



# The „Gypsy camp“ at Auschwitz-Birkenau

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## Introduction

As the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp, the concentration camp complex near the Polish city of Oświęcim (Auschwitz) has become a symbol of the suffering and death of more than a million men, women and children from all over Europe. The extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where predominantly Jews, Roma and Sinti were murdered, played a crucial role in the systematic mass murders committed by the Nazis. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis imprisoned various groups of people in different sections of the camp. In section B-II-e, there was a "gypsy family camp" from spring 1943 to summer 1944, in which about 23,000 European Roma and Sinti and others, categorized by the Nazis as "racial gypsies and gypsy half-breeds", were imprisoned.<sup>1</sup>

The line of action the German Nazis chose against the Roma and Sinti was prepared and defined in the German Reich, based on Nazi "racial science" and put into practice through various political measurements, culminating in mass murder in concentration and extermination camps. The decree on the "battle against gypsy plague", issued by the commander of the SS and police, Heinrich Himmler on 8 December 1938, regulated the solution of the "gypsy question" in the Reich on a racial basis. From May 1940 on, the first deportations of German Roma and Sinti from the Reich into the territory of occupied Poland took place, where the Nazis imprisoned them in various camps and ghettos (for example in Łódź). Alongside the preparation and implementation of the "final solution of the Jewish question", conditions were gradually created for the last stage of the "final solution to the gypsy question". The final decision on the fate of the Roma and Sinti not only in Germany, but in the whole of Nazi-controlled Europe was published on December 16, 1942, when Himmler issued the so-called Auschwitz decree (Auschwitz-Erlass). This decree and its implementing directives issued by the Reich Security Head Office

<sup>1</sup> In the following text, the term "gypsy" is used as a historic term that, depending on the circumstances, can mean different categories of people. Although the term has often been used sinonimously to „Roma and Sinti“, it also referred to all other persons considered "gypsies" for any reason.



(Reichssicherheitshauptamt) on January 29, 1943, ordered the deportation of "gypsy half-breeds, gypsies-Roma and non-German members of gypsy tribes of Balkan origin" to the Auschwitz II-Birkenau concentration camp on former Polish territory annexed to the Reich.<sup>2</sup>

## Establishment and spacial organization of the camp

### Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau

The Auschwitz camp complex was built gradually, starting in spring 1941, and consisted of three parts. The first part, known as Auschwitz I, was established in the spring of 1940 as a concentration camp modeled on the long-established Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen and Ravensbrück concentration camps. By mid-1942, most of the prisoners were politically active people from Poland and those whom the Nazis thought could be dangerous to their plans to Germanize Poland, such as teachers, scientists, priests.<sup>3</sup>

On the grounds of the former Polish village of Brzezinka, about 2 km from the Auschwitz I concentration camp, the first expansion of the camp was begun in the autumn of 1941. This new camp called "Auschwitz-Birkenau" was originally intended to keep a pool of forced laborers for the implementation of the Nazi's plans for settlement by the German population in the area. As forced laborers, Himmler wanted to abuse Soviet prisoners of war, which he assumed would be captured in great numbers. First it was thought of 50,000 prisoners, then 150,000, and finally even 200,000.<sup>4</sup> In February 1942, Himmler changed his plan and instead of Soviet prisoners of war he started to plan with Jewish prisoners.<sup>5</sup>

The third part of the complex, Auschwitz-Monowitz, was created in collaboration with the Nazis and IG Farben, the first private company to use the Nazis' offer to "hire" prisoners on a large scale. A buna, or synthetic rubber, factory was to be built. While IG Farben

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the persecution of Roma and Sinti in Europe during World War II, see for example: Kenrick, Donald: *Das Schicksal der Zigeuner im NS-Staat* [The fate of the gypsies in the Nazi state]. In: Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan, Zülch, Tilman: *Die Zigeuner. Verkannt – Verachtet – Verfolgt* [The Gypsies. Misjudged - Despised - Persecuted]. Hannover 1980, pp. 37–74; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: *Cikáni pod hákovým křížem* [Gypsies under the swastika]. Olomouc 2000, 179 p.; Rose, Romani (ed.): *Nacistická genocida Sintů a Romů. Katalog ke stálé výstavě ve Státním Muzeu v Osvětimi* [The Nazi genocide of Sinti and Roma. Catalog for the permanent exhibition at the State Museum in Auschwitz]. Prague 2009, 323 p.

<sup>3</sup> Steinbacher, Sybille: *Auschwitz. Geschichte und Nachgeschichte* [Auschwitz. History and post-history]. Munich 2015, pp. 21, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.



was responsible for accommodation, supplies and food in this camp, SS-members took care of supervising the prisoners. IG Farben's example was followed by other companies, creating smaller side camps, a total of more than thirty around the IG Farben factory.<sup>6</sup> By the end of 1942, all three camps formed a joint administrative unit, then the complex was divided into three administrative parts with their own commanders. In 1944, Auschwitz III became an independent concentration camp, which administratively included all its branches.<sup>7</sup>

The Auschwitz-Birkenau camp was deliberately built by the Nazis in swampy and wet terrain, which practically never dried up, so it was the cause of constant wet fumes. In addition, the local climate was characterized by significant temperature fluctuations during the day and sharp differences during the year. There was severe heat in summer, unbearable cold in winter and thick fog or storms in spring and autumn.<sup>8</sup>

The camp area measured in total 750 x 1800m. Two roads leading from the east to the west divided the camp into three unequally large construction sections (Bauabschnitt, abbreviated B) called B-I, B-II and B-III. The individual construction sections were themselves divided into smaller sections denoted by lowercase letters. Each section had a special function that changed several times during the existence of the camp. In 1944, the following designation applied: women's quarantine camp (B-I-a), women's labor camp (B-I-b), men's quarantine camp (B-II-a), Terezín family camp (B-II-b), Hungarian women's camp (B-II-c), men's camp (B-II-d), "gypsy family camp" (B-II-e), men's hospital camp (B-II-f) and the unfinished and undivided section B-III called Mexico. In one part of this section, the camp leadership placed Hungarian women.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 42–45.

