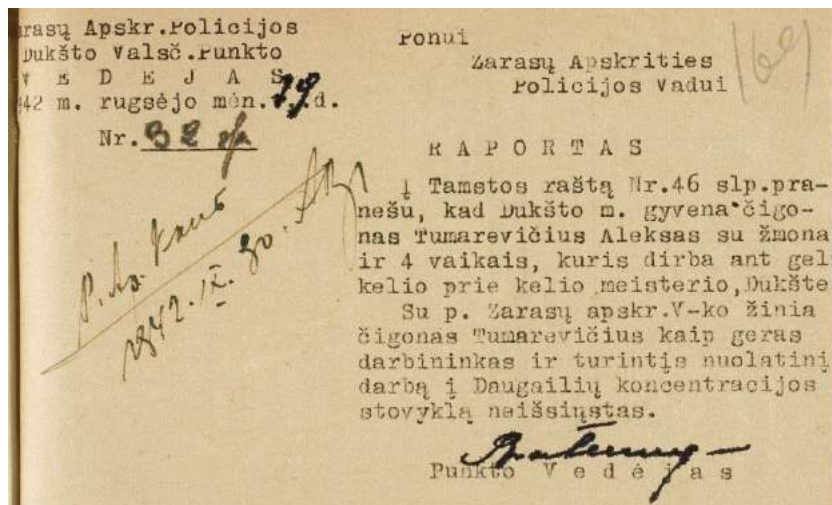
<sup>41</sup> 23 December 1942 letter of the chief of Division V of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania to the chief of the Lithuanian Security Police, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 5.



23 December 1942 letter of the chief of Department V of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania to the chief of the Lithuanian Security Police, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 5.



Document from the LCSA, f. R-1106, ap. 1, b. 56, l. 170.



19 September 1942 report of the head of the Dūkštų valsčius (Dūkštas) police station to the Zarasai country police chief, LCSA, f. R-1106, ap. 1, b. 56, l. 169

On 27 August 1942, the Zarasai country police chief received a letter regarding the request of the head of the German labour office (Arbeitsamt) to gather the Roma families living in the county and mobilise them in the Daugailiai concentration camp. The Roma were to be sent to the camp with all of their possessions. Their horses and carriages were to be taken from them and handed over to the chiefs of the volosts. The latter were to give the horses and carriages taken from the Roma to the farmers whose horses had been taken by the German army and who did not have anything to cultivate their land with.<sup>42</sup>

The head of the Dūkštų volost police station reported the family of Aleksas Tumarevičius, who was living in the town of Dūkštų and working by the railway, to the Zarasai country police chief: *With the knowledge of the honourable chief of the Zarasai country police, the Gypsy Tumarevičius, as a good worker holding a permanent job, was not sent to the Daugailiai concentration camp.*<sup>43</sup> However, it is difficult to say what the situation of the Roma in other Lithuanian counties and volosts was at that time due to the lack of documentation.

The 5 April 1943 letter of I. A. Hiss, an officer for the German Security Police and SD, indicates that the Lithuanian Roma were concentrated in the Pabradė, Pravieniškės and Ežerėlis peat cutting camps. The aforementioned German security police officer enquired if it was still possible to place Roma elsewhere, if there were mixed marriages between “Gypsies” and people of other nationalities, and how such mixed families were perceived.<sup>44</sup>

On 1 July 1943, another forced labour camp began to operate at the Raudonplynė peat bog in the Kazlų Rūda volost. It is possible that Lithuanian Roma were also employed in this camp.<sup>45</sup> In general, accounting for and controlling the Roma was a problem that remained unresolved right up until the end of the Nazi occupation. On 29 April 1943, the chief of the Lithuanian criminal police

<sup>42</sup> 27 August 1941 letter from the head of Zarasai country to the Zarasai country police chief, LCSA, f. R-1106, ap. 1, b. 56, l. 189.

<sup>43</sup> 19 September 1942 report of the head of the Dūkštų volost police station to the Zarasai country police chief, LCSA, f. R-1106, ap. 1, b. 56, l. 169.

<sup>44</sup> 5 April 1943 letter of German Security Police and SD officer Hiss regarding Roma, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 7.

<sup>45</sup> 28 June 1943 letter from the Concentration Camps Inspectorate to the head of Panevėžys county, LCSA, f. R-729, ap. 1, b. 26, l. 59.

informed the commander of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania that accurate statistics on Roma are not available in Lithuania, but that 284 Roma were registered in Lithuania during the 1932 census [probably referring to the Lithuanian census of 1923]. However, the police officer added that this figure was not accurate, since some Roma have concealed their nationality. It was estimated that there were over a thousand Roma in Lithuania. Most of the Roma were nomadic, but there were also sedentary families in the counties of Marijampolė, Trakai, Utena and Raseiniai. Finally, he proposed resolving the “Gypsy question” as follows: *...Gypsies who have committed criminal offences could be placed in forced labour facilities, and the ones who only harm society by their wandering and begging could be sent to Ežerėliai or other peat bogs. However, this poses the problem of where to place the family members of these Gypsies who are not able to work (children and grandparents). In order to isolate all Gypsies from society, perhaps it would be possible to find one or more larger state farms and, with good supervision, put up the Gypsies and their families there, or separate them into camps prepared for that purpose, where they could also be accommodated with their families and do useful work.*<sup>46</sup>

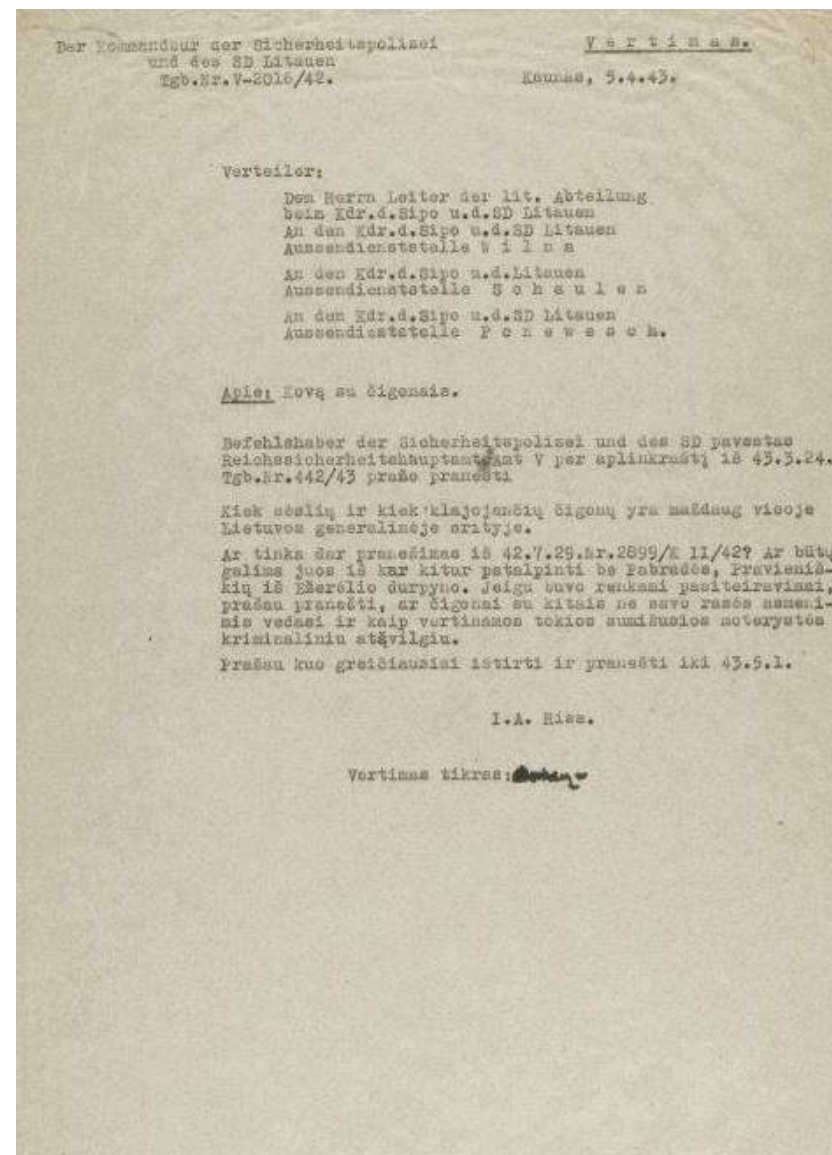
### Roma in Forced Labour Camps

Probably the most Lithuanian Roma were imprisoned and killed in the Pravieniškės forced labour camp. This is how Aleksas Aleksandravičius remembered a Roma massacre in Pravieniškės:

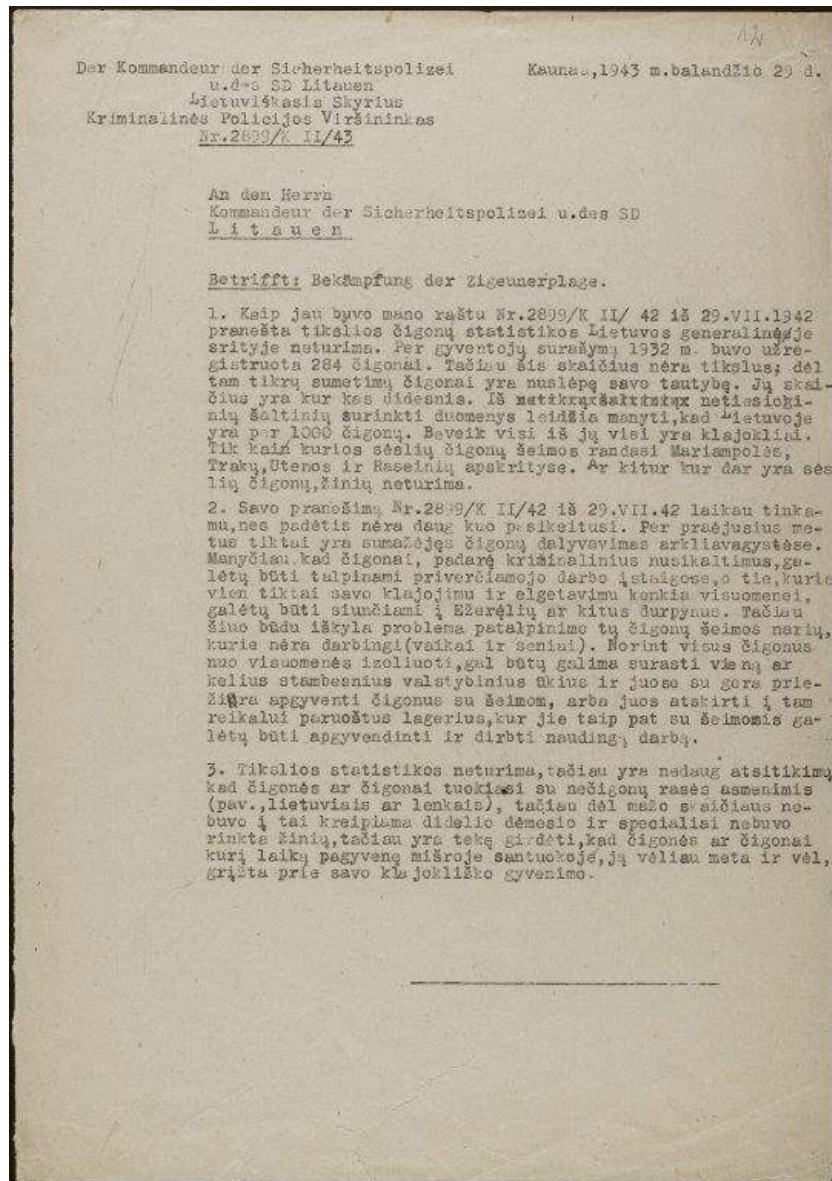
*We were walking in the woods. We hear – bam, bam – shooting. ... It didn't even occur to us. They herd us to the camp – it's empty, the floor was washed. There wasn't a soul there. ... There were maybe 80, with the little ones. Then we found these teenagers, 12 years old, 10 years old, 13... They didn't shoot those, they left them. Locked them up... How many were there? Maybe 12 or 14? Then they shot the oldest and the smallest. The ones who were 12 or 13 years old – they left them but not in those barracks, but in another, they were locked up.*<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> 29 April 1943 letter from the chief of the Lithuanian criminal police to the commander of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Vytautas Toleikis, “Lietuvos romai nacių okupacijos metais.” In *Karo belaisvių ir civilių gyventojų žudynės Lietuvoje 1941-1944 m.*, 58.



5 April 1943 letter of German Security Police and SD officer Hiss regarding Roma, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 7.



29 April 1943 letter from the chief of the Lithuanian criminal police to the commander of the German Security Police and SD for Lithuania, LCSA, f. R-1216, ap. 1, b. 4, l. 12.

