**Examining Poetry from the Roma Holocaust**

To a large extent, the Roma Holocaust is the forgotten Holocaust. It was as described as such by Professor Eve Rosenhaft and it has been noted that, “after the war, survivors and relatives of victims struggled to get recognition and compensation for the persecution and losses they had suffered”. (1) However, there are signs that in recent years, more recognition of the suffering of the Roma has been taking place, including large ceremonies at Auschwitz on 2nd August to mark the anniversary of the murder of the last Roma and Sinti in the camp in 1944. One way in which we can remember the terrible suffering of the Roma people during the Holocaust is to examine some of the poetry that has been produced in response to the Holocaust. In doing so, we can reflect on what happened in those dark days and also on what the situation for the Roma people in Europe is today.

We can begin with **When I was a Child**, by **Philomena Franz**. Here are a few lines from this poem:

**I saw the stones as flowers the tears of hope were many-coloured. …………………… My silent smile shows the way to gardens of stone. I see the light of too many scars.**

(2)

Here we see the Holocaust through reminisces and the writer’s personal history. There is a poignant comparison of her past to the present in light of the horrors of the Holocaust, speaking as someone who was a survivor of Auschwitz and whose parents, godmother and five siblings did not survive (3). She expresses the hope that was there in her early life and how those hopes and dreams of childhood were taken away by the experience of the Holocaust. To me this extract of this poem shows just how the Holocaust could cut away the hope in people’s lives and the way that it affected individuals. You can see that today; if you watch any film of young Roma children today or the 2011 film A People Uncounted, see the children playing happily and then compare their happy faces to the careworn expressions of adults on film, you can still see a similar change in demeanour.

Next up is the poem No Sea Lay at our Feet by Mariella Mehr:

**In vain, in the places of skulls we wept for our mothers and covered dead children with almond blossom to warm them in their sleep**

(4)

Again, we see the history of the Holocaust distilled down to the individual level, with the use of personal history**.** Mehr was born in Switzerland after the Holocaust in 1947 but, “as a traveller, Mehr was a victim of the ‘Kinder der Landstrasse’ project – a government rule applied from the 1930’s to the 1970’s, under which ‘children of the road’ were taken from their parents and given to adoptive families against their will”. (5) Consequently, we can feel the despair felt by Mariella and through that we can feel the despair felt by so many of the other half a million Roma and Sinti victims of the Holocaust and their families. We can feel the hopelessness of it all, the lack of escape routes and the way that the Roma were trapped. It has been noted that between 500 000 and 1.5 million Roma perished in the Holocaust and that, “when to the camp victims are added the huge numbers of Roma – perhaps more than perished in the camps – who ‘were murdered in the fields and forests where they lived, the death toll may well match that of the Armenian genocide”.   
(6) The words about the mothers are also poignant when one considers the ongoing discrimination today, especially the forced sterilisation of Roma women. It was reported in 2013 that, “according to the Czech Ombudsman, as many as 90,000 women have been sterilized in the territory of the former Czechoslovakia since the 1980s. Although most forced sterilizations were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, the most recent reportedly occurred in 2007.” (7)

Auschwitz was the site of many of the murders of Roma in the Holocaust. The mass murder there is remembered in the poem **The Gypsy Camp At Auschwitz** by **Raine Geoghan**

**men kek bissa: we will not forget winter birds mourning on the branches the earth remembering**

(8)

Here we see strongly expressed feelings and heart-rending imagery. The anonymous writer has the need to say something to somebody to cry out. On a personal level, I remember my own visit to Auschwitz in 2014 for the ceremony which marked the 70th anniversary of the murder of the last Roma and Sinti and the pine trees that were dotted around the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau like silent sentinels watching on. There was one sign I remember very well, was that which said that a clump of trees were the trees where people had to wait their turn for the gas chambers. They had to wait their turn to die. The poem is also a reminder that death took place in many places while the birds and animals watched on. As indeed did the world - put in evidence from Roma on Tyneside And the world still looks on. At Lety in the Czech Republic there stands a pig farm at the site of what was once a labour camp for Roma. (9) protests about the site of the pig farm have been going on for years, with the government claiming that it doesn’t have the money to buy the farm and turn it into a memorial to the pain and suffering of the Roma, who were forced to work there.

The next poem is **The Dancing Gypsy** by Stanislav Smelyansky:

**Ai, na-ne-ne-vai – don’t kill me! Ai, na-ne-vai – don’t shoot me! Not a hooligan, not a thief - I am just a gypsy, a dancing gypsy My tambourine is all my wealth. Ai, my soldier, put away your gun. Let me dance for you – ai, na-ne-ne! Hey don’t shoot!**

(10)

Again, we see the need to say something and in this case it is again something which strikes at the very heart of what happened in the Roma Holocaust and at the very heart of the discrimination against the Roma, which is sadly still so prevalent across Europe today. The reality of the Holocaust was that it was harmless, innocent people, who were seen as being different and who were shot for no good reason, just that they were different. Stanislav Smelyansky would have been acutely aware of this because, although he was born in 1979 in Moscow, his grandmothers’ relatives suffered greatly in the Holocaust. (11) It brings home to us that the reality of the racism in the Holocaust, that people were murdered just for who they were, not for what they had done, but simply for who they were. And sadly, the ongoing discrimination continues across Europe, as it has been noted that, “even in contemporary Europe, Roma are the subject of violence and persecution. (12)