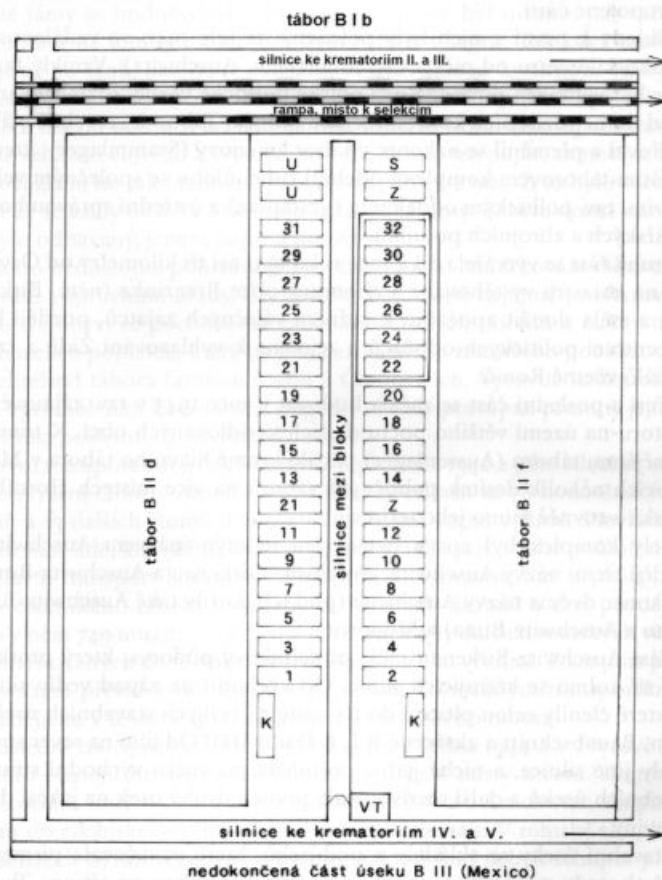
<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945 [The Czechoslovak Roma during the years 1938–1945]. Brno 1994, p. 174; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945) [Roma in Moravia and Silesia (1740–1945)]. Brno 2005, p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945. Brno 1994, p. 74; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid. Die nationalsozialistische „Lösung der Zigeunerfrage“ [Racial utopia and genocide. The National Socialist "Solution to the Gypsy Question"]. Hamburg 1996, p. 327; Nečas, Ctibor: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945). Brno 2005, p. 287.



### XII. Situační pláněk tábora BII e v Auschwitz-Birkenau



#### Vysvětlivky:

- |                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| B I b            | ženský pracovní tábor  |
| B II d           | mužský kmenový tábor   |
| B II e           | cikánský tábor   |
| B II f           | nemocniční tábor pro muže  |
| B III            | nedokončený stavební úsek („Mexico“)   |
| K                | kuchyně  |
| S                | místo k očištění a odvěšivování vězňů, „sauna“                                 |
| U                | umývárna   |
| VT               | velitelství tábora (Blockführerstube)  |
| Z                | záchod   |
| 1                | sklad potravin   |
| 2                | kanceláře pracovního nasazení (Arbeitseinsatz), táborová písrna (Schreibstube) |
| 3                | sklad oděvů (Bekleidungskammer)  |
| 4-21, 23, 25, 27 | obytné bloky   |
| 24, 26, 28, 30   | nemocniční bloky (Häftlingskrankenbau)   |
| 29, 31           | „materská školka“, bloky pro nejmenší děti, později pro sirotky                |
| 32               | „laboratoř“ táborového lékaře MUDr. J. Mengeleho                               |

Detailed map of the "gypsy camp" in section B-II-e in concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. (Nečas, Ctibor: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945). Brno 2005).



The camp as a whole included common facilities that were placed next to the described sections: in the west, there was a cleaning and disinfection station, and section B-II-g, where the personal belongings of the prisoners were stored with a warehouse of prison uppers and objects. In the east was the main entrance gate located, as well as waterworks, SS-barracks, including a hospital and the SS-headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

Each of the sections at Auschwitz-Birkenau was fenced with barbed wire to a height of 2.5m. At night, this fence was charged with high-voltage electric current. Sometimes, desperate prisoners committed suicide by jumping into it. A fence of the same kind surrounded the camp area as a whole, together with wooden towers with SS-guards permanently on watch. The distance between the towers was 50m.<sup>11</sup>

The inhuman regime in the Auschwitz camp complex was led by a camp commander who also commanded the SS-men in the camp. In each individual camp, its own camp commander (Lagerführer) occupied the highest place, having unlimited power over the life and death of prisoners and deciding especially on the punishments imposed in the camp. In the "gypsy camp", SS officers B. Pfütze, G. A. M. Palitzsch, F. Harder, H. B. Buch, G. Bonigut and finally W. R. Sawatzki held this position. They were subordinated to the report commander (Rapportführer), the camp doctor (Lagerarzt) and the block leader (Blockführer), who were responsible for announcing and conducting daily appeals. At the lowest level were the guards (Posten), with whom the imprisoned people were in direct contact during their imprisonment, including also special events, such as selection, or incoming or outgoing deportations, etc.<sup>12</sup>

Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest Nazi extermination camp. From 1942, the Nazis gradually built a complex of gas chambers and crematoria there, which made mass murders on great scale possible. Two gas chambers called bunkers, were constructed in two former farm buildings of the village of Brzezinka. Bunker I with a capacity of 800 people was put into operation in March, 1942, bunker II, with a capacity of 1200 people, in June 1942. The crematoria II and III, operated since March and June 1943 each had one gas chamber with a capacity of 2,000 to 3,000 people in the basement. The crematoria on the ground floor each had 15 furnaces and could burn about 1,440 bodies a day. Since the Nazis wanted their mass murders by Cyclone B to be a quiet process, the gas chambers were disguised as showers. Both large crematoria were blown up by

<sup>10</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945. Brno 1994, p. 74; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945). Brno 2005, p. 289.