These massacres most likely occurred in the summer of 1943 or May-June 1944. According to witness Jonas Piepalis (b. 1912), who was imprisoned in Pravieniškės in 1942-1944, at least three mass shootings were carried out in the camp. In the summer of 1943, a group of Roma women, children and old people were shot. They were brought to Pravieniškės in groups in 1943. In the summer of 1943, some of the healthy men were taken to Germany and the approximately 50 remaining people were shot.<sup>48</sup> Witness Vasilijus Paršionokas (b. 1919) said that when the female Roma prisoners were brought back from work to the camp in May or June 1944, they no longer found their children there. No one could say where their children had gone. The women rushed about the camp, screaming and pulling their hair out, but no one could help them.<sup>49</sup>

### Seredžius Roma During the Holocaust

Jonas Brižinskas, a Roma from Seredžius, lost his father and other relatives during the Nazi occupation. He, his mother and his siblings only survived because his mother had been warned in advance by the local police officer Balisevičius about the impending arrest. Mr Brižinskas spoke about his hardships as follows: *During the war, the others were taken away and shot by the Germans in Pravieniškės. My cousin and my aunt were taken away, my uncle was taken away – if they were still alive, where did they vanish? They didn't come back. Many, very many were shot. They loaded the old people and little ones into vehicles and carted them away. And shot them. They would take them from their homes. ...Only one family survived, and the others, maybe ten families, were taken away [to Pravieniškės].*<sup>50</sup> Česlava Ragauskaitė (b. 1929) lived in Seredžius and was deported to Germany in 1944. She worked in a factory in the town of Balingen until the end of the war. Ms Ragauskaitė only returned to Lithuania with her husband in late 1947.<sup>51</sup> According to Tamara Majauskienė, almost all of the Roma in Seredžius were taken to the Pravieniškės camp at the end of the German occupation. They were allegedly taken away for hiding Red Army soldiers who had stayed in Lithuania since the beginning of the war. During the war, there were even more Roma living in Vilkija than there were in Seredžius. They were housed there in the homes of Jews who had been shot. The Vilkija Roma were taken away to Pravieniškės at the same time as the Seredžius Roma.<sup>52</sup>

The prison conditions at the Pravieniškės camp were quite harsh. The prisoners lived in barracks and performed hard labour in the forest; they were fed poorly and subjected to corporal punishment and constant bullying.<sup>53</sup> Unable to stand the grim camp conditions, the Roma often tried to escape, often successfully. The fugitives would hide with their relatives or at other settlements and camp sites.

At the end of the Nazi occupation, the imprisoned Roma were taken to France and Germany for work or to concentration camps. Some historians claim that about a thousand of them might have been deported from Lithuania.<sup>54</sup> There, they performed hard labour in factories, cut road stone, repaired roads, and rebuilt cities destroyed by bombings.

## Surviving Documents and Evidence About Roma Who Survived the Genocide

Mykolas Matusevičius (b. 1924) lived in Kaunas and worked at a peat bog. In May 1942, he was arrested for his nationality (Roma) and put in prison. In May 1944, he was taken for forced labour to the German-occupied part of France, where he was put in a labour camp in Versailles and worked in a quarry until August 1944, when Paris and Versailles were liberated by the Allied forces from German occupation. Mr Matusevičius and his wife, Klava Matusevičienė, only left for Lithuania in late August 1945.<sup>55</sup> Surviving archival documents suggest that a substantial number of people of Roma descent were deported from the city of Kaunas to Germany. Some of them were imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps and prisons for minor offences.

In the summer of 1942, Kaunas resident Jonas Visockis (b. 1922) was locked up in the Pravieniškės labour camp and later taken from there to work in Germany, where he built bomb shelters. For being absent from work, Visockis was imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp, where he spent one year and five months. Mr Visockis returned to Lithuania after the concentration camp was liberated by American forces.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Paršionoko of witness J. Piepalis, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 47694/3, t. 12, l. 292-294.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of the 1974-03-13 interrogation of witness V. Paršionokas, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 47694/3, t. 2, l. 201, 205.

<sup>50</sup> Aušra Simoniukšytė, *"Seredžiaus romai," Seredžius* (EIC V. Girininkienė), V., 2003, 881.

<sup>51</sup> Č. Ragauskaitė's 1947-10-24 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 33003, l. 1.

<sup>52</sup> Simoniukšytė, *"Seredžiaus romai,"* 881.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 880.

<sup>54</sup> Toleikis, "Lietuvos romai nacių okupacijos metais," 61.

<sup>55</sup> M. Matusevičius's 1945-08-25 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 6353, l. 1-1 a. p.

<sup>56</sup> J. Visockis's 1945 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 5704, l. 1.

○ Adelė Stankevičienė (b. 1928) was taken from Kaunas to Germany in August 1943. She was put to work at the munitions factory in Hanover. Once the war ended, she returned to Lithuania in 1945.<sup>57</sup>

○ Kaunas resident Matas Brižinskas (b. 1920) was arrested on 8 May 1944 and taken to prison in Germany. He was suspected to be a Soviet partisan. In Germany, he was imprisoned in the Stuttgart prison and the Dachau concentration camp. Mr Brižinskas only returned to Lithuania in late 1947.<sup>58</sup>

○ Jonas Visockis (b. 1915) and his wife Marija Visockienė (b. 1913), who lived in Kleboniškis village (Kaunas county), were arrested, deported to Germany, and imprisoned in the Dachau concentration camp. They managed to survive until the end of the war and return to Lithuania.<sup>59</sup>

○ Monika Brizinska (b. 1914), a native of Vilnius, was deported to Germany in May 1944. She also worked at a military factory. For reasons unknown, Ms Brizinska was imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp. She managed to survive and return to Lithuania in July 1945.<sup>60</sup>

○ Aleksas Bagdonavičius (b. 1929) from Panevėžys was sent to Germany for forced labour in June 1943, where he worked as an unskilled labourer at the Potsdam aircraft factory until 23 April 1945. After the war, Mr Bagdonavičius returned to Lithuania through the USSR NKVD filtration camp in Grodno.<sup>61</sup>

○ Zosė Matuzevičiūtė (1934-2005), who lived in Panevėžys, was imprisoned with her mother in the Pravieniškės labour camp in June 1943 and later taken to work in Germany. There she was put in the Balingen sub-camp of the Natzweiler concentration camp, where she collected stones, loaded wagons and did other hard labour. She returned to Lithuania from Germany on 24 November 1945. After returning to Lithuania, Ms Matuzevičiūtė lived in Panevėžys.<sup>62</sup>

○ Ona Matuzevičienė (b. 1908) was taken from Panevėžys to Germany for work in February 1943. She returned to Lithuania on 24 November 1945.<sup>63</sup> Ms Matuzevičienė's son Motiejus (b. 1936) was deported with her. In Germany, Ms Matuzevičienė gave birth to a daughter, Valerija, in 1944. Valerija and Motiejus returned to Lithuania with their mother.<sup>64</sup>

○ Malvina Aleksandravičiūtė (b. 1925) was taken from Raudondvaris in mid-March 1944 to the German town of Geislingen for forced labour. She worked in town maintenance there right up until her release on 19 April 1945. Ms Aleksandravičiūtė returned to Lithuania in late August 1945.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>57</sup> A. Stankevičienė's 1945 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 5677, l. 1.

<sup>58</sup> M. Brižinskas's 1947-10-24 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 4981, l. 5.

<sup>59</sup> J. Visockis's 1946-10-12 questionnaire, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 1733, l. 1-2 a. p.

<sup>60</sup> M. Brižinskas's 1945-07-20 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 5042, l. 1.

<sup>61</sup> A. Bagdonavičius's filtration case, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 24176, l. 1, 2, 6.

<sup>62</sup> 19 October 2001 decision of the District Court of Panevėžys, Chamber of Panevėžys, GRRCL archive, Z. Matuzevičiūtė's case No 486629, l. 8-8 a. p.

<sup>63</sup> 26 November 1945 list of repatriated USSR citizens settled in Panevėžys, LCSA, f. R-754, ap. 4, b. 431, l. 55.

<sup>64</sup> 12 April 2001 decision of the District Court of Panevėžys, Chamber of Panevėžys, GRRCL archive, Z. Matuzevičiūtė's case No 407613, l. 10-11.

<sup>65</sup> M. Aleksandravičiūtė's 1945-08-30 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 652, l. 1.

Veronika Brižinskaitė(?)-Ragauskienė (b. 1910), who lived in the small town of Alvitās in Vilkaviškis county, was taken to Germany in July 1944. She was initially imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp, which is well known in Lithuania, and later worked at the munitions factory in Hanover. Her mother and two sisters remained in Alvitās. Ms Brižinskaitė-Ragauskienė returned to Lithuania in the summer of 1945.<sup>66</sup>

Kaunas native Magda Brižinskienė (b. 1923) was also imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp. She was taken to Germany on 15 May 1944. Her two sisters stayed in Kaunas. She returned to Lithuania in 1945.<sup>67</sup>

Part of the Lithuanian population living on the German-Lithuanian border (especially Vilkaviškis, Marijampolė and other counties) was forcefully evacuated to East Prussia in the late summer of 1944. Along with Lithuanians, people of other nationalities living in freedom, including Roma, were also evacuated. Aleksas Aleksandravičius (b. 1917) lived in Kybartai, where he had his own farm and was engaged in agriculture. In August 1944, the Germans drove a large number of locals to Germany. Mr Aleksandravičius ended up in East Prussia, where he cut firewood at various labour camps. In January 1945, the Soviet army occupied the area where Mr Aleksandravičius, his mother and two sisters worked. The entire family was sent to a Soviet filtration camp and then returned to Lithuania.<sup>68</sup>

Together with his family, Kybartai Roma Jurgis Brižinskas (b. 1912) was taken to Germany in August 1944, where he felled trees in the vicinity of Frankfurt an der Oder. When the Soviet army occupied the area, Mr Brižinskas and his family returned to Lithuania.<sup>69</sup>

Roma living in different Lithuanian counties were deported to Germany and France for forced labour. Liudvikas Gurskis (b. 1914) lived in Biržai, where he made a living as a cobbler. On 24 March 1944, he was arrested by the Germans, who kept him in the Pravieniškės camp for a couple of weeks until deporting him to Nazi-occupied France on 9 April 1944. His wife Adelė (b. 1911), son Aleksandras (b. 1936) and four other children were also imprisoned in the Pravieniškės labour camp [their fate is unknown, but it is very likely that Gurskis's children were shot at the Pravieniškės camp]. Gurskis initially worked as a stevedore at the port of Brest, and later as a cobbler in Versailles, Paris and other French cities. Gurskis's father, two brothers and sister remained in Lithuania. Gurskis was sent from France to Lithuania in late October 1945.<sup>70</sup>



Lithuanian Special Archives, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 6353, Matusevičius Mykolas, b. 1924, was taken to France for forced labour in 1944.



Lithuanian Special Archives, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 308, Aleksandravičius Aleksas, b. 1917. Taken to Germany for forced labour.

<sup>66</sup> V. Brižinskaitė-Ragauskienė's 1945-07-20 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 389, l. 1-1 ap.

<sup>67</sup> M. Brižinskaitė's 1945 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 331, l. 1.

<sup>68</sup> A. Aleksandravičius's 1945-03-03 questionnaire, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 308, l. 1-2 ap.

<sup>69</sup> J. Brižinskas's 1945-04-04 questionnaire, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 1792, l. 1-2 a. p.

<sup>70</sup> L. Gurskis's questionnaire, date unknown, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 33798, l. 2-3.

Together with her husband, Juozas Brižinskas, Magdalena Ragauskienė (b. 1925), who lived in Kybartai, was taken by the Germans in August 1944 to Germany, where she worked at the brickworks in the town of Zwickau until her release. She and her husband returned to Lithuania in the summer of 1945.<sup>71</sup>

Vladimiras Kudriavcevas (b. 1924) lived and worked in the town of Daugailiai in Utena county until his arrest. In January 1944, he was arrested by Lithuanian police and put in prison. Then the Germans took Mr Kudriavcevas to Germany. At first, he was put in a prisoner-of-war camp in Berlin. Later, Mr Kudriavcevas worked at the Betzdorf and Falkenberg labour camps and received two marks a day for his work. In the beginning of May 1945, they were liberated by the American army and sent to the Soviet Union through Romania. First he was sent to the USSR NKVD filtration camp in Khabarovsk Krai and only returned to Lithuania in 1946.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> M. Ragauskaitė's 1945-07-30 registration slip, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 32754, l. 1-1 ap.

<sup>72</sup> V. Kudriavcevas's 1946-04-29 questionnaire, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 59, b. 46507, l. 1-4.

### The Fate of Lithuania's Roma

At the end of the war, most of the Lithuanian Roma deported to Western Europe were liberated by the Allied forces (United States and Great Britain). Even though they were offered the opportunity to stay in Western Europe, they nevertheless returned to Soviet-occupied Lithuania. Only a handful of families stayed in Belgium and England.<sup>73</sup> Upon returning to their homeland, they found their houses burned down and their property looted, and learned that many of their family members and relatives had been killed. For example, Panevėžys native Motiejus Matuzevičius lost all five of his brothers and sisters, and was the only one left alive.<sup>74</sup>

Data on the number of Roma murdered in Lithuania are also almost non-existent. It is known that on 10 July 1942, unit No 9 of the Motorisierte Gendarmerie shot 40 Roma men, women and children 45 km south-east of Vilnius, near the Vilnius-Minsk railway between Gudaga and Loska. These Roma were killed because the nearby Organisation Todt labour camp had been shot at during the night. The gendarmerie unit that quickly arrived at the site of the shooting found a Roma settlement of about 50 people in the forest. In the course of their arrest, nine armed men fled, and the rest were detained and interrogated by the gendarmes. It was discovered that the labour camp had allegedly been shot at by the Roma men who had escaped. As a result, the gendarmes shot all of the Roma who had been detained – men, women and children.<sup>75</sup> Four Roma were shot in Paneriai in 1942, five were shot in Pravieniškės in autumn 1943, and an unknown number were shot in Pravieniškės in 1944.<sup>76</sup> On 12 April 1944, right before Easter, 46 Roma and one Russian were taken away to be shot.<sup>77</sup>

Examining the archival documents found, it can be assumed that for Roma, the key form of persecution was not their direct murder, but rather – their imprisonment in Nazi labour and concentration

<sup>73</sup> Vytautas Toleikis, "Lietuvos romai nacių okupacijos metais." In *Karo belaisvių ir civilių gyventojų žudynės Lietuvoje 1941-1944 m.*, 60.