The Roma face high levels of discrimination in areas of employment and in accessing services, goods and housing which demonstrates the failure of European governments to protect Roma against discrimination in the private sector. (13) The Roma also face widespread discrimination in the area of schooling, with around half of Roma children being marginalised in elementary schools, with a very limited curriculum. This substandard education means that Roma attainment levels are far below average. (14) Consequently, it is harder for them to get good jobs and even those who have had a more mainstream education often find it difficult to break into the labour market. The Roma also face discrimination in terms of health. As noted earlier, it has even been known for Roma women to be sterilised without their knowledge, as they are forced to sign a piece of paper about a routine operation and sign their rights away. (15)

The next poem, **My Love** by **Mircea Lacatus**, is a little different…..

**don’t worry i’m alright here we have everything there isn’t much food but it tastes good the officers care about us they don’t beat us don’t swear at us sometimes we trip when we are working and fall down and no one kicks us with their boots**

(16)

Clearly this poem is looking at the suffering and the brutality of the Roma Holocaust in a different light, using irony and sarcasm to show what happened on a daily basis to Roma in so many places. It is also a reminder of just how black humour is a natural response to difficult situations. It is a remembrance of the sheer brutality of the Holocaust. To give just one example, it was reported on 17th December 2020 that racists in Prague had assaulted a non-white family, called the father "Cikán", given the Nazi salute, and tried to take their baby away from them. (17)

Those who survived the death camps did not necessarily escape the effects of being interred in them and this is emphasised in **Auschwitz is my Overcoat** by **Celia Stojka**:

**you are afraid of the darkness? i can tell you, when there’s no one on the road, you have nothing to fear. i am not afraid. my fear stayed behind in auschwitz and in the camps**

**auschwitz is my overcoat, bergen-belsen my dress and ravensbruck my vest what is there to fear?**

(18)

This is an interesting poem as Celia, who as a child survived Auschwitz (19) is speaking and expressing feelings as if talking in a conversation. It is a strong reminder that the effects of being in the death camps haven’t always left people. It is a reminder that even those who survived the Holocaust were changed by it, often in terrible ways. The poem is a reminder that even those who survived suffered for so long afterwards, while the discrimination never ended with the lack of financial support and compensation for survivors and, as we have seen, the ongoing discrimination today.

Yet, this poem is also a hopeful poem. It is about survival against all the odds and against the hatred and persecution. It reminds me of another image in my mind from my visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2014. There were speeches on what was a hot day and some of the young Roma who were there peeled away from the crowd. All across the area, which had been the Roma camp during the Holocaust, there were the remains of the horrible, squalid huts, which people had been housed in. The wooden sections had long since disappeared and all that was left were the low walls of bricks which were parts of the foundations of the huts. I remember so well that they took their Roma flags and they sat on these low walls. It somehow represented the survival of the Roma, despite all the hatred and violence during the Holocaust and all the other hatred and violence the Roma have had to endure both before and since the terrible events of the 1930’s and 1940’s. It seemed to me that the Roma youth, were saying, “we are still here”.

We end appropriately with In the memory of the **Gypsy Victims of the Holocaust** by **Jozsef Choli Daroczi**:

**The road came to a dead end in Auschwitz-Birkenau**.

(20)

I find this one line to be such a strong image of the fate of the Roma over a period of 1 000 years in Europe. To me it effectively links the travelling life and the endless search for a home, going on for 1 000 years with the finality of death at Auschwitz. It is a stark reminder that the Holocaust as the end of a long road of persecution, going back 1 000 years.

The Roma began to come to Europe from the Punjabi region of India, through Persia and the ottoman Empire in small groups around the year 1 000 and although originally welcomed by many, because of their metal work skills, they never found a safe home and by the 15th century along with the other great diaspora, the Jews, they were not seen as part of the ‘national family’ in many European countries. It was at this point that many Roma began to be taken as slaves by rulers such as Prince Vlad Dracul. (21) The 1490’s saw the first attempts to ban Roma from the Holy Roman Empire and in 1530 the Egyptians Act was brought into law in England, followed by the more draconian amendments in 1554 (22), which made Roma liable to be executed in England. The draconian laws, the persecution and the constant danger for Roma people continued up until the 20th century.

And yet the Roma as a people did survive. And so this surely begs one or perhaps two, final questions: where do the Roma go from here and when will they be accepted, as they should be, as fully equal citizens of Europe?

This is, of course, just a small snapshot of the cultural responses to the Roma Holocaust, that have taken place over the years since 1945. I hope that you have found it both stimulating and educational and given you more insights into the ‘forgotten Holocaust’, the Roma Holocaust.

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Endnotes

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7. [“We have succeeded by speaking out” | Amnesty International](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2013/03/we-have-succeeded-by-speaking-out/)
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15. <https://www.hhrjournal.org/2016/12/coercive-and-cruel-forced-sterilisation-of-romani-women/>
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18. J. Boase-Beier and M. de Vooght, Poetry of the Roma Holocaust; an Anthology, p.152
19. ibid.
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