<sup>11</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945. Brno 1994, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 81.



the Nazis on January 20, 1945, trying to hide evidence of their crimes. The smaller crematoria KIV (in operation since March 1943) and KV (since April 1943) had three gas chambers of different sizes (for 1,500, 800 and 150 people) on the ground floor. These crematoria had eight furnaces, each furnace could burn about 770 bodies a day. KIV burned down during the uprising of the Jews from the so-called "Sonderkommando" (special command), who were forced to work in KIV, on October 7, 1944. KV was destroyed by the Nazis themselves on January 26, 1945, the day before the liberation of the camp.<sup>13</sup>

### Establishment and appearance of the "gypsy camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau

The "gypsy camp" (Zigeunerlager), also referred to as the "gypsy family camp" (Zigeunerfamilienlager), in section B-II-e of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, was established after the Auschwitz-decree and its implementing directives had been issued respectively on 16 December 16, 1942, and on January 29, 1943, ordering the concentration of "gypsy half-breeds, gypsies-Roma and non-German members of gypsy tribes of Balkan origin" from the Reich and the occupied territories.<sup>14</sup>

The "gypsy camp", built on an area of 150 x 750m, was adjacent to the men's hospital camp (sections B-II-f) and the men's camp (sections B-II-d). South of it was the ramp, where the selection of Jews after arrival of the deportation trains in the camp took place since spring 1944. A path called the camp road (Lagerstrasse) passed through the center of the camp, wooden barracks or "blocks", numbered 1 to 33, were built on both sides of this path. The barracks, just like those in the other sections of Auschwitz-Birkenau, were originally constructed as army horse stables, made of wood and about 40 m long, 9 m wide and about 2.5 m high. Light streamed in through two rows of windows in the raised roof. There was a gate on both short sides, next to the gate opening to the Lagerstrasse, there were two small rooms. In one of these rooms, the block leader slept, the other functioned as a serving counter where the inmates of one barrack were handed out their daily bread rations. Next to the gate at the opposite side of the barrack stood containers for feces. Inside the blocks stood three-story bunk beds, two beds on each story.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau [Final destination Auschwitz-Birkenau]. Olomouc 1994, pp. 28, 96, 100, ann. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 16; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 301–304.

<sup>15</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 31; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 174; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 328; Nečas, Ctibor: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 292.



Blocks No. 5 to 27 and 4 to 20 were used to accommodate prisoners, a smaller amount of barracks was used for operational and administrative tasks (food storage, camp canteen, office rooms, clothing storage, offices of the camp's Gestapo, the so-called kindergarten, hospital). Behind the entrance gate were two kitchens: one cooked for adults from the very beginning, the other was put into operation only later as a children's kitchen. There were also two toilets, two washrooms and a so-called sauna, which served as a steam bath for short baths of new prisoners or lice control.<sup>16</sup>

The area in front of the blocks was used for roll calls (called "Appell" in German), during which the prisoners were counted to make sure nobody was missing. A strip of stomped clay stretched between and behind the individual blocks was used by the imprisoned people to meet and communicate during their free time.<sup>17</sup>

## Inmates

### Deportations and the number of people imprisoned



*Unknown woman with prison number Z-63598, one of the few surviving photographs from the "gypsy camp" in concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. (picture: Archive of the State museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau)*

<sup>16</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 75; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 292–293.

<sup>17</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 76; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 294.



The "gypsy camp" in section B-II-e was in operation from the end of February 1943 to the beginning of August 1944, and throughout this time, deportations of more or less numerous groups and individuals from the Reich and occupied European countries came in. Initially, future prisoners were brought in small groups, the first of them arrived on February 26, 1943. During the first three weeks, thousands of Roma and Sinti were deported to the newly opened and as yet unfinished camp. By the end of March 1943, there were more than 12,000 men, women, and children in the "gypsy camp," including those born in the camp, registered as prisoners here. The largest influx of prisoners occurred in the first and then in the next two months after the establishment of the camp. Then the deportations were substantially reduced, with the exception of August 1943, when 768 people from the Protectorate were deported in a single transport, and gradually renewed from December 1943. Of the approximately 20,900 victims registered in the "gypsy camp", 18,700 were deported in 1943, and 2 200 during the following year. In total, about 23,000 men, women and children passed through the camp during the less than 17 months of its existence. This plain number hides the tragic fates of individuals, most of whom have died.<sup>18</sup>

In total about 10,200 German Roma and Sinti were deported to the "gypsy camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau, mainly during 1943 from various local concentration camps where they had previously been assembled.<sup>19</sup> 2,600 to 2,900 Austrian Roma and Sinti were brought to the camp in several mass transports from March to May 1943.<sup>20</sup> More than 3,000 Polish Roma from the General Government came to the camp mainly from "gypsy camps" that had been set up to prepare the deportations.<sup>21</sup> In spring 1944 Roma and Sinti were deported from the German-occupied Netherlands to Auschwitz-Birkenau. A transport with 245 Dutch, Belgian and German Roma and Sinti arrived from the

<sup>18</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 32; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 76; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 327.

<sup>19</sup> Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 305–309.

<sup>20</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 19, p. 100; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 23–24; Nečas, Ctibor: Nad osudem českých a slovenských Cikánů v letech 1939–1945 [On the fate of the Czech and Slovak Gypsies in the years 1939–1945]. Brno 1981, pp. 34–35; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 73; Thurner, Erika: Nacistická a poválečná politika proti Romům a Sintům v Rakousku [Nazi and post-war policy against Roma and Sinti in Austria]. In: Horváthová, Jana (ed.): Le romengro murdaripen andro dujto baro mariben = Genocida Romů v době druhé světové války. Sborník z mezinárodního odborného semináře Pražská židovská obec, 27. 5. 2003 [Le romengro murdaripen andro dujto baro mariben = The genocide of the Roma during the Second World War. Proceedings of the international professional seminar held by the Prague Jewish Community, May, 27, 2003]. Prague 2003, p. 38.





Westerbork concentration camp on May 21, 1944.<sup>22</sup> Transports from Belgium took place in November 1943 and January 1944. On 17 January 1944, 351 people arrived in the camp, including individuals not only Belgium but also from France, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and Norway.<sup>23</sup> In the spring of 1944, deportations took place also from the territory of the Soviet Union, by then occupied by the Nazis. Roma from Brest, Lithuania, which belonged to the Belarusian General Commissariat, and from Lithuania were deported to the "gypsy camp" in Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>24</sup>

### Prisoners from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia

The Deportations of Roma and Sinti from the Protectorate, based on Himmler's so-called Auschwitz-decree, took place during 1943 and 1944. People were deported either individually, in larger or smaller groups or more often by means of mass deportations, which usually consisted of tens and hundreds of men, women and children previously assembled at so-called collection points (sport clubs, inns and other buildings). Transports took place by rail, the people were crammed into freight cars with tightly closed doors and windows and had no access to food, drink and toilets during their many-hour journey (for example, the journey from Prague to Auschwitz). The trains started from Prague and went via Pardubice, Brno, Přeřov and Moravian Ostrava to Auschwitz. On the territory of the Protectorate, the deportation trains were operated by the Czech-Moravian Railways and beyond the borders of the Protectorate, by the German Reich Railway (Deutsche Reichsbahn). Accordingly, the non-uniformed police of the Protectorate and the gendarmerie escorted the trains to Moravian Ostrava, where the German criminal police took over at the border.<sup>25</sup>

Iren Herák (born 1912 in Ludkovice, prisoners number Z-4446<sup>26</sup>), imprisoned in the concentration camps Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buchenwald and Mittelbau I-Dora, recalled:

<sup>22</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: *Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau*, p. 25; Zimmermann, Michael: *Rassenutopie und Genozid*, p. 312–315; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: *Cikáni pod hákovým křížem*, p. 59–60.