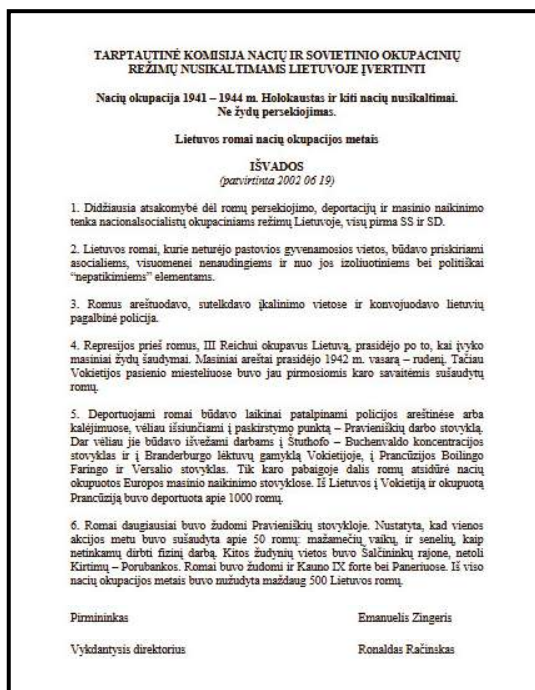
<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>75</sup> FRG Prosecutor Emerit's 23 October 1968 letter initiating the case, Bundesarchiv-Außenstelle Ludwigsburg (hereinafter – BA), B 162/7919, l. 85; Ibid., B 162/7920, l. 145.

<sup>76</sup> *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje*, d. 1, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Vaclovas Aliulis, "Kalėjimo kapeliono Juozo Baltramonaičio dienoraštį (1942-1944) suradus," *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, Vilnius, 2003, t. 22, 590.

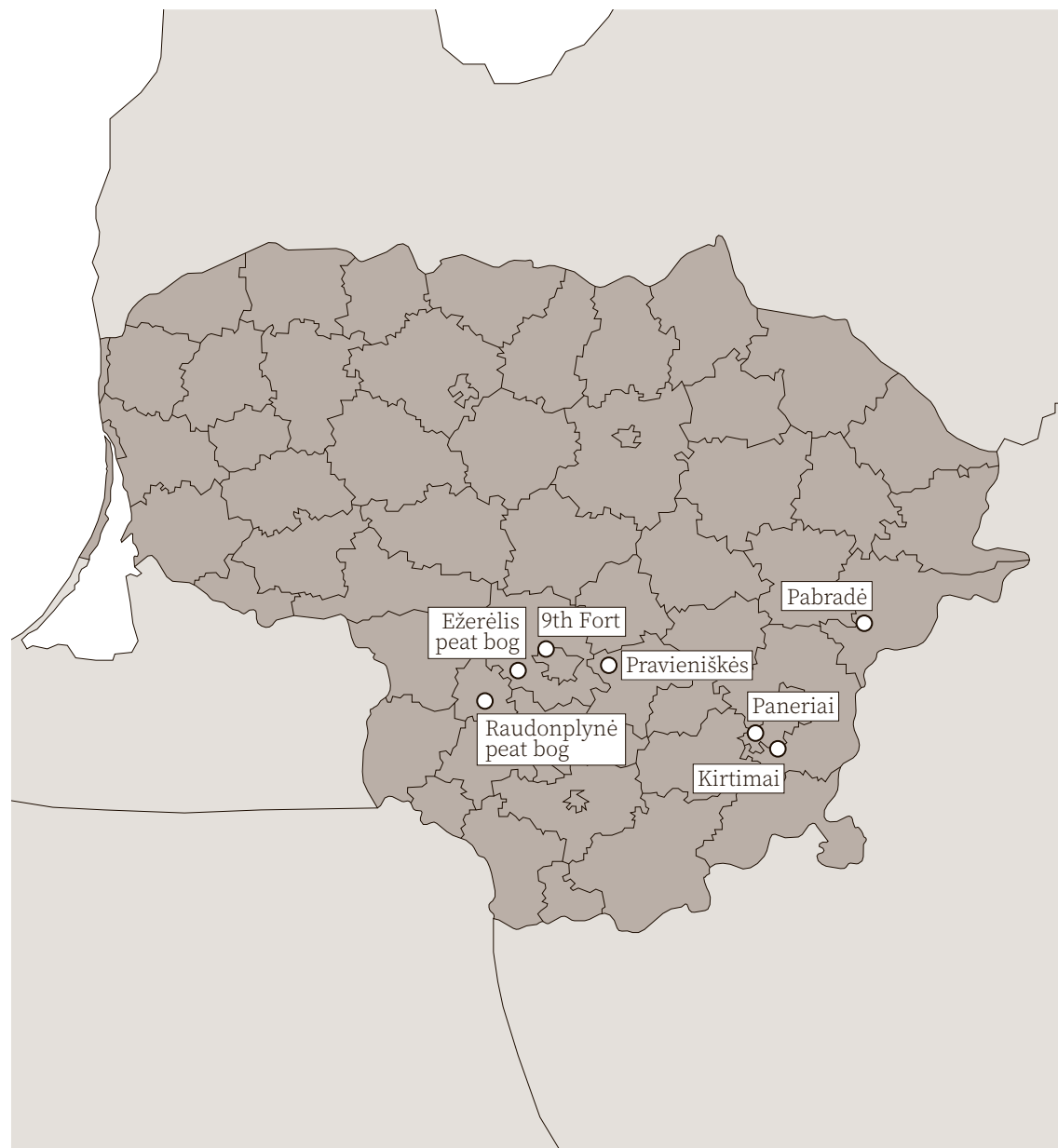
camps. Hundreds of Lithuanian Roma were taken to Germany and its occupied countries in 1944 for forced labour and detention in concentration camps. It is not known how many of them died there, but the extant documents suggest that most of them survived and returned to Lithuania after the war. Probably the most Roma deported to Germany were imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp. It is not known exactly how many Roma were killed in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation. One could presume that the number of victims was no more than a few hundred. According to Vytautas Toleikis, at least 500 people died during the years of Nazi occupation, i.e. approximately every third Lithuanian Rom.<sup>78</sup>



“Lithuanian Roma during the Nazi Occupation” – conclusions approved by the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania on 2002-06-19

Source: <https://www.komisija.lt/>

<sup>78</sup> Toleikis, “Lietuvos romai nacių okupacijos metais,” 58.

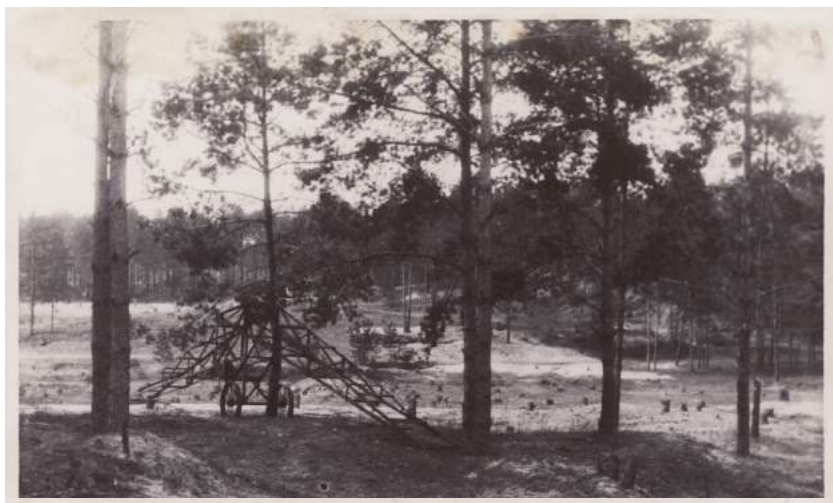


Roma detention and killing sites mentioned in documents



The road to Paneriai.

Photo from the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.



Mass murder site in Paneriai.

Photo from the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.

Neringa Latvytė

## Paneriai: The Largest Mass Shooting Site in Lithuania

Paneriai is the largest site of massacres organised by the Nazi regime and carried out with local collaborators. According to the latest available data, it is likely that in 1941-1944, the Vilnius Special Unit subordinate to the German Security Police and SD shot 50,000-70,000 people, most of whom were Jews from Vilnius and the Vilnius region, but also Roma, members of the Polish underground, Soviet prisoners of war, soldiers from the Lithuanian Territorial Defence Force and other locals who were persecuted by the Nazi regime for racial, socio-economic and ideological reasons.

Before World War II, the beautiful area of Paneriai near Vilnius was a popular place to relax. In 1939, after regaining Vilnius and the Vilnius region, which had previously belonged to the Republic of Poland, Lithuania was forced to admit Soviet Union army corps, and fuel storage and ammunition depots began to be built for them in Aukštieji Paneriai. On 24 June 1941, the Germans who had occupied Vilnius noticed an unfinished fuel base right next to the Paneriai railway station.<sup>79</sup> At the time, there were over a dozen pits dug out there that the Nazis decided to use for mass extermination campaigns. The site chosen for the massacres met all the requirements for mass destruction: the condemned could be herded in from nearby Vilnius, or brought in by truck or train from other areas, and the forest blocked the site from inquiring eyes and muffled the sound of the shooting. The name “base” was appropriate for the killing site and was originally used purposefully by the murderers to make people think that Paneriai was a labour camp or a third ghetto.<sup>80</sup>

Yuliy Farber, one of the members of the Special Unit for exhumation and cremation (Soderkommando 1005 A) imprisoned in Paneriai, recalled that former Vilna (Vilnius) Ghetto prisoner

<sup>79</sup> Акт о злодеяниях совершенных немецко – фашистскими захватчиками в местности Понары [1944]. LSA (Lithuanian Special Archives), f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 20037/3, t. 3. lap. 211; Luftwaffe Airfields 1945. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). 373-TVGX459-SK-exp521.

<sup>80</sup> Аврахам Суцкевер, Из Вильнюсского гетто. Москва, Екатеринбург: Центр и Фонд «Холокост», издательство «МИК», 2008, с. 71.

Avraham Blyazer, who was imprisoned with him and has escaped from two massacres in Paneriai, had said that at the Paneriai killing site, “there was no barbed wire in 1941.”<sup>81</sup> It is believed that the double<sup>82</sup> 1.8-2 metre-high<sup>83</sup> barbed wire fence<sup>84</sup> was only constructed as the massacres intensified. Witnesses have mentioned that there may have been land mines around the entire grounds of the base.<sup>85</sup> At least two gates had to be passed through in order to enter the base.<sup>86</sup>

It is believed that at first, the grounds of the Paneriai base were not constantly guarded – only during the massacres. This notion can be formed when reading about the escape of Mrs Tsak – a teacher from Vilnius – from the Paneriai killing site, which was mentioned in the diary that Polish journalist and bibliographer Herman Kruk wrote in the Vilna Ghetto: “We both dragged ourselves to some barbed wire fence and from there to the gate. No one was there either. The gate was tied with a piece of wire, which could easily be opened.”<sup>87</sup> However, by December 1941 - January 1942, the people there said “the place is surrounded by a guard, and you are shot for approaching.”<sup>88</sup> On the side of the gate facing the road, there was a sign in German that said that entry into the territory was prohibited not only for civilians, but also for officials. According to witnesses, there were orders to shoot anyone who approached the fence.



Exhumation of the remains of victims carried out at the Paneriai killing by the Extraordinary Commission on 15-23 August 1944. Photo from the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum.

The grounds were guarded by SS and SD groups and special police units.<sup>89</sup> According to Yuliy Farber, in late December 1943, the Paneriai base had a triple barbed wire fence, and the grounds were guarded by external and internal guards. There were several gates inside the grounds. Behind the third was the barracks for the internal guard<sup>90</sup> and a prison pit for the exhumation and cremation unit.

According to the conclusions of the experts of the Extraordinary State Commission for Ascertaining and Investigating Crimes Perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders and their Accomplices (hereinafter – the Extraordinary Commission) who worked at Paneriai on 15-23 August 1944 and investigated ten sites (seven pits and three canals), people were massively and systematically exterminated in the Paneriai forest during World War II. The vast majority of victims were civilians, although bodies of soldiers were also found. The majority of the victims were Jews, with slightly fewer Russians, Poles, Roma and Lithuanians. Almost all of the victims died from gunshot wounds or injuries. From the documents and personal belongings that were found, it was possible to establish that people of various professions were shot in Paneriai: doctors, engineers, students, drivers, machinists, railwaymen, tailors, watchmakers, etc. Some bodies were even identified by relatives or friends.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Борис Розин и Юлий Фарбер. Яма. Независимый альманах «Лебедь». Но. 636 [interactive] 2011-06-22: 21, accessed 2020-03-31, <http://lebed.com/2011/art5860.htm>.

<sup>82</sup> Показания Сигизмунда Повловского. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4913, lap. 4.

<sup>83</sup> Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939-1944* (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2004), 339.

<sup>84</sup> “A barbed wire fence in the grove surrounding the Ponary mass extermination site near Vilnius (Vilna),” Ghetto Fighters House Archive (GFH), Catalogue No 5902.

<sup>85</sup> Акт о злодеяниях совершенных немецко – фашистскими захватчиками в местности Понары [1944]. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 20037/3, t. 3, lap. 211.

<sup>86</sup> Wiktor Iwanowski, *Wilno, Ojczyzna moja... Wspomnienia* (Szczecin, 1994), 363.

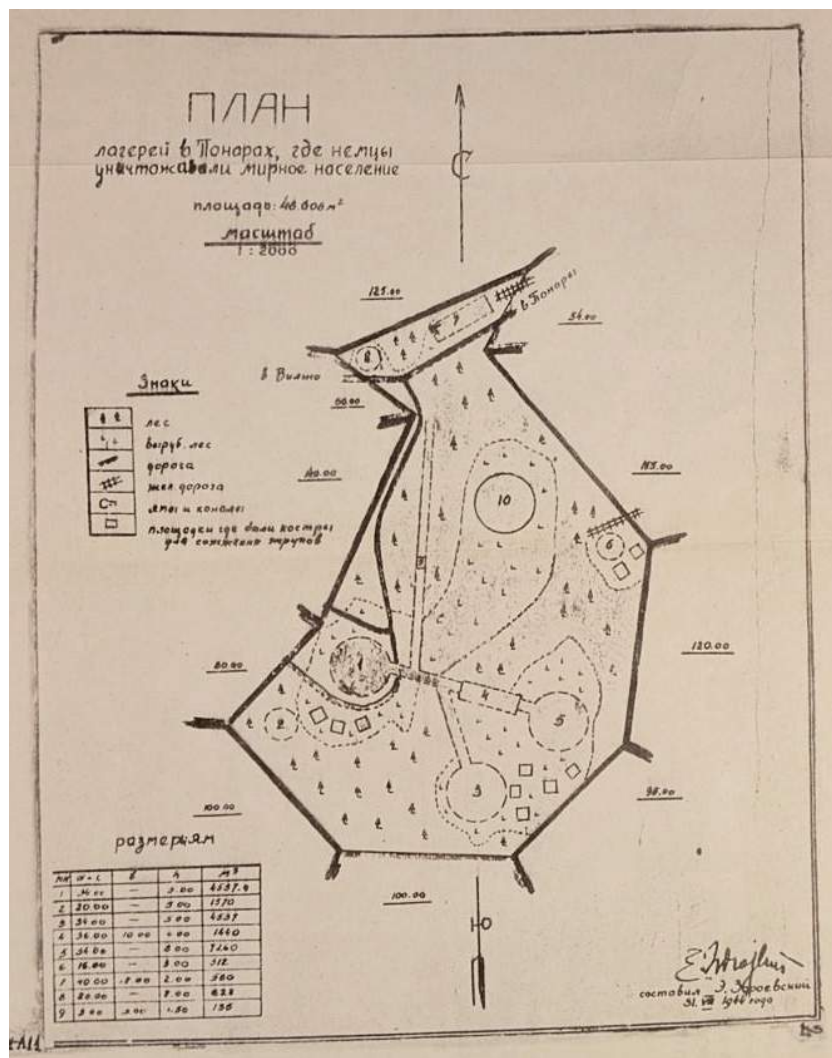
<sup>87</sup> Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania*, 262.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>89</sup> Акт о злодеяниях совершенных немецко – фашистскими захватчиками в местности Понары [1944]. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 20037/3, t. 3, lap. 211. Показания Аврахама Блязера. 1944 08 15. ГАРФ (Государственный архив Российской Федерации), ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 63–64; Протокол допроса свидетеля Юхневичева Мария. 1944 08 06. ГАРФ, ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 48.

<sup>90</sup> Yad Vashem Archives. 3380/412; Борис Розин и Юлий Фарбер. Яма. Независимый альманах «Лебедь». Но. 636 [interactive], 2011-06-22: 22, accessed 2020-03-31, <http://lebed.com/2011/art5860.htm>; “A bunker at the Ponary mass extermination site, which housed the Jewish ‘Sonderkommando’ men.” Ghetto Fighters House Archive (GFH). Catalogue No 5916.

<sup>91</sup> Заявление Потанина Константина в Государственную Чрезвычайную комиссию ЦК партии. 1944 08 13. ГАРФ, ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 93–95.



In a map of the mass murder site in Paneriai drawn on 31 July 1944 by Extraordinary Commission Member E. Zdroevski, the “Kaunas pit” was marked No 7 and 8. Lithuanian Special Archives.

The massacres were carried out according to a pre-arranged plan: the victims were brought to the killing site, then divided into groups and herded to the murder pit, where they were shot. The first victims of the mass murder campaigns were not undressed, but later, the members of the Special Unit would undress the victims by the gate of the Paneriai base. Sometimes the people who were brought in by truck were told to leave their clothes in the vehicle, and sometimes the victims were told to leave their clothes right before being shot in the pit.<sup>92</sup> At Paneriai, they used 9 mm and 7.65 mm machine guns as well as German pistols,<sup>93</sup> and victims were shot at close range, with a revolver to the nape of the neck.<sup>94</sup>

The detainees at Paneriai were shot by members of the Special Unit (Sonderkommando) of the German Security Police and the SD. “The Vilnius Special Unit was mentioned for the first time in documents on 15 July 1941. The documents discuss issuing ammunition for the work of the Special Unit. According to the testimony given by members of the Special Unit to the Soviet security force, the Lithuanian reserve police unit was established in the first days of the war. At the time, there were about 100 people in the unit wearing civilian clothes. ...The members of the unit were used as guards and to drive Jews out of their flats to the ghetto.”<sup>95</sup> The first organisers of the unit were junior lieutenants Petras Jakubka and Mečys Butkus. Officer Juozas Šidlauskas was put in charge of the unit on 23 July 1941.<sup>96</sup> The unit was armed with Russian shotguns and wore white armbands. In November 1941, Lieutenant Balys Norvaiša was appointed head of the unit, and Balys Lukošius became his deputy. The number of unit members was reduced to 40-50 in 1942. “Most of the members of the unit were Lithuanians, with just a few Russians and Poles. The Special Unit was subordinate only to the German security police and followed the instructions of its officers.”<sup>97</sup> The

<sup>92</sup> Yad Vashem Archives. 2725/23, 4613/915, 75FO4; Kazimierz Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary, 1941-1943* (Vilnius: Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, 2004), 90; Testimony of witness Avraham Blyazer. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4911, t. 8, lap. 5.

<sup>93</sup> Report of the Extraordinary Commission, 1944-08-26, LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4911, t. 8, lap. 21.

<sup>94</sup> Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary*, 90-96.

<sup>95</sup> Arūnas Bubnys, *Vokiečių saugumo policijos ir SD ypatingasis būrys Vilniuje (1941-1944)*. From “Atminties dienos” (Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1995), 183.

<sup>96</sup> “Darbo planas ypatingo būrio prie vokiečių SD nusikalstamai veiklai nustatyti,” LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4914, lap. 2.

<sup>97</sup> Arūnas Bubnys, “Mirties konvejeris Paneriuose: budeliai ir aukos.” From Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary*, 8-9.

members of the unit wore SD uniforms and held SD identification cards. Company Sergeant Major Jonas Tumas took command of the unit in late 1943. For their service, the members of the Special Unit were paid a salary of a few dozen marks, and were also issued provisions. SS-Untersturmführer Martin Weiss was at the helm of the Special Unit for the longest, and took part in the Paneriai massacres himself as well. “The Special Unit was created specifically to kill people and did this ‘job’ for the entirety of its existence. This unit shot the most people in 1941. At that time, its members went to the Paneriai nearly every day for that purpose. ...20-30 men from the Special Unit would go to shoot. Some did the shooting, while others stood guard or led people to the pits.”<sup>98</sup> According to the report of SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger, at least 20,000 Jews – as well as Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, communists, Soviet activists and prisoners of war – were shot in Paneriai by the end of 1941.<sup>99</sup> In herding the large groups to Paneriai and shooting them, the Special Unit “was assisted by soldiers of the German and Lithuanian police battalions. ...There were cases when the Germans would photograph the shootings.”<sup>100</sup>

## Roma Among the Victims in Paneriai

Although the first four Roma victims in Paneriai were first mentioned in 1942,<sup>101</sup> the most information about Roma who were killed in Paneriai was provided by a few members of the Special Unit for exhumation and cremation who escaped from this place through a dug-out tunnel in April 1944 and who gave testimony to investigators from the Soviet Union’s Extraordinary Commission immediately after the war. It is known that in late March 1944, 87 Roma and 15 Polish railwaymen were brought in by train to be killed.<sup>102</sup> However, victims were usually herded to the Paneriai mass murder site in columns on foot.<sup>103</sup> They were only brought in by train on 4 April

<sup>98</sup> Bubnys, *Vokiečių saugumo policijos ir SD ypatingasis būrys Vilniuje*, 184.

<sup>99</sup> 1 December 1941 report written by German Security Police and SD Commander, SS-Standartenführer Karl Jäger to the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) in Berlin about the activities of Einsatzkommando 3/A. LČSA (Lithuanian Central State Archives), f. 1742, ap. 1, b. 2, lap. 1-9.

<sup>100</sup> Bubnys, *Vokiečių saugumo policijos ir SD ypatingasis būrys Vilniuje*, 185-186; Bundesarchiv. BA, 162/2503; Yad Vashem Archives. 2725/23, 4613/915, 75FO4.

<sup>101</sup> *Masinės žudynės Lietuvoje*, d. 1, (Vilnius: Mintis, 1965), 40.

<sup>102</sup> Заявление Потанина Константина в Государственную Черезвычайную комиссию ЦК партии. 1944-08-13. ГАРФ, ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 35; J. Petrauskas, “Paneriuose,” *Tiesa*, 1944-08-23, No 40 (101), 3.



In a map of the mass murder site in Paneriai drawn on 31 July 1944 by Extraordinary Commission Member E. Zdroevzki, the “Kaunas pit” was marked No 7 and 8.

Lithuanian Special Archives.

1943 (5,000 Jews from liquidated ghettos in Vilnius District)<sup>104</sup> and in late March 1944. The members of the exhumation and cremation unit mentioned that the Roma were shot in the so-called “Kaunas pit”. According to a map of the mass murder site in Paneriai drawn by E. Zdroevzki in 1946,<sup>105</sup> the 560 m<sup>3</sup> pit/trench marked No 7 and the 628 m<sup>3</sup> pit<sup>106</sup> No 8 was called the “Kaunas pit” by the members of the exhumation and cremation unit. These sites got this name after the prisoners from the liquidated ghettos in the counties of Vilnius were brought to Paneriai to be killed, having been told that they were not going to Paneriai, but rather – to the Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto.

One member of the exhumation and cremation unit testified that the Kaunas ditch and pit were located near the road to Grodno and claimed that in March 1944, “84 Gypsies and 15 Polish railwaymen were brought in at the end of the month, including two girls. They were all shot by the bonfire spot, one by one. You heard a gunshot and a scream, a gunshot and a scream.”<sup>107</sup> In 1944, the daily newspaper *Tiesa* wrote about the exhumation at Paneriai as follows: “That same year (1944), they brought in a few dozen Gypsies and a few dozen Lithuanian soldiers and shot them in the so-called ‘Kaunas pit’. From the soldiers, the cremation unit got 37 brand new green caps, and the same number of trousers, jackets and greatcoats. In the upper layer of the ‘Kaunas pit’, the cremation unit found the corpses of around 250 children... There are still people in the ‘Kaunas pit’ who haven’t been cremated. They will be dug up eventually.”<sup>108</sup>

Members of the exhumation and cremation unit testified that in early April 1944, they found the not-yet buried or decomposed bodies of 37 Lithuanians wearing identical military uniforms at the top of the “Kaunas pit”. In total, some 8,000 bodies were found in the pit and the ditch. The bodies of 252 children between the ages of one and five were found in a separate location in the same pit. All of their skulls had been smashed. Seven young women who had been stripped and raped were also found there. One of them was biting her right hand. Probably because she was buried alive. In the upper layer of the pit, 2,900 corpses were excavated – the adults were clothed, but the children were stripped. There were 4,500 naked victims in the lower layer of the pit.

In his recollections, Yuliy Farber mentioned that somewhere around early April 1944, he and the other cremators were taken to the end of the railway branch line, “where 50 Gypsies were laying

there, probably the entire settlement that was brought in the day before and immediately shot. They probably tried to escape, because their bodies were scattered all over the place. Some had managed to run 60 steps. And one girl, it seemed to us, was alive. Women, children... We were told to strip them – the men were wearing those short fur coats that we now call дублёнки [sheepskin coats], collect the bodies, put them on the pile of corpses, and set them on fire.”<sup>109</sup> He also mentioned that in the last week of March 1944, 50 Roma (five of whom were men – the others were women and children) and 15 Poles were liquidated along with 450 Jews.<sup>110</sup> Based on archival documents, it can be assumed that as many as 100 Lithuanian Roma could have been killed in Paneriai, the largest massacre site in Lithuania.

In his diary, Lukiškės prison chaplain Juozas Baltramonaitis mentions that before Easter, on 12 April 1944, “they took 46 Gypsies and one Russian to the final solution [to Paneriai], which really spoiled the spirit of Holy Saturday. They took the Gypsies with young children. 26 Gypsies (all adults) confessed and received communion. I baptised three Gypsies.”<sup>110a</sup>

Based on archival documents, it can be assumed that as many as 100 Lithuanian Roma could have been killed in Paneriai, the largest massacre site in Lithuania.