<sup>23</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: *Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau*, p. 26; Zimmermann, Michael: *Rassenutopie und Genozid*, pp. 311–312; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: *Cikáni pod hákovým křížem*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>24</sup> Zimmermann, Michael: *Rassenutopie und Genozid*, p. 315.

<sup>25</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: *Romové v České republice včera a dnes [Roma in the Czech Republic yesterday and today]*. Olomouc 1999, pp. 76–77; Nečas, Ctibor: *Holocaust českých Romů [The Holocaust of the Czech Roma]*. Prague 1999, p. 135; Nečas, Ctibor: *Z Brna do Auschwitz-Birkenau. První transport moravských Romů do koncentračního tábora Auschwitz-Birkenau [From Brno to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The first deportation of Moravian Roma to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp]*. Brno 2000, p. 11; Nečas, Ctibor: *Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945)*, pp. 294–295.

<sup>26</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: *Auschwitz prisoners*. Online available at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=93294](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=93294) [2021-02-19].



*"We left from Uherský Brod in trains with freight cars. The freight cars were crammed with people, so that we could hardly move. There was no toilet, just a tin pot, I remember this like it happened today... We didn't know where we were going. The train did not stop anywhere. In Ostrava we were taken over by the Gestapo and Czech gendarmes said their goodbye. They knew where they were taking us."<sup>27</sup>*

The first mass transport of "gypsies and gypsy half-breeds" from the Protectorate, numbering 1,038 Roma men, women and children, mainly from South Moravia, left Brno on March 6, 1943.<sup>28</sup> During the year 1943, further transports followed from various parts of Bohemia and Moravia, which arrived in Auschwitz on March 10 (the transport sent from Prague numbered 650 people) and March 19 (1,048 people from Olomouc). In addition, transports also left from both "gypsy camps": on May 7 from Lety u Písku (863 people) and on August 22 from Hodonín u Kunštátu (768 people). The last, smaller transports left on October 19, 1943 (from Prague and Brno, 92 people) and on January 28, 1944 (from Prague and Brno, 37 people). In total, the Protectorate authorities gradually deported about 4,500 Roma and Sinti from the Protectorate to the "gypsy camp" in Auschwitz-Birkenau. More than a hundred people were deported by the Protectorate authorities individually.<sup>29</sup>

As part of the deportations from the Reich, almost 900 Roma and Sinti from the territories of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia that had been affiliated to the Reich in 1939, were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau as "gypsies and gypsy half-breeds". They were included mainly in the deportations registered on March 7, 1943, March 14, 1943, March 17, 1943 and April 9, 1943.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Holocaust.cz: Iren Herák, narozen 1912 [Iren Herák, born 1912]. Available online at: <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/vzpominky/iren-herak-narozen-1912/#remark-13> [2021-02-19].

<sup>28</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Romové v České republice včera a dnes, pp. 76–78; Id.: Z Brna do Auschwitz-Birkenau, 60 p.; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 294–297.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on the deportation of Roma from the Czech lands, see for example: Nečas, Ctibor: Nad osudem českých a slovenských Cikánů v letech 1939–1945, pp. 62–63; Nečas, Ctibor: Romové v České republice včera a dnes, pp. 76–77; Id.: Z Protektorátu Čechy a Morava do Auschwitz II - Birkenau. Hromadný transport 7. 5. 1943 [From the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia to Auschwitz II – Birkenau. The mass deportation of May 7, 1943] In: Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské univerzity 1995 (C 42) [Yearbook of the arts faculty of the University of Brno 1995 (C42)], pp. 139–145; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 134–140; Id.: Z Brna do Auschwitz-Birkenau, 60 p.; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 297–300.

<sup>30</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nad osudem českých a slovenských Cikánů v letech 1939–1945, p. 68; Nečas, Ctibor: Aušvicate hi kher báro. Čeští vězňové cikánského tábora v Osvětimi II – Brzezince [Aušvicate hi kher báro. Czech prisoners of the Gypsy camp in Auschwitz II - Birkenau]. Brno 1992, 246 p.



In total, the Nazis deported about 5,500 Roma and Sinti from the territory of the present-day Czech Republic to the "gypsy camp" in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Most of them did not survive the camp internment.<sup>31</sup>

## Survival in the "gypsy camp"

### Arrival

Trains with the deportees arrived day and night at the Auschwitz station. After the train stopped and the wagons opened, they had to disembark immediately under the supervision of armed SS guards with dogs. Everything took place at a very fast pace and was accompanied by the screams of people and the barking of dogs. The frightened men and women, together with their crying children, were loaded onto trucks, which were prepared for their further transport, or they had to lined up in rows of five people and walk to their destination. From the spring of 1944, the railway tracks lead directly into the camp.<sup>32</sup>

Survivor Aloisie Blumaierová, née Ištvánová (born 1926 in Bořitov, prisoners number Z-1199<sup>33</sup>) recalled her arrival: *"We arrived in Auschwitz in the afternoon, it was still light. The SS and the dogs immediately drove us out of the wagons and we had to set out on foot for the next journey. It didn't take long, maybe thirty minutes. Coming into that environment was terrible. Only barbed wire everywhere and behind them one barrack building after another."*<sup>34</sup>

Upon arrival at the camp, the admission process, consisting of several phases, took place immediately. The first phased consisted of a shared bath in the so-called sauna under showers or in washrooms. The humiliating joint shower took place in the presence of mocking SS guards and prison officials with constant swearing, beatings and bullying. In addition, the guards alternated hot and ice water with no warning. Then the prisoners` hair was completely shaved off. Some already arrived with cut hair from, for

<sup>31</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 141.

<sup>32</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 32; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 77; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 146–147.

<sup>33</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=101228](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=101228) [2021-02-19].

<sup>34</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená tábtorová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků [We can't forget = Našti bisteras. Forced camp concentration in the stories of Roma witnesses]. Olomouc 1994, p. 80.



example, other internment and concentration camps (e. g transports from the protectorate's "gypsy camp" in Hodonín u Kunštátu).<sup>35</sup>

Antonín Absolon-Růžička (born 1930 in Mistřín, prisoners number Z-7539<sup>36</sup>) recalled: *"In the morning we were lined up, we had to keep our things in the block, and they took us back to the neighboring camp. There was a large room in the barracks where we all had to undress. That was awful. People didn't want to undress because they were all there together, men, women and children. There was screaming, beating, crying. I remember well that my oldest sister, Božena, who was 16 years old, did not want to undress, even though a lot of people were already naked. An SS-man beat her, ripped her clothes off, my sister was screaming, crying and defending herself. We had to tie our clothes together, so that the number was visible. Then we were completely cut and shaved. We didn't recognize ourselves, the way we looked afterwards."*<sup>37</sup>

The "bath" was followed by getting dressed. Due to the lack of prison clothing, people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp", different from the prisoners in other parts of the Auschwitz complex, were not given special prison clothes or shoes after their arrival in the camp. Some of the newcomers were left in the clothes and shoes in which they arrived, others were fitted with clothes after the gassed, especially Jewish, prisoners. In both cases, long stripes in the form of the letter X were painted in red oil on the entire back of these civilian garments.<sup>38</sup>

Tomáš Šubrt (born 1901 in Čeložnice, prisoners number Z-4751<sup>39</sup>) said: *"They left us our civilian clothes, but they painted a red cross on our clothes, on our caps and hats, so that they could find us everywhere if we ran away. We wore that clothing about 9 months, before we tore it apart. Then, we didn't have shoes or clothes and we had to walk barefoot and half-naked. When a transport arrived, and there were many of them every*

<sup>35</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 41; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 77; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 147–148.

<sup>36</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=196624](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=196624) [2021-02-19].

<sup>37</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 86; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 335; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=223243](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=223243) [2021-02-19].



*day, they were Poles, Czechs, Russians, French, they stripped them, gave them prison clothes and gave us as gypsies their civilian clothed, but dyed, marked.*<sup>40</sup>

The initial cleansing was followed by the registration of prisoners. Each received a strip of white canvas, which he had to wear sewn on the garment in the left half of his chest, and the men also on the outer seam of his right leg trousers. There were three symbols on the canvas: a triangle, a letter, and a number. The triangle was a tag every prisoner was given, its color expressed the prisoner's category. Roma and Sinti were classified by the Nazis generally as "asocials" and received black triangles, regardless of their previous social status, property they might have owned and cultural conditions. The prison number replaced the name of each prisoner throughout his internment. The numbering was done in several series, differentiated with letters of the capital alphabet and people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" were given numbers from the Z-series ("Z" as abbreviation of the German word "Zigeuner", i.e gypsy).<sup>41</sup>

People imprisoned in the Auschwitz camp complex have also been tattooed since the spring of 1943 due to high mortality, difficulties in recognizing the dead and in order to render escape impossible. Prisoner functionaries tattooed the prisoner's number on the legs of Romani children and on the left forearms other Romani women and men.<sup>42</sup>

Růžena Otáhalová, née Krausová (born 1928 in Dolní Cerekev, prisoners number Z-1781<sup>43</sup>) remembered: *"They drove us into a big hall, we fell over each other, they tore the little children away from their parents, so they started looking for each other. We were there overnight without food, without everything, then I found my mother there. Here they also started tattooing us, with that one needle they tattooed us until it broke, no exchange. Then we had terrible sores because everyone had different blood.*"<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 215.

<sup>41</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 41; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 77–78; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 148–149.

<sup>42</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Vyhazení českých Romů [The extermination of the Czech Roma]. In: Lacho Lav 1990, p. 2; Id.: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 78; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 149; Nečas, Ctibor: Nad rubrikami hlavních knih osvětivského cikánského tábora [On the categories in the main prisoners' books of the Auschwitz gypsy camp]. In: Časopis Matice moravské 126/2007, p. 356.

<sup>43</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=128338](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=128338) [2021-02-19].

<sup>44</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 187.



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Häftlings Nr.	Häftl. Art	Name	Vorname	Geburtsdatum			Geburtsort
				Tag	Monat	Jahr	
✓ 5364	✓	Rauisch	Katharina	19	3	20	Pravonice, Mäh.
✓ 5365	✓	Rauisch	Augusta	25	3	60	Pravonice, Mäh.
✓ 5366	✓	Borjak	María	26	11	39	Velké Chrástovice
✓ 5367	✓	Büchler	Anna	2	12	39	Prácheň
✓ 5368	✓	Palat	Margdalena	20	6	89	Čekovice
✓ 5369	✓	Vavrič	Marie	16	12	60	Bohulice
✓ 5370	✓	Wichter	Hyta	12	3	39	St. Jan
5371	✓	Wichter	Julie	16	8	36	Pravonice
✓ 5372	✓	Wichter	Antonie	27	2	33	Pravonice
✓ 5373	✓	Wichter	Anna	11	9	31	Pravonice
✓ 5374	✓	Wichter	Anna	6	5	12	Pravonice
✓ 5375	✓	Wagner	Pauline	10	3	96	Pravonice, Prácheň
✓ 5376	✓	Wagner	Marie	20	4	92	Prácheň
✓ 5377	✓	Wagner	Marie	19	8	19	Pravonice
✓ 5378	✓	Wagner	Marie	27	1	62	Pravonice - Prácheň
✓ 5379	✓	Wagner	Marie	8	10	68	Pravonice
✓ 5380	✓	Wagner	Marie	14	2	96	Pravonice
✓ 5381	✓	Wagner	Margaretha	25	3	29	Pravonice
✓ 5382	✓	Wagner	Anna	8	5	25	Pravonice
✓ 5383	✓	Wagner	Anna	27	9	34	Pravonice - Prácheň
✓ 5384	✓	Wagner	Anna	25	1	94	Pravonice
✓ 5385	✓	Wagner	Anna	23	4	33	Pravonice - Prácheň
✓ 5386	✓	Wagner	Marie	5	3	38	Pravonice - Prácheň
✓ 5387	✓	Wagner	Anna	4	2	86	Pravonice
✓ 5388	✓	Wagner	Anna	13	4	30	Pravonice
✓ 5389	✓	Wagner	Anna	27	7	99	Pravonice
✓ 5390	✓	Wagner	Anna	21	6	35	Pravonice
✓ 5391	✓	Wagner	Anna	3	11	33	Pravonice
✓ 5392	✓	Wagner	Anna	4	5	36	Pravonice
✓ 5393	✓	Wagner	Anna	13	8	22	Pravonice
✓ 5394	✓	Wagner	Anna	3	8	62	Pravonice

A page taken from the record book of women imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" of Auschwitz-Birkenau. (picture: Archive of the State museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau).