<sup>103</sup> Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary*, 34, 28, 44, 48, 52, 54; Протокол судебного заседания воеводского суда в Олштыне. Показания свидетеля Виктора Ивановского 1977-05-17. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 47746/3, t. 3, lap. 208; Testimony of witness Sofija Kovalskaja. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4913, lap. 153; Grigorijus Šuras, *Vilniaus geto kronika 1941-1944* (Vilnius: Era, 1997), 39.

<sup>104</sup> Sakowicz, *Ponary Diary*, 87; Протокол судебного заседания воеводского суда в Олштыне. Показания свидетеля Виктора Ивановского 1977-05-17. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 58, b. 47746/3, t. 3, lap. 206; Testimony of witness Sofija Kovalskaja. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4913, lap. 153.

<sup>105</sup> План лагерей в Понарах, где немцы уничтожали мирное население. 1946-08-31. LSA, f. K-1, ap. 46, b. 4911, lap. 14–8.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Заявление Потанина Константина в Государственную Чрезвычайную комиссию ЦК партии. 1944 08 13. ГАРФ, ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 35.

<sup>108</sup> Petrauskas, “Paneriuose,” 3.

<sup>109</sup> Борис Розин и Юлий Фарбер. Яма. Независимый альманах «Лебедь». Но. 636 [interactive], 2011-06-22: 10-11, accessed 2020-03-31, <http://lebed.com/2011/art5860.htm>.

<sup>110</sup> Юлий Фарбер. Мы не сдавались. «Дружба народов». 1997. Номер 5, ст. 186.

<sup>110a</sup> Vaclovas Aliulis, “Kalėjimo kapeliono Juozo Baltramoničio dienoraštį (1942-1944) suradus,” *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, Vilnius, 2003, t. 22, 590.

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“Given the wide range of victims, the mass murder site in Paneriai, as a historical site, should be treated in several ways: 1) as the largest site of massacres organised and carried out by the Nazis in Lithuania in terms of the number of victims; 2) as the largest Holocaust site in Lithuania in terms of the number of victims; 3) as the largest killing site for Poles in the Vilnius region; and, in view of the general topography of the terror of the Nazi regime in Europe, 4) as one of the most distinct Holocaust shooting sites in Eastern Europe and one of the first training areas for this ‘method’. Paneriai can also be viewed as a crime scene, the traces of which the criminals, following the instructions of Berlin, began trying to destroy in December 1943, just like at many other major Holocaust sites.”

Dr Zigmantas Vitkus, historian

## Testimony of Zofija Beresnevičiūtė-Sinkevičienė About the Life of the Roma in Labour Camps

Testimony documented by Vida Beinortienė

As the genocide of Lithuanian Roma only became a matter of interest quite a bit later, most of the people who survived the Holocaust were no longer able to share testimonies about their experience at labour and concentration camps. On 18 October 2006, Vida Beinortienė documented the very valuable account of a Roma woman from Panevėžys who survived the genocide.

Zofija Beresnevičiūtė in Buchenwald, 1945.  
Source: Panevėžio romų kančių keliai  
1941–1945 m.



### When asked about the life of the Roma in labour camps, Zofija Beresnevičiūtė-Sinkevičienė says:<sup>111</sup>

“When the war started, they caught Jews in the street and took them or drove them to the ghetto, which was on Krekenavos Street. Then they drove them to Žalioji. When people heard that they were driving Jews to Žalioji [Forest] to shoot them, everyone ran to watch. Zofija’s family ran from Tilvyčio Street. The ghetto was close; the streets were next to each other. They herded them nicely. But the Jews were really crying. The scream echoed in Panevėžys. Everyone knew they were going to be shot. The people were really frightened. And there were a lot of people herding them – a whole group. They

<sup>111</sup> Vida Beinortienė, compiled by Daiva Tumasonytė, editor Lionė Lapinskienė, *Panevėžio romų kančių keliai 1941–1945 m.* (Panevėžys: VšĮ Komunikacijos centras „Kalba. Knyga. Kūryba“, 2016).

were dressed in German army clothes. When the Jews were shot, the Gypsies were still living at ease – they had no idea that they would suffer too. There was this man Juozas from Upytė, he transported people and shot Jews. He says they’d give him something to drink so he’d go and shoot. It was the end of January, right after New Year’s 1943. Zofija’s acquaintance Starkevičius came with the Germans. And there were others, but his was the only name Zofija remembers. And they started driving their family out of their home. At the time, their family was living at 26 Tilvyčio Street. It was a long wooden house. That building has since been demolished and is now a kindergarten. Their entire family (there were also other Gypsies in the house) was driven out. They drove them out with the children and pregnant women, herding everyone from the house to the ghetto. Zofija’s baba [grandmother] was already quite old. At night, Germans and Lithuanians came. They say, “let’s go.” The Lithuanians translate it and tell them what they said. Zofija didn’t understand German – she only began to understand it later. Her baba was crying, there was something wrong with her heart. They gave her some medicine, drops. You have to go, like it or not. It was unexpected. They did everything at night so that other people wouldn’t know, wouldn’t see.

Then priests came to the ghetto – they heard confessions, baptised people, and married the ones who were living in sin. People received Communion. Right there, in the ghetto. Maybe the priests knew what was going on, but they didn’t tell people anything. Nobody understood what it was all for. They thought they were going to take them to work. There were maybe four or five priests. The priests were there during the day. Other Gypsies had already been baptised. The Gypsies were baptised in an orderly fashion. Zofija’s godparents were Lithuanian. She was baptised at church when she was little. They are believers and went to church before the war. They used to celebrate Christmas. When the priests came, it was their last rites, only no one understood that.

Then the next day, the Gypsies said they had a pig at home. The Germans let them go back and slaughter it. And they slaughtered it. Aunt Teodora [later referred to as Dora] and Uncle Juozas Jablonskis. And then came back to the ghetto. The Germans said you’ll have something to eat there. They said we’ll need to eat at Pravieniškės. That was the first time they said that they were taking us to Pravieniškės. When they were arrested, they didn’t live in the ghetto for

long, maybe a week. They lived there and thought that they would go back. They didn't have anything to eat, they didn't give them anything. Only what they had from home. Uncle Mykolas Jablonskis butchered that pig and salted it; it wasn't large. Uncle put the pieces in a bag and put it in Zofija's basket. Zofija asked Aunt Dora if they would shoot them on Saturday or Sunday. Her aunt answered, saying: what fool told you that – what are they going to shoot us for? They shot the Jews because they were really smart, and the Germans didn't want smart people. But why shoot Gypsies? And how many they shot in Poland. Very many were shot. They herded them on foot from the ghetto through town to the railway station, to cattle wagons. They took them to Pravieniškės.

They cooked that pig at Pravieniškės in the woods. Everybody wanted to eat. Others came and asked for some. Baba would give some to others too, not just her own people. Nobody else had anything. Pravieniškės was the main distribution point (in Roma recollections – prison) before being transported to Germany or France for work. The Germans treated the Gypsies very badly there. They would beat them with batons. Zofija had a ring and the Germans pulled it off. They pulled earrings out too. Not just hers – anyone who had them. They took their shoes and gave them these clogs with wooden soles. They had to walk to work. They really tortured them. The Germans said the Gypsies were kaput. The Lithuanians did the same. They also beat them with batons, like the Germans. The Gypsies were herded to work in rows of four. If one of them didn't walk they would beat them. They would really beat them. When they got to the work site, one of the detainees – this officer, a tall man named Vytas – wanted to escape, so they shot him. The officer was dressed in Smetona [interwar period] clothes. Zofija didn't know what for – they didn't let them talk there. When they shot him, they scalped him completely. They made all of the people get down on their knees and said that the same thing will happen to them if they try to escape. That's how it was at Pravieniškės.

At Pravieniškės, they had to carry logs 2-3 metres long. With thick trunks, men would carry the front and back, and women had to carry the middle. Zofija goes over to a tree. Without gloves, in clogs; there was snow and her hands and feet were cold. Zofija lifts a stick – it would have been faster if she had gloves. It slips out of her hands, she can't lift it. A German comes over, points his rifle at her and aims. But she wasn't scared. She drops to her knees

in front of him. At that moment, the soldiers come over. When Zofija lived on Pušaloto Street and was in first grade, she knew the father, may he rest in peace, of one of the soldiers. But he was older than her. When the German wanted to pull Zofija into the forest, that man from Panevėžys comes over and says that they were neighbours, that they went to school together. Forgive her. They looked. He pulls Zofija over to his side. It was a cold winter; he makes a fire. That man from Panevėžys begins telling Zofija a story. He says that if you want, I'll let you go when they bring lunch. Just don't give me away. But she was afraid of escaping. She said that she wasn't going to go anywhere. He told her that they were going to shoot her on Friday or Saturday. They were going to shoot everybody. He said he would teach her how to stay alive. He knew everything. He was taken into the army – he was innocent, young. He said that long pits had been dug out and that at night they would call them out according to the list, and Zofija's surname – Beresnevičiūtė – started with B. He told her to raise her hand and go when they called her. Zofija did just that. "Oh, gut, gut, you pretty little one, you'll go to Germany, to Saxony..." said the German immediately. They didn't shoot Zofija because she had raised her hand. Zofija doesn't know why the Germans did that. She thinks the Germans simply liked it that way. And the ones who didn't raise their hand – they shot them all. But whoever did raise their hand was taken to Germany. Then Zofija saw her brothers [Aleksas and Jonas Beresnevičius] – they were standing in front of her. Zofija began to scream, "everyone raise your hands!" She screamed in Lithuanian, Russian, Romani. Now she doesn't understand how they didn't shoot her then. But what was she supposed to do? She took a risk. She thought to herself, "will they shoot me or not?" She grabbed them by the hair and pulled them over to her side. After that, the ones who didn't raise their hands – old people, little kids – they shot them all. Uncles, cousins, children and grandparents were shot at Pravieniškės. Zofija heard them shooting people at Pravieniškės. The people who lived there saw them being shot. They didn't shoot the children – they threw them into the pit alive. They say the earth moved for two or three days. They locked them up and shot them at night. People suffocated. Zofija's aunt, baba, cousins, her brother's children – they were all shot.

Zofija escaped from there. When she was in the column on the way to work, Zofija asked the guard if she could do her business a

bit farther off. That time it wasn't a German, but a Ukrainian. Zofija went off and didn't come back. Later, Zofija thought of him often and prayed for him, but she didn't know either his name or surname. They shot her in the leg. But she managed to escape. She would spend the night with different people. She would never stay long in one place. She didn't want to get anyone in trouble. People would give her food, a place to sleep, clothes. She tried to stay with older people. She went into a little farmhouse, looked at her – her leg was bandaged. Then that old lady kept her for a week, gave her goose fat. Zofija didn't know that her sons were in the forest. Zofija laid on the stove. She didn't show her to anyone. The curtains were drawn; it was an old-fashioned stove. One son was against the Germans, the other wasn't. Antanas came in, his mother's heart ached; she embraced him like a child. The biggest lamp was lit on the table, and Zofija saw everything through the curtain. The mother asks what he would do if he saw Juozas. He says he'd shoot him. Antanas went for the Russians. She asks if he wouldn't feel bad shooting his brother. He says he wouldn't. Juozas came, he went for the Germans. Juozas came to see his mother. His mother also asks him what he would do. He was different. He didn't say that about his brother. But the other did. And she, may she rest in peace, didn't show Zofija to anyone. Zofija realised that the sons – one or the other – were bad for her. So she left early in the morning. The old lady gave her salo, bread, butter.

She went to Tilvyčio Street. Born and raised there, Zofija knew the way well. And she would ask people how to get to Panevėžys... Tilvyčio Street was where their home was. Zofija found an empty house. Aunt Elžbieta [Jablonskaitė] wasn't there. She had run away. People took Zofija in and hid her until she came back. The house was unlocked. Everything had been taken out. But there were beds so Zofija spent the night. She walked around for three days – it was empty, nobody was there. Zofija hoped that maybe someone would come, maybe her aunt. And then that man saw Zofija. He was there when their entire family was driven out of their home. He asked where she had come from. She said that she wasn't Beresnevičiūtė – she was Jablonskaitė [her parents hadn't registered their marriage, so her father was Jablonskis, and her mother was Beresnevičiūtė; her father died when Zofija was nine, and her mom died a year later]. But he recognised her. He arrested her again. They interrogated her, burned her chest. They asked her where she had been, what she

had seen, how she had escaped. They wanted her to snitch. Three people tortured, kicked and beat her; they wanted her to tell them where she had been, what she had seen. They beat her once, twice, three times. They burned her chest – she still has a scar on her breast. A mark, from the matches. Zofija said she didn't stay with anyone, just walked and walked. She couldn't tell them. Then they put her in the ghetto again. They held her there, but they took other people and carted them away.