## Accommodation and hygienic conditions

After all the necessary admission procedures, the imprisoned people were accommodated. Unlike in other parts of Auschwitz, in the "gypsy family camp" and the "Terezín family camp", there was no normal division of families, resp. separation of men and women. Regarding Roma and Sinti, the reasons for this form of internment were probably based on the racial ideology of the Nazis. At the same time, the "gypsy family camp" could serve as a space for gaining experience in the liquidation of other groups of the population.<sup>45</sup>

The wooden residential block or barracks with an area of 389 m<sup>2</sup> was adapted to accommodate 300 people, but immediately after the opening of the camp, up to 1,000 to 1,200 people were crammed into one block and the accommodation capacity was significantly exceeded. The individual floors of the three-story wooden bays (slang. bukša), which were built along the longer inner walls of the barracks, were planned as a sleeping place for five people, in fact, fifteen people had to sleep there. Officially, they were supposed to sleep on wood wool straw mats, but usually there were none, so people slept on the bare boards and covered themselves with blankets only.<sup>46</sup>

The only interior of the barracks were two tin stoves, which stood at both sides of each block and were connected by a brick channel that ran across the floor. Together, they were supposed to function as a heating for the whole barrack. Since they were not used for this purpose, the brick wall was used in other ways (prisoner functionaries used it to distribute food rations, the prisoners sat there and stored their personal belongings on it).<sup>47</sup>

The blocks were poorly lit and ventilated only by small air shafts and open gates during the day which caused darkness and bad air throughout the day, the situation deteriorated even more at night after the gate closed. The roofs were leaking, since the barracks were built without any insulation and, similarly, as there was no floor covering, the mud the barracks were built on stayed moist.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Zimmermann, Michael: *Rassenutopie und Genozid*, p. 331–333; Thurner, Erika: *Nacistická a poválečná politika proti Romům a Sintům v Rakousku*, p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: *Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau*, p. 44; Nečas, Ctibor: *Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945*, p. 85; Id.: *Holocaust českých Romů*, pp. 150–151; Id.: *Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945)*, p. 293.

<sup>47</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: *Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945*, p. 85; Id.: *Holocaust českých Romů*, p. 151; Id.: *Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945)*, p. 293.





The hygienic conditions in the camp were appalling. Water was never introduced into the house huts for washing, and instead of toilets, only barrels stood at the back door, which usually overflowed. The overcrowding of the barracks and the general lack of water (so-called sauna washrooms functioned only to a limited extent for prisoners) made proper personal hygiene impossible just as cleaning. Because of this, the prisoners themselves had no chance but to be dirty, and the same applied to their clothes and blankets. Therefore, insects (especially clothes lice and scabies) spread throughout the camp, making it impossible for the prisoners to rest and, additionally, transmitted various diseases. The non-systematic attempts to remove lice couldn't solve this problem.<sup>49</sup>

### Nutrition

After a short stay in the camp, the imprisoned people began to feel a lasting hunger and thirst that accompanied them everywhere. The prisoners were to receive food in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, but none of the rations met the prescribed, albeit low, standards. Responsible for this was the poor storage and disposal of rotten food, shortcomings in the technical equipment of kitchens, but above all theft, committed by the power apparatus, but also by other prisoners led by their own hunger and instinct of self-preservation.<sup>50</sup>

Marie Nedvěďová, née Kovářová (born in 1923 in Bedlno, Rakovník district, prisoners number unknown) recalled: *"We received food once a day, and it was bad food. In addition, fodder beets in small portions and 10 slices of bread. We had tea from birch leaves and we didn't see coffee the whole time we were there."*<sup>51</sup>

Only the small number of those, who brought money or gold to the camp and prominent people, that means, all those who held positions as prisoner functionaries or obtained permanent work in one of the various camp facilities, had the opportunity to supplement the insufficient ration of food through purchases in the canteen with a very limited selection and on the black market. However, most prisoners suffered from constant hunger, which turned into long-term malnutrition and gradually exhausted the body. In desperation and under threat of punishment, some prisoners went to the camp

<sup>48</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 85–86; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 151; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 293.

<sup>49</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 86; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 151–153.

<sup>50</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 82; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 335; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, pp. 128–129.

<sup>51</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 194.



kitchens to pick up leftovers from weaned barrels for food or to search piles of carried kitchen rubbish. Some also collected and ate roots, stems and leaves in the camp area.<sup>52</sup>

### Forced labour

All men and women in the "gypsy camp" had to work, as long as they could. A small number of prisoners were selected for permanent work in kitchens, hospitals and other camp facilities, which allowed them to obtain better accommodation and food conditions, and thus a greater chance of survival. Most prisoners though did not have any work benefits, as they worked very little and only occasionally. Men and women were deployed for particularly demanding construction work (construction of toilets, washrooms or showers, camp roads, digging of drainage ditches, groundwork between barracks and in the camp surroundings, etc.) or were forced to conduct various pointless tasks (carrying heavy loads from one place to another and back, digging up turf or clay, shifting piles of sand and stones). Occasionally, and mostly for males, there was work outside the camp, like extending the railway ramp or groundworks near the completed crematoria, groups of women, among other tasks, had to collect nettles and other herbs for the camp kitchens.<sup>53</sup>

Some work group leaders, kapos and their assistants, who were armed with sticks or batons, treated their fellow prisoners ruthlessly and cruelly, which the SS often forced them to do under threat of their own punishment. Prisoners who could not keep up with the set pace were beaten, which, in combination with their physical exhaustion, sometimes led to their death.<sup>54</sup>

František Holomek (born 1918 in Veselí nad Moravou, prisoners number Z-1208<sup>55</sup>) recalled working in the camp as follows: *"... we worked on the roads, we repaired the roads. We were digging. They beat us at work, people died like flies. We were not even allowed to stand up, whenever we stood up, we got beaten. My wife's grandfather also*

<sup>52</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 43; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 84–85; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 159–161; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 308–309.