When they took her to the ghetto again, it was winter, late 1943. They spent the entire winter at Pravieniškės. That time they were all together: her baba, cousins, two brothers, grandfather, uncles, aunts. At Pravieniškės, Zofija remembers this little spoon, a tiny one – half a teaspoon of sugar or jam. They used to make horse leg soup. They would toss in an herb or a piece of pasta. The saved, and knew that they would be shot sooner or later. But everyone lived as clean as possible. Zofija's baba loved cleanliness. The cots were low and wide. Zofija had to scrub them with her aunt – they were white and beautiful. They brought their pillows from here, from Tilvyčio Street. They brought their own bedding, but not much. They took as much as they could. The Germans used to say, "gut, gut, Gypsies kaput." The Germans were really horrible. Zofija said there was one time when she couldn't lift a tree so one wanted to shoot her; she dropped to her knees. Then he grabbed her by the hair. But the urge to shoot her passed quickly. That German was maybe four years older than her. Then he acknowledged her somehow and told her to escape, but she was afraid. One Gypsy, may he rest in peace, had escaped at Pravieniškės. He was arrested and taken to the death chamber. He asked them to let him sing one last song. He sang so beautifully. So all the Gypsies came out of the barracks to listen. He was pardoned as a result. They let him go. All the Gypsies hugged, wept. He sang a Russian song. He sang beautifully, he had a beautiful voice. Then he went to Germany too. And the others were shot. And the ones who weren't shot, they herded them on foot to the wagons.

They took them from Pravieniškės to France. It was a long wagon, for transporting livestock. Wherever the train stopped, new people were crammed in. They didn't give them any water, but the people asked for it – they were travelling along the sea, but they said it was salty and didn't give them any. One drew up a bottle and gave it to them, but it was really salty so they couldn't drink it. It was cold in the wagon and people laid on the floor with nothing to cover

themselves with. They could hear them shoot when they went. He aunt started crying. Then they fired again. It wasn't to France that they had been taken, but to Germany. Malina alone (she wasn't from Panevėžys) left six children in Pravieniškės. She only had one child with her. After the war, Zofija's Uncle Juozas married her. When they got to Berlin, they gave everyone a little bit to eat. In Germany. A little bit of bread. He told us to get on our knees and everybody got on their knees. Like for a king. He just loved seeing helpless people kneeling before him. Like there are those paper cups for ice cream, they would give them some soup. Zofija held that cup, but the bottom fell apart and the soup spilled out. The next day there was a little loaf of white bread for four people. You got weak, you don't see food. One person had half a bag of dried bread. And when you want to go to the toilet, you stand by the door and go. The entire wagon was like that. Everything stayed in the wagon. Sometimes they would throw it out the little window. Then they took them to France.

When they arrived, there were no people there, no one. It was a camp. There were prisoners, but there were no civilians. There was this iron building. Three or four stories high. The commandant was German. The water was turned off there. When you need to have a drink, you turn it on. That they'd take you to the sauna – that didn't happen. There was no shower. When people would find some water in a puddle, they'd wash up, wash their clothes, and that's it. The building in France that they put them in was large, a few stories high. Her brothers were in the same town, just at a different camp. Once Zofija received a letter from the men's camp that her brother Leksa [Aleksas Beresnevičius] had been injured and was in the hospital. Her brother had wanted to eat and had crawled through some barbed wire to look for food. The guard saw him and shot him. His insides were injured. He survived the operation. They kicked him. Zofija asked to be allowed to visit him in the hospital, falling on her knees before the commandant to beg him. He didn't let her. Her brother was very handsome and sang beautifully. One eye was brown and the other was blue. That's how he was born. They could have let her visit but they didn't. A bit later, Zofija received another letter that her brother had died. And that's where he was left to lay. They kicked Zofija too. The commandant kicked her, then two men kicked her – the commandant and another man.

In France, they would give you a small loaf of bread. They gave you bread once a day. In France, the soldiers were Italians. And the prisoners were Russians, Lithuanians, Gypsies and women. They did hard labour. They had to make bomb shelters, and also cleaned up demolished houses, carried bricks, and dug pits, two metres long, two wide and two deep. One time Zofija dug it out fast, and there was an old Gypsy woman who was taking a long time, and Zofija wanted to help her. Then she died in the camp. Zofija did that work for her – sweat was running off of her and she sat down on the ground. A German came over. She was doing her job, and he came over and kicked her. Zofija was so riled up that she didn't even know what happened to her, but she picked up this branch and hit the German in the head, knocking his cap off. The German said, "ooh, ooh, kaput, kaput." He summoned all the Germans. And in the basement there was a lot of water. The basement was wide and deep. There were these stairs. It's good that she knew how to swim. They kept her there for a couple of hours. Then one man came and said that the girl was a good worker; he wanted to take her out of there. He climbed down the stairs and pulled her out, all wet. She could have frozen in there. They would really beat them in Pravieniškės. The people in France were better. When the Germans retreated, they said, "stay, don't work." Working in France, they would give you a chance to rest. The French would turn away, the civilians would turn away and walk off a bit. "It was horrible, really horrible..." remembers Zofija. But then things got better for them when they began to receive parcels from Lithuania. In France, everyone was in their own clothes. They wanted to give ones with these numbers, like it was for Jews. These yellow ones. But then they took those numbers off. They gave them clothes in France. Zofija remembers that they gave her a dress. The girls made earrings from necklaces.

When the Americans came in, Zofija had her picture taken. The Americans took her into the store and told her to take whatever she wanted. Fabric, clothes. Others took things because they were brought in as they were. Then they took them to Germany. It was easier in France. It's just too bad her brother died there. And in Germany it was harder with food. They would beat them and give them three unpeeled potatoes to eat. Zofija ran away from work once in Germany. She went to beg for food. They'd give her food vouchers, so she ran to the store, bought bread and ate it. They would count the people every three or four hours. Zofija ran to the store, said

that she wanted to eat, and the clerk gave her a little loaf of bread and a voucher. Zofija ate half of it at once. She happened upon a good person. She didn't have any documents on her. The documents were issued in Buchenwald when they were getting ready to let them go. In France, it was hard to fix the road. And it was even harder in Germany. In France, the people were better. They had to do hard labour, not like sweeping. In Germany she lived in a camp. A big one, with iron doors and an iron fence, all wrapped in barbed wire. There was one building with two stories. There were Lithuanians, Gypsies and Russians in that building. Women. The men were separate, out of sight. They slept on the ground. At first it was empty. Then they made these cots, above and below. Wooden ones. They gave them blankets. There was water for washing up. They themselves, the Germans, were clean people, and they liked cleanliness. They would go to wash their undergarments themselves, with cold water. There was nowhere to rinse them. In cold water. They would put them on to dry them. The Americans came in and gave them a piece of soap for five people. There you were a person like a fool. They shot at Pravieniškės, they shot the Jews – and they'll keep shooting them. Exhausting work, terrible food, constant physical punishment, bullying, fear.

They were sick of that suffering, the uncertainty, that kind of life. America came. There were a lot of Poles. A lot of men. Zofija, well, and the others, were very beautiful and young, the men really came on to them. But Zofija had no such business. She had beautiful braids, but the Germans cut them off. The last camp was Buchenwald. The people were locked up. They would give you these documents, but they didn't want to let you out so you wouldn't escape. They thought that the prisoners would ask people for money and go home. They knew America wouldn't shoot. There were no more Jews in Buchenwald. Only Poles, Gypsies, Lithuanians and Russians. Once, while working in Buchenwald, the German was standing on the bridge and Zofija stood up to take a break – she wanted to stand for a while and relax. He shot her with a slingshot. And hit her on the forehead, cutting her with the rock. There's still a mark. They wanted to shoot everybody at Buchenwald, but didn't have enough time – the Americans came in. They beat everyone at the camp, they didn't care if you were a Gypsy, a Russian or a Lithuanian. That's how they killed one person at Buchenwald. With a shovel to the head. The Germans were afraid that America would come here.

They took everyone away at night. In France, when they herded you to work, they wouldn't beat you. Sometimes they would take you to work in the morning. They'd give you tea, a pat of margarine or butter, bread. They didn't give you anything to eat during the day. After work, then they'd give you soup. With some kind of herbs, and maybe a piece of pasta tossed in. No one would do anything wrong there, but they would just come and beat you. Just for the heck of it. They'd come over and hit you. They'd bring a friend. The wife of one of the wardens was pregnant. Another wife would tell her husband. And she would watch and didn't forbid anything. Standing there with her fur coat and shoes, watching her husband beat people. He had this rubber stick. Some people would hide behind the others. He would beat the Lithuanians and the Gypsies. He beat the Gypsies more. And he'd beat the Russians. "Maybe he was a psycho," Zofija thinks.

One time everyone was locked up in one place – there were a lot of women. This intense German came into their barracks. Right to Zofija. She was frightened. "Go work," he said. He took Zofija and another girl away. It was scary with people like that. They washed the floor. That other girl saw a file. They read the names that were supposed to be taken away. There was an inkpot, so Zofija poured ink on the papers. He grabbed his head and then beat up Sonia. Then they were taken with the others to another town.

In 1945, when the Americans came in, Zofija and the others received offers from the Americans not to return to what was then the Soviet Union. Everyone turned them down and returned to Panevėžys. First her uncles – Juozas, Mykolas, Silvestras [Jablonskis] and others – and her brother Jonas [Beresnevičius] came back, and then the women. At that time, Zofija, like the others, was given cards for bread and sugar. There were Russians here. In Lenin Square they gave her clothes and meals for half a year. And that's how it ended."

Aurėja Jutelytė

## Recognition and Commemoration of the Roma Genocide

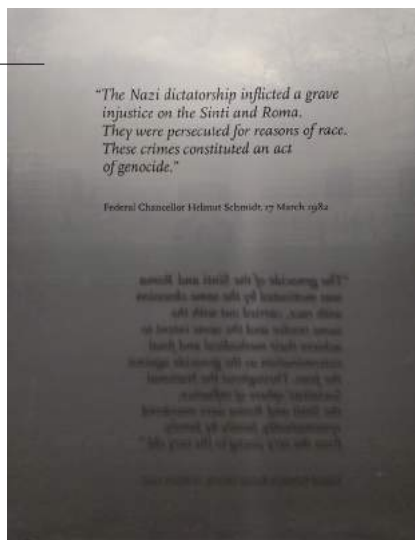
After World War II the European Roma who had survived persecution found themselves in an unenviable situation: most of them had lost their relatives and homes, were in poor health and had suffered severe psychological trauma, and were living in poverty. As societies in countries recovering from the war tried to grasp the scale of the Holocaust, and this tragedy gradually became a collective trauma of the 20th century, the Roma genocide received little attention in public discourse. For example, the process of denazification that was carried out in post-war Germany overlooked Nazi crimes against the Roma, so the persecution of the Roma did not become a political issue in this country.<sup>112</sup> Part of German society began to view the Roma as victims of Nazism only in the late 1940s, but this change was not significant and the marginalisation of Roma continued, with Romaphobia and discrimination against Roma still tolerated in society, except in cases where hate crimes were accompanied by open Nazi rhetoric.<sup>113</sup> As the political situation changed in the early 1970s,

"The Nazi dictatorship inflicted a grave injustice on the Sinti and Roma. They were persecuted for reasons of race. These crimes constituted an act of genocide.

Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.  
17 March 1982"

Memorial to the Sinti and Roma  
Victims of National Socialism, Berlin, 2020.

Photo by Aureja Jutelytė.



Memorial to the Sinti and Roma  
Victims of National Socialism, Berlin, 2020.  
Photo by Aureja Jutelytė.

Germany officially recognised the Roma as victims of Nazism, but the move was formal and did not add empathy or promote cultural recognition of the Roma in society. An important change at the political and societal levels came in 2012, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened a memorial to the victims of the Roma genocide in Berlin.<sup>114</sup>

Difficulties in commemorating the memory of the Roma genocide have also been encountered in other European countries whose residents became victims of the Holocaust. In the Central and Eastern European countries, where less is known about the Roma genocide, cases of violence, discrimination and hatred against Roma are more common. In Romania and the Czech Republic, for example, activists seeking historical justice for Roma have long fought to draw public attention to the forgotten Roma genocide and to launch a public debate on the extent of Holocaust atrocities.

In recent years, the ongoing disputes over the location of a former concentration camp in the Czech Republic have received a lot

<sup>112</sup> Gilad Margalit, *Germany and Its Gypsies: A Post-Auschwitz Ordeal* (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 142-149.

<sup>114</sup> "Merkel Opens Roma Holocaust Memorial in Berlin," BBC News. BBC, 2012-10-24, accessed 2019-12-24, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20050780>.

of attention. During World War II, Czech Roma were imprisoned in the Lety concentration camp, and according to the European Roma Rights Centre, of the 1,300 Roma imprisoned there, more than 327 (including 241 children) died, and more than 500 were deported to Auschwitz.<sup>115</sup> In 1971, a pig farm was built on the site of the concentration camp, and was later taken over by a private business. Roma organisations, human rights non-governmental organisations and other activist groups have been protesting for decades to close the Lety pig farm. The United Nations Human Rights Committee and the European Parliament have also pressured the Czech government to remove the farm from the former Roma killing site.<sup>116</sup> During the debate, several Czech politicians erroneously claimed that the Roma killed at the Lety concentration camp were not victims of genocide, but criminals who were held in the camp to maintain public order. This is one example of gross Holocaust denial and relativisation resulting from a lack of knowledge about the Roma genocide and



Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism, Berlin, 2020. Photo by Mike Peel ([www.mikepeel.net](http://www.mikepeel.net)).

The triangular “island” in the centre of the memorial symbolises the brown Inverted triangle that the Roma were required to wear attached to their clothes at the concentration camps.

prejudice against the Roma. An agreement on the Lety concentration camp was only reached in 2017, when the Czech authorities announced that they would buy out and demolish the pig farm and replace it with a new space in memory of the Roma who were imprisoned and killed there.<sup>117</sup>

Similar problems were encountered in Romania: during the communist period and in the first decades after the collapse of the communist regime, the country denied any involvement in Holocaust crimes.<sup>118</sup> For a long time, the most popular position of the state with respect to the Holocaust was to deny the role of Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu in eliminating Jews and Roma from the country's territory, and the fact of persecution of the Roma remained on the fringes of World War II history both in the post-war years and in the post-communist period.<sup>119</sup> In 2003, the Romanian government publicly denied the Holocaust in Romania, causing international outrage. It was only after this event that a Holocaust commission was set up to investigate the history of the Holocaust in Romania and to assess the involvement of the then Romanian authorities in the massacres. A year later, the commission officially declared that “the Romanian regime of Ion Antonescu (1940-1944) had perpetrated the Holocaust in Romanian-controlled territories, killing more than 200,000 Jews and 10,000 Roma.”<sup>120</sup> This event laid the foundations for the recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide in the country.

### Transnational Memory of the Roma Genocide

At the international level, the Roma genocide only began to be mentioned actively quite a bit later. For a long time, European Union institutions only mentioned the fact of the Roma genocide in the

<sup>115</sup> Bernard Rorke, “Genocide and the Pig Farm: End in Sight to the Lety Controversy,” European Roma Rights Centre, accessed 2019-12-01 <http://www.errc.org/news/genocido-and-the-pig-farm-end-in-sight-to-the-lety-controversy>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Jan Velinger, “Culture Minister Says Buyout of Controversial Pig Farm at Lety Only Weeks Away,” Radio Prague, 2017-07-26, accessed 2019-12-24, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/cultura/culture-minister-says-buyout-of-controversial-pig-farm-at-lety-only-weeks-away>.

<sup>118</sup> Michelle Kelso AND Daina S. Eglitis, “Holocaust Commemoration in Romania: Roma and the Contested Politics of Memory and Memorialization,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 16, No 4 (2014): 487-511. doi:10.1080/14623528.2014.975949, 487.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 492.

<sup>120</sup> Michelle Kelso, “‘And Roma Were Victims, Too.’ The Romani Genocidio and Holocaust Education in Romania,” *Intercultural Education* 24, no. 1-02 (2013): 65. doi:10.1080/14675986.2013.768060.

broad context of the Holocaust. In 1995, the European Parliament adopted a resolution calling on all Member States to designate 27 January – the day on which the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated in 1945 – as European Holocaust Memorial Day. In 2005, to mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution on Holocaust remembrance and proclaimed 27 January International Holocaust Remembrance Day. That same year, a European Parliament resolution declared this day to be European Holocaust Remembrance Day in the EU.<sup>121</sup> These documents include the Roma on the list of Holocaust victims, and the resolutions acknowledge that the Roma, like the Jews, were exterminated for racial and ethnic reasons.

International organisations and EU institutions have begun paying more attention to the Roma genocide in the last decade. One of the earliest examples of a coherent narrative on the Roma genocide presenting well-formulated arguments for the recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide is the speech made by Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič in 2011.<sup>122</sup> This speech reflects the European Commission's values, such as respect for and protection of human rights and the integration of minorities, which underpin the rhetoric that supports the expansion of Holocaust remembrance practices. In his speech, Mr Šefčovič cites both the Roma genocide and the symbolic and physical violence faced by Roma communities in the EU today as examples of racial hatred and intolerance. The proposed solution: education for European youth and better Roma integration.

Since 2015, the European Commission and the European Parliament have been commemorating European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day every year. The institutionalisation of this commemoration date was a successful initiative of the European Parliament – on 15 April 2015, on the occasion of International Roma Day, the European Parliament adopted a resolution formally recognising the historic fact of the Roma genocide and the day to commemorate it (2 August). The resolution states that Europe's Roma have historically been part of society in many European countries and have contributed to the development of European culture and values. The resolution calls on the European Union Member States and other European countries to officially recognise the Roma genocide and the other forms of persecution of the Roma such as deportation that took place during World War II.<sup>123</sup> The arguments set out in the resolution created pre-

conditions for remembrance of the Roma genocide to have a place in European remembrance policy. This document has become a source of official European discourse on the Roma genocide and a point of reference of sorts for EU Member States on how to commemorate and communicate the Roma genocide.

In addition, the issue of recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide is integrated into the EU National Roma Integration Strategy.<sup>124</sup> In this document, EU Member States are encouraged to integrate Roma and fight discrimination not only through diversity and inter-cultural dialogue programmes, but also through education about Romani history and culture, in particular by including the Roma genocide in school curricula.

Since 2015, the European Commission has been releasing a report every year on Roma Holocaust Memorial Day calling for the recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide throughout Europe. The European Commission has also set up the Europe for Citizens – European Remembrance programme, which funds cross-border and Pan-European projects aimed at analysing the consequences of the rise of totalitarian regimes in 20th century Europe, paying special attention to the victims of totalitarian regimes.<sup>125</sup> Many projects related to the Roma genocide have been implemented under this programme.

Currently, most European countries officially commemorate the genocide of the Roma, as one of the groups of victims, on 27 January – Holocaust Memorial Day, or commemorate the Roma genocide as a separate day of remembrance on 2 August. In recent years, a new initiative to celebrate Roma Resistance Day on 16 May has been garnering more and more attention.

<sup>121</sup> European Parliament, "The European Union and Holocaust," European Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing, 2018, 1.

<sup>122</sup> European Commission, Press Release, M. Šefčovič during World War II Plenary of European Parliament Brussels, 02 February 2011, accessed 2020-01-01, [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-11-92\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-11-92_en.htm).

<sup>123</sup> European Parliament resolution of 15 April 2015 on the occasion of International Roma Day European Parliament, accessed 2019-02-24, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P8-TA-2015-0095>.

<sup>124</sup> European Commission, "Assessing the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and the Council Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States," Brussels: Publication Office of the European Union, 27 June 2016. SWD (2016) 209 final.

<sup>125</sup> "Europe for Citizens - European Remembrance - EACEA - European Commission," Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2015-12-11, accessed 2019-12-09, [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens/strands/european-remembrance\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/europe-for-citizens/strands/european-remembrance_en).

## 16 May: Romani Resistance Day

On the night of 15-16 May 1944, there were plans at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp to destroy some 6,500 people imprisoned in the Gypsy Family Camp, but the events of that night quickly took an unexpected turn. When the guards, armed with machine guns, surrounded the camp and ordered the Roma to leave their living quarters, the Roma did not come out. Instead, the prisoners blocked the doors and began making weapons from whatever they could get their hands on: work tools, metal pipes, stones and – according to some sources – even pieces of hard bread.<sup>126</sup> The SS soldiers withdrew, and the Roma imprisoned in the camp survived for another three months, until 2 August 1944.

The commemoration of Romani Resistance Day is an example of the active participation of Roma in Holocaust discourse. The initiative to commemorate the Romani resistance was launched by advocates for Roma who see this date as an alternative platform for telling the story of the Holocaust, and as an opportunity to show that the Roma were not just helpless victims of the Nazis. In Europe, Roma have begun celebrating Romani Resistance Day as an inspiring and unifying day that is also meant to draw attention to the ongoing struggle of the Roma in today's Europe.



Poster for Romani Resistance Day.

Illustration from ternYpe, the International Roma Youth Network

<sup>126</sup> "16 May – Romani Resistance Day," Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative, accessed 2019-12-09, <http://2august.eu/the-roma-genocide/16-may-romani-resistance-day/>.

## 2 August: International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day

After the first unsuccessful attempt to liquidate the Roma camp, the Nazis, fearing that the uprising could spread to other locations in the concentration camp, planned to implement the "final solution to the Gypsy question" on 2 August. Approximately half of the able-bodied Roma from the Gypsy Family Camp were transferred to other parts of the concentration camp, and some of them were moved to other camps where the majority perished or were killed. On the evening of 2 August, the Roma were forbidden to leave their living quarters. That same night, the remaining 2,897 Roma – most of them sick, frail, elderly or children – were taken to the gas chambers. The Roma tried to resist again, but the resistance was brutally suppressed. On the night of 2-3 August, the Roma in the Auschwitz Gypsy Family Camp were exterminated – their bodies were burned in pits next to the crematorium. When the Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated in 1945, only four Roma were found alive.<sup>127</sup>

This event marks the end of the history of the Roma in Auschwitz, when the entire group imprisoned there was destroyed. The act of exterminating the Roma was carried out on racial grounds. The Roma were targeted on the basis of the Nazi "final solution to the Gypsy question".<sup>128</sup>



Auschwitz II (Birkenau) camp, summer 1944. The Gypsy Family Camp is marked in yellow.

Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>127</sup> "2 August – Roma Genocide Remembrance Day," Roma Genocide Remembrance Initiative, accessed 2019-11-30, <http://2august.eu/the-roma-genocide/2-august-roma-genocide-remembrance-day/>.

<sup>128</sup> "Roma and Sinti People, Holocaust Memorial Day Trust," accessed 2019-11-30, <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/porrajmos>.

### Remembrance of the Roma Genocide in Lithuania

The fact that Lithuanian Roma were also affected during the Holocaust was practically unknown in Lithuania for a long time. On the one hand due to the lack of historical testimonies, and on the other due to the inadequate significance given to the Roma genocide in the country, this topic was only touched upon in historical works. At the beginning of the 21st century, the trials of the Lithuanian Roma during World War II were mentioned on a small scale by separate interest groups and activists. Memorial practices only moved to the institutional level at the beginning of the last decade, and various international actors and non-governmental organisations began to pay more attention to the situation of Roma in Lithuania in 2015.

In 2001, the staff of the Roma Community Centre contributed to a project to find people who were somehow connected to the Roma genocide in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation. The centre's employees took part in interviews with Roma victims of the Holocaust throughout Lithuania. As many testimonies were collected as part of the project, the importance of the topic became clear, which gave the centre the initial impetus to look into the Roma genocide in Lithuania. The Memorial Museum of Paneriai has become a place of remembrance for the Roma genocide, which Svetlana Novopolskaya, the director of the centre, visited with members of the Roma community in 2001. This commemoration has become an annual practice. The Roma Community Centre later organised a memorial project in Paneriai.

Up until 2008, the commemorations were organised and attended only by the Roma Community Centre, together with partners Čigonų Laužas and Vilnius-based Čigonų Bendrija. In 2008, the Roma community of Panevėžys joined the commemorations. In 2009, the Jewish community began participating in the commemoration of the Roma genocide at the invitation of the Roma. That same year, representatives of Lithuanian public authorities and embassies operating in Lithuania joined the Roma NGOs and now lay flowers every year at the Paneriai Memorial to commemorate International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day (2 August).

Now that Lithuania has become a member of various international organisations, the transnational discourse of the memory of the Roma genocide has influenced the practices of honouring Roma

victims in our country as well. In order to make the general public more aware of this lesser-known part of World War II history, commemorations of the Roma genocide in Lithuania have, since 2015, been organised in conjunction with exhibitions about the Roma and their fate during the Holocaust, as well as conferences and seminars on this topic.

On 3 August 2015, International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day was commemorated at the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius. The commemoration was organised by the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, and was attended by members of the Roma community and representatives of other organisations. An exhibition in memory of the members of the Roma community who suffered during the Nazi occupation has been opened at the Museum of Genocide Victims. It has been reported that together with Kaišiadorys Municipality and Pravieniškės Eldership, the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania is coordinating plans to commemorate the victims of the Roma genocide in Pravieniškės.<sup>129</sup>

In 2015, the Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights launched a project to bring Stolpersteine – memorial cobblestones created by German artist Gunter Demnig to commemorate specific victims of the Holocaust – to Lithuania. Of all the groups of victims, the most well-known were selected – the Roma and the Jews. In 2016, four Stolpersteine were unveiled to commemorate four Roma women from Panevėžys who were affected by the genocide.

On 6 October 2017, an event dedicated to the memory of the Roma genocide was held at the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania. A mobile exhibition on Roma during the Holocaust was presented during the event. On 28 November of the same year, “The Genocide of European Roma, 1939-1945”, an international conference organised by the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, took place at the Tuskulėnai Peace Park Memorial Complex. In 2017, the Polish Institute in Vilnius, together with the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, translated *Mietek na wojnie* – a book by Natalia Gancarz

<sup>129</sup> “Balandžio 8-oji – Tarptautinė romų diena,” Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, accessed 2016-03-14, <<http://tmde.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos/balandzio-8-oji-tarptautine-romu-diena>>.

about Roma at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp – into Lithuanian, and in 2018, the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania translated Right to Remember, a self-contained educational resource developed by the European Commission, into Lithuanian.

A significant change in Lithuanian remembrance policy occurred on 27 June 2019, when the members of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania supplemented the Lithuania Law on Remembrance Days with Roma Genocide Remembrance Day (commemorated on 2 August). This step was a joint victory for the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania, Lithuanian human rights NGOs, and Roma communities, international organisations and institutions. The decision to officially recognise Roma Genocide Remembrance Day in Lithuania was made on the basis of two key arguments: the existence of the Roma genocide as a recognised historical fact, and the widespread international practice of recognising and commemorating the Roma genocide.

### Stolpersteine

The Stolpersteine – literally “stumbling stones” – are the brain-child of German artist Gunter Demnig, and are installed in pavements or among other cobblestones to commemorate the victims of National Socialism. Because the Nazis sought to destroy individuals and turn people into numbers, Demnig wants to remember these victims and return their names to the places where they once lived. Each brass plate is dedicated to a separate Holocaust victim and is installed on the street where the victim lived, studied or worked.