<sup>53</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, pp. 86–87; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 155–156; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 305–306.

<sup>54</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 43; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 87; Id.: O osudu pracovních transportů z cikánského rodinného tábora v Auschwitz-Birkenau [On the fate of labor transports from the gypsy family camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau]. In: Terezínské listy 1996, pp. 51–54; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 169.

<sup>55</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=96645](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=96645) [2021-02-19].



*arrived there. He was older. One time, when he didn't do anything, and they caught him, they beat him and that was the end. The corpses were piled up, cars arrived in the evening, and they were put in the incinerator.*<sup>56</sup>

One way to get out of the "gypsy camp" was to be transferred to work in another part of the Auschwitz complex or to be deported to another concentration camp. But also there, however, thousands of people fell victim to the method of "liquidation by work" or various pseudo-medical experiments (e.g. forced sterilization of women in the Ravensbrück concentration camp). However, the transfers of prisoners from the "gypsy camp" motivated by the Nazis' need for labor, was an option mainly for young, healthy and physically fit individuals, and took place continuously throughout its operation. As early as March 4 and 12, 1943, about 700 men and boys were transferred to work in the Auschwitz I concentration camp, and on November 9, 1943, about 100 men were deported further to the Natzweiler concentration camp.<sup>57</sup> During spring and summer of 1944, several transports with a total of 3,000 men and women were deployed for work in the Buchenwald, Ravensbrück and Flossenbürg concentration camps.<sup>58</sup> However, not all of them endured the hard work and if, after some time, they were classified as unfit for work, they were sent back to Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>59</sup>

### Camp regime and penalties

The everyday life in the camp was determined mainly by the observance of the strict provisions of the unwritten camp rules or sadistic regulations that were set up informally. Around four o'clock in the morning, the day at the camp began with gong strikes that announced the wake-up call. While getting up, the prisoners were accompanied by SS-guards and kapos shouting at them, beating and harassing them, pushing those who were still asleep out of their beds, pouring cold water over them, pulling their hair, etc. Inside the barracks, inhabited by several hundred people, there was only minimal space and possibility to get dressed quickly or some personal hygiene. Still, just the slightest disorder was punished on the spot. If children had urinated or defecated at night, their parents were punished.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 145.

<sup>57</sup> Id.: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 90.

<sup>58</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 89–91; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, pp. 194–195; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 316.

<sup>59</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 93.

<sup>60</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, pp. 78–79; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 153; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 303.



After quickly leaving the barracks, there was little time left to queue up for the opportunity to perform a bodily need and a basic cleansing. Any delay carried the risk for each prisoner, that upon his return to the barrack, someone else would have taken his food ration. The short breakfast was followed by a morning call. The prisoners had to stand in front of their barracks in rows of ten in order to facilitate their counting. Regardless of the weather, they had to remain in line until the exact sum of those present, those who died at night, were transferred to other blocks or had been deported further to other camps, matched the number counted.<sup>61</sup>

Aloisie Blumaierová, née Ištvánová (born 1926 in Bořitov, Blansko district, prisoners number Z-1199<sup>62</sup>) recalled: *"From day one, we had to submit to a tough camp regime that began with a roll call. In the morning we had to stand in rows in front of the block and everyone had to report their number. Doctors reported the numbers of the sick, mothers had to report the numbers of their younger children. And if it didn't match, the whole ceremony was repeated. The roll call lasted until everyone was counted."*<sup>63</sup>

After the roll call, old people and initially also women with small children returned to the barracks. Later, the children were placed in a so-called kindergarten and a nursery for the whole day. All other prisoners were to work from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. After returning from work, the evening roll calls followed, which were endless, especially when one of the prisoners was missing or had tried to escape. In this case, the roll call lasted until the SS-guards managed to catch the escaped prisoner and brought him back to the camp.<sup>64</sup>

The roll call was followed by dinner and free time, at least if there was time left and no punishments took place and no delousing or other activities were ordered. During this small amount of free time, the prisoners gathered around the barracks, where they talked to each other, sold or exchanged things or visited each other in their respective barracks. Some of the prisoners played musical instruments or sang.<sup>65</sup> The "gypsy camp"

<sup>61</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 79; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 153–154, 162; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 303–304.

<sup>62</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=101228](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=101228) [2021-02-19].

<sup>63</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 79; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 153–154, 162; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 303–304.

<sup>65</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 162; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 304–305; Weissbach, Anne Merle: Musik der Sinti und Roma im nationalsozialistischen Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager [Music of the Sinti and Roma in the National Socialist concentration and extermination



is also the place of origin of several songs whose lyrics in Romani describe the miserable life in the camp (e.g. Labesbryku, éj, Osvěčnatar amen dine: from Auschwitz we were taken to Ravensbrück). One of these so-called plaintive songs is "Aušvicate hi kher baro" (There is a big house in Auschwitz). The song did not have a stable shape and the prisoners sang it in various variants, which were recorded in Poland, Slovakia and Moravia after the war. Růžena Danielová (1904–1988, prisoners number Z-8259) from Moravian village Mutěnice, who survived her internment as the only one from her family also carried with her one of the versions from the "gypsy camp".<sup>66</sup> The lyrics and melodies of the song have become one of the musical symbols of the suffering of the Roma in Auschwitz and are often part of various commemorative events, not only in the Czech Republic.<sup>67</sup>

At 9 p.m., gong strikes announced the curfew, during which it was strictly forbidden to leave the barracks. Prisoners who violated this ban, were tracked down by searchlights, and shot by the SS-guards on the watch towers.<sup>68</sup>

The executive power in the camp was the so-called prisoners self-administration, which was subordinate to the military structure of the SS. Members of the prisoners self-administration, who were recruited into the "gypsy camp" from the ranks of non-Roma prisoners, wore ribbons (Binde) on their sleeves, indicating their respective function and rank. Black ribbons marked the prisoner functionaries with the greatest power and advantages, which were the elder of the camp (Lagerältester), the administration clerk (Rapportschreiber) and the head of Kapos (Lagerkapo). Elders of the block (Blockältester, slang. Block, blocker), who were responsible for order and cleanliness in their barracks, for allocating food and clothing, controlling the presence of all prisoners, etc. wore red ribbons. Their deputies (Vertreter), block clerks (Blockschreiber) and prisoners with corresponding tasks (Stubendienst, slang. štubový, štubinista)

camps]. Berlin 2011, 80p.