Stolpersteine to commemorate four Roma women from Panevėžys who were affected by the Roma genocide.

Illustration source: Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights, [www.manoteises.lt](http://www.manoteises.lt)

There are currently over 70,000 stolpersteine in 2,000 locations across Europe, making it the world's largest open-air memorial museum.<sup>130</sup>

In 2016, at the initiative of the Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights, four Stolpersteine were unveiled in Panevėžys to commemorate victims of the Roma genocide. This memorial is installed on J. Tilvyčio Street, near house No 1. The stones are dedicated to Ona Bagdonavičiūtė-Matuzevičienė, Anastazija Bagdonavičiūtė-Jablonskienė, Zosė Matuzevičiūtė and Ona Bagdonavičiūtė-Grachauskienė, and honour all of the Roma who were persecuted, deported and killed during the Holocaust.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>130</sup> "Stolpersteine," accessed 2019-12-29, <http://www.stolpersteine.eu/en/home/>.

<sup>131</sup> "Atminimo akmenys," Lietuvos žmogaus teisių centras, accessed 2019-12-29, <https://manoteises.lt/atminimo-akmenys/panevezys/>.

Dr. Zigmas Vitkus<sup>132</sup>

## Remembrance of the Roma Genocide in Paneriai

During the first five years of Lithuania's independence, Jewish, Polish and Lithuanian national communities erected memorials to their compatriots killed in Paneriai. Only the memory of the Roma who were shot in Paneriai remained unmentioned. The sole document that told of the Nazi terror against the Lithuanian Roma was only on exhibit in the museum – a facsimile inherited from the Soviet era of a telegram from the commander of the German Security Police and SD for Vilnius about the shooting of 40 Roma near Vilnius on 10 July 1942. The small, barely readable document displayed at the bottom of the stand could scarcely have been an apt reflection of the Roma tragedy in Lithuania during the Nazi occupation.

The main place for commemoration of the Roma community at the Paneriai Memorial eventually became the Soviet obelisk dedicated to the “victims of fascist terror”. In the absence of a monument commemorating the Roma killed in Paneriai, the Roma community and the organisations that support it naturally chose what was semantically the memorial covering the widest range of victims. In 2015, the children of the Vilnius Roma community and employees of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum (at the initiative of the latter) created a circle of remembrance from field stones on the occasion of Roma Genocide Day – a sign that can also be treated as a temporary, alternative “monument”. As well as a message that the Roma community feels a need for a monument in Paneriai.

The fact that the memory of the victims from the Roma community was not commemorated for 26 years, neither in Paneriai nor in any other part of Lithuania, can be explained by at least two reasons: the lack of power to favourably influence institutions stemming from the limited economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital managed by the Roma community (such accumulation is necessary for the implementation of memorial projects), and the chronically

<sup>132</sup> This text is part of Dr Zigmas Vitkus's dissertation “Memorialas atminimo politikoje: Panerių atvejo tyrimas (1944–2016),” Klaipėda University, 2019. Updated by the author on 2020-01-22.

poor response of official institutions to the needs and expectations of the Roma community, as well as commemoration needs, treating them as “less important” and therefore deferrable.

With Lithuania's rapid integration into the political and economic structures of the European Union in the first decade of the 21st century, the organisations defending the interests of the Roma community in Lithuania getting stronger (the Lithuanian Centre for Human Rights and the Roma Community Centre, which were established in 1994 and 2001 respectively, should be mentioned separately here), and the first Roma cultural professionals graduating, the efforts of this community(-ies) to commemorate the compatriots killed in Nazi Lithuania has also gained stronger backing in recent years. On 27 June 2019, the decision of the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania to add Roma Genocide Remembrance Day to the list of remembrance days was an important step in highlighting this event both for the Roma themselves and for the rest of Lithuanian society.



In 1943-1944, Lithuanian Roma were killed in the “Kaunas pit” behind the “Panerių memorialas” memorial stone.

Photo by Neringa Latvytė.

### Paneriai in Roma Remembrance Culture

The most Lithuanian Roma were killed in Pravieniškės (Kaišiadorys District), where a forced labour camp and a redistribution point operated during the Nazi occupation. Historical sources attesting to the massacre of Roma in Paneriai are not abundant, but Paneriai is undoubtedly the site of their genocide (the Porajmos). In his recollections, “burner” Yuliy Farber mentions the murder of approximately 50 Roma in Paneriai in April 1944.<sup>133</sup> It is more than likely that these are the same 46 Roma described in the diary kept in 1942-1944 by Lithuanian priest and Lukiškės prison chaplain Juozas Baltramonaitis.<sup>134</sup> Another source (pointed out by historian Neringa Latvytė) writes about 87 Roma brought to Paneriai by train in 1944.<sup>135</sup> A source of no less importance about the massacre of Roma in Paneriai is the Romani oral tradition, in which the image of Paneriai also exists.<sup>136</sup>

The memory of the Roma in Paneriai is traditionally honoured on 2 August, with the participation of Roma non-governmental organisations, representatives of the Lithuanian Jewish community and Lithuanian state institutions, as well as foreign diplomats. As there is no monument to the memory of the Roma in Paneriai, the gatherings are held at what is semantically the most universal memorial – the obelisk erected during the Stalin era “to the victims of fascist terror”. Though the commemoration of the victims of the Roma genocide in Lithuanian remembrance culture remains a marginal event (as evidenced by the relatively small number of “outsiders” who participate in the annual ceremonies), the popularisation/popularity of Romani culture and history has been trending in public communication since 2014, and there has been a generally positive attitude on the part of public authorities, which allows us to hope that the significance of this event to the general Lithuanian remembrance culture will strengthen.

The increased activity of Roma communities and the organisations that support them has been driven by the attention given by European Union institutions (and the old EU Member States, especially Germany) to the history of the Roma – in particular, the resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 15 April 2015, on the occasion of International Roma Day, declaring 2 August European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day. This resolution emphasises the need to combat anti-Gypsyism as a widespread form of racism today. In the context of this resolution, we should see strengthening

the culture of remembrance of Lithuanian Roma at the state level as one of the measures for the social and cultural integration of Roma.

One of the reasons why, in July 2015, the employees of the Memorial Museum of Paneriai of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum invited the children of the Vilnius Roma community to arrange a symbolic circle of remembrance from field stones reminiscent of a Roma wagon wheel was to demonstrate that the tragedy of the Roma in Paneriai, though little known, has not been forgotten. It also communicated that their community has the right to a memorial in Paneriai, and highlighted a memorable event for Roma children, whose education, including the development of historical consciousness, is one of the most organic forms of positive socialisation.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Yuliy Farber, accessed 2018-06-10, <http://www.partner-inform.de/memoirs/detail/my-bezhali-iz-lagerja-smerti/7/137/64>.

<sup>134</sup> Vaclovas Aliulis, “Kalėjimo kapeliono Juozo Baltramonaičio dienoraštį (1942-1944) suradus,” *Lietuvių katalikų mokslo akademijos metraštis*, Vilnius, 2003, Vol. 22, 74.

<sup>135</sup> Заявление Потанина Константина в Государственную Черезвычайную комиссию ЦК партии. 1944-08-13. ГАРФ, ф. 7021, оп. 94, д. 1, л. 35; J. Petrauskas, “Paneriuose,” *Tiesa*, 1944-08-23, No 40 (101), 3.

<sup>136</sup> Aušra Simoniukštytė, “Lietuvos romai: tarp istorijos ir atminties,” *Lietuvos etnologija*, 2007, No 6 (15), 143-144.



A symbolic circle of stones made on 4 August 2015, on the occasion of Roma Genocide Day, by children from the Vilnius Roma community and employees of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum in memory of the Roma who were killed.

Photo by Zigmas Vitkus.

## Recommended Literature

### *Mietek na wojnie*

*Mietek na wojnie* is a book by Natalia Gancarz about Roma at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp. At the initiative of the Polish Institute in Vilnius and the Department of National Minorities under the Government



of the Republic of Lithuania, the book was translated into Lithuanian in 2017 with the title *Esu Karolis*. Richly illustrated by Diana Karpowicz, this educational book presents the fate of the Roma during World War II through the eyes of Karol, a Roma boy who ends up in a concentration camp and tries to understand and explain his situation. This story about the tragedy of the Holocaust offers a look at the Roma genocide from a victim's perspective.

The main character's everyday life is interrupted by a war that moves the child's world into a concentration camp. At the camp, Karol's different needs, fears and desires get jumbled into one – the little boy experiences separation and sadness, fears for his life and the lives of his loved ones, and suffers from hunger and anxiety. Faced by this threat, the boy encounters the issue of ethnic identity and tries to understand why he ended up in the Roma camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Yet even though the boy's everyday life has been changed drastically by the conditions of the concentration camp, he still has a child's need to play, have friends, and get to know the world.

Although the book was written for children, it is also useful for adults who are interested in the Roma genocide during World War II or who are looking for ways to talk to children about this painful and appalling subject. The book is distributed free of charge in Lithuanian schools.

## Right to Remember

*Right to Remember* is a self-contained educational resource developed by the European Commission that the Department of National Minorities under the Government of the Republic of Lithuania has translated into Lithuanian. This handbook is a teaching tool for all those wishing to learn more about the Roma genocide and combat discrimination against the Roma. The remembrance and commemoration of historical events are presented in the handbook as an important part of embedding human rights principles in society.

One of the main objectives of the book is involving young people, including Roma youth, in the complex process of knowledge and recognition of the Roma genocide in society. This publication has been designed primarily for youth workers in a multicultural environment, and can be used in schools and non-formal settings. By discussing this topic, learning new facts, and contextualising the Roma genocide, young people will not only deepen their knowledge of the victims of World War II, but will also learn about fundamental human rights and the situation of national minorities in society.

*Right to Remember* emphasises the importance of recognising and commemorating the Roma genocide, both for Roma communities and for all European societies in general. The handbook not only presents the historical events of the Holocaust, which led to the Roma genocide – it also discusses the preconditions for this tragedy and the consequences of racism and Romaphobia, and links the events of the past to the current situation of Roma in Europe.



## Panevėžio romų kančių keliai 1941–1945 m.

*Panevėžio romų kančių keliai 1941–1945 m.* (“Exploring the Untold Suffering of the Roma People of Panevėžys: 1941–1945”) is a collection of testimonies published in Panevėžys about Roma victims of the Holocaust. Working with the Roma of Panevėžys and documenting the facts of their history and the details of their life today, Vida Beinortienė and her sister Daiva Tumasonytė spent years collecting material for the publication.

The book calls for the recognition and commemoration of the genocide of the Lithuanian Roma during World War II while also delving into the fate of the Roma in Panevėžys. The book tells the stories collected by the authors about local Roma at forced labour and concentration camps in Germany and France, as well as recollections of the suffering of the Panevėžys Roma in Lithuania. The fate of the local Roma is described through the surviving memories of witnesses, the stories of their loved ones, photos from personal albums and archival material.

In collaboration with historians and researchers of Romani culture in Lithuania, the authors provide information on the historical context of the Holocaust, the circumstances that led to the persecution of Roma in the 20th century that ended in the Roma genocide, and discrimination against Roma in today’s Europe.

The book can be found in Lithuanian libraries, schools in Panevėžys and online.



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## Summary

This book attempts to illuminate anew a less-known part of the history of Lithuanian Roma: the persecution faced by this minority group during the Second World War, known by scholars, human rights activists and concerned members of European societies, as the Roma genocide or the Roma Holocaust. Those who survived the annihilation of European Roma at the hands of Nazis and their allies remember this tragedy as Porajmos, or devouring. However shocking the persecution of Roma, resulting in at least a quarter of their European population being wiped out in Nazi-controlled and occupied territories, the memory of the Roma genocide did not fit its place in the discourse of the Holocaust and popular consciousness easily. Only recently did transnational actors start an active dialogue on recognition and commemoration of the fate of our fellow citizens, thus turning the tide and integrating the history of the genocide into the broader discussion on Roma rights and challenges faced by them today; namely, antigypsyism, racism, discrimination and violence.

Composed having in mind both educators and youth eager to learn about the atrocities of the past and willing to recognize the challenges falling upon us as a civic society today, this book presents to the readers the information on the Roma genocide in Lithuania. It is illustrated by historical documents and witness accounts, coupled with an explanatory body of work on the aft of the Holocaust, including the development of the practices of recognition and commemoration of the Roma genocide in Lithuania and abroad. The readers are presented with informative maps with marked sites of mass killings and Roma imprisonment and extermination camps, the timeline introducing significant dates of Roma genocide historiography, and segments on specific events or commemorative practices. Detailed insights made by Lithuanian scholars on Roma in Paneriai and Pravieniškės, historical accounts on foreign labor and concentration camps, and testimonies of victims, shine a new light on the extent of the Roma genocide and give the readers access to less-known tragic events of World War II. This interdisciplinary publication includes various primary sources and an overview of recent fiction and nonfiction works on the subject.

Although the reader will be able to follow the general structure in different chapters of this book, the publication is deliberately left

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without a unifying narrative or a voice of the omniscient storyteller. Suffering from long-lasting structural and physical violence, European Roma have spent decades voiceless, their initiatives becoming more noticeable only in the recent years. Unfortunately, most of this book is written by non-Roma authors, but we can acknowledge our bias and invite the audience to read our work and make independent conclusions.

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