<sup>66</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=54483](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=54483) [2021-02-19].

<sup>67</sup> Holý, Dušan, Nečas, Ctibor: Žalující píseň. O osudu Romů v nacistických koncentračních táborech [A song of complaint. About the fate of the Roma in Nazi concentration camps]. Strážnice, Brno 1993, 151 p.; Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 46–47, 101; Nečas, Ctibor: Špalíček romských miniatur. Osoby a dějství z romského dramatu, které se odvíjelo na scéně historické Moravy [A set of Roma miniatures. Persons and acts from Romani drama, which took place on the scene of historical Moravia]. Brno 2008, pp. 107–113; ...to jsou těžké vzpomínky / ...They're Painful Memories. Brno 2013; for the lyrics see also Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 126;

<sup>68</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 162–163; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 305.



supported them. The officials responsible for the work results of the individual working groups were hierarchized as kapo (Kapo), sub-kapo (Unterkapo) and foremen (Vorarbeiter) and wore yellow ribbons. Members of the prisoners self-administration had various advantages in the camp, e.g., they were exempted from physical work, lived separately in small rooms in their blocks, received more food, were relatively clean and well dressed, etc. On the other hand, they were often bullied and punished by the SS if they failed to conduct their assigned tasks according to the wishes of the SS, such as order on the blocks, etc.<sup>69</sup>

The management of the camp, through subordinates and the prisoners self-administration, severely and cruelly punished real and imaginary offenses committed by prisoners. The most common group punishment, pack drill (Strafexerzieren, slang. Sport), was carried out at the end of the camp road littered with sharp gravel. Another common punishment was additional work (Strafarbeit), that had to be conducted during free time, ie on Sundays and public holidays, during lunch breaks or after the end of the evening roll call and during the night. Withdrawal of (parts of the) food rations (Kostenzug) while one had to keep on working was a punishment prisoners feared particularly. Among the individual punishments, the most common was beating, which was carried out on a special bench at the guardhouse or directly in front of the fellow prisoners. It was also common to tie a prisoner with rope or chain to the ceiling beams in the barracks with their hands behind the back, just high enough for them not to be able to stand on their own feet anymore (Pfahlbinden).<sup>70</sup>

Another possibility punishment was detention in the camp prison located in block 11 of the Auschwitz I concentration camp, next to the execution site. There, prisoners were imprisoned in a so-called bunker, where there were also dark cells. The camp Gestapo also placed prisoners in the so-called criminal command (Strafkommando), whose members were under strict supervision, received lower food rations and worked in particularly difficult workplaces.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 38–39; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 81–82; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 333–334.

<sup>70</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, pp. 80–81; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, pp. 165–167; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 131.

<sup>71</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 80; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 335–336.



## Escape

Besides being transferred to another part of the Auschwitz complex or another concentration camp for work, the only chance for people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" to rescue themselves was trying to escape. Escaping from the camp though was mostly unsuccessful, as the prisoners had to cross the heavily guarded and barbed-wire-enclosed space that surrounded the "gypsy camp" and all other camps next to it, since they rarely worked outside the camp. Despite these unfavorable circumstances, some of the Roma and Sinti were willing to take the risk and tried to escape.<sup>72</sup> According to the incomplete records in the bunker book, ie the prison of the Auschwitz complex, over forty people from the "gypsy camp" tried to escape. The very first report of escape from this camp notes that the Polish prisoner Stefanie Ciuroń (unknown prisoners number) fled on April 7, 1943. The second woman who escaped was Weronika Walaniewicz (prisoners number Z-9611<sup>73</sup>). She fled on February 6, 1944. Both were not captured and their fates are unknown.<sup>74</sup>

The camp documentation also contains records of escapes by Roma from the Czech lands, though all of them failed. On May 4, 1943, Josef Serinek and František Růžička fled.<sup>75</sup> Another six Czech Roma who fled on May 7, 1943, were subsequently captured and shot on May 22, 1943 by an execution squad. Jaroslav Herák (Z-4466<sup>76</sup>) from Luhačovice even managed to escape twice. He first attempt on November 27, 1943, ended in capture and detention, later he was released from the camp prison and placed in the criminal command. From there, he tried to escape again on February 1, 1944. He fled with several others, but they were captured and executed on the run.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 76; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 79; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 167; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 132.

<sup>73</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=240975](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=240975) [2021-02-19].

<sup>74</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 72; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 335–336; Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, Joanna: Resistance and Survival of the Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In: Roma Resistance during the Holocaust and in its Aftermath. Collection of working papers. Budapest 2018, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 80; Id.: Útěky českých Romů z osvětimského táborového komplexu [Escapes of Czech Roma from the Auschwitz camp complex]. In: Vlastivědný věstník moravský 47/1995, pp. 70–71; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 167.

<sup>76</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=93302](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=93302) [2021-02-19].

<sup>77</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 73; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 80; Id.: Romové v České republice včera a dnes, pp. 80–81; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 168; Valůšek, David: Jaroslav Herák. Tragický osud luhačovického Roma [Jaroslav Herák. The tragic fate of a



Marie Nedvěďová, née Kovářová (born in 1923 in Bedlno, Rakovník district, unknown prisoners number) recalled: *"When a prisoner escaped, it was something terrible, the whole block was shut down and we couldn't even go out. There were drawn wires and there was electricity. The fugitive was shot and then shown around in the barracks, for us to know how we would end up if we also tried to run away."*<sup>78</sup>

The attempts of escape undertaken by Roma and Sinti from the "gypsy camp" mostly ended in failure, and although all the other imprisoned people in the camp knew this, it did not stop everyone from trying. Under these circumstances, an attempt to escape was a manifestation of deep despair, as well as courage and resistance against violence and a natural protest of individuals against the power in charge.

### Sickness and death

The catastrophic conditions concerning nutrition, accommodation and hygiene the "gypsy camp" quickly exhausted the imprisoned people and weakened their resistance to diseases, which became the main cause of mass mortality, given that health care was almost nonexistent, too. Morbidity and mortality culminated mainly in the summer of 1943 and then again in the winter of 1943-1944.<sup>79</sup> A total of about 19,300 people died in the camp, including about 4,300 people murdered during the night of August 2-3, 1944, which counts up to 84% of all people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp".<sup>80</sup>

Zdeněk Daňhel (born 1928 in Bílovice, Z-1255<sup>81</sup>) remembered: *"We did not have access to water. We secretly went to the wells, let down some jar on a string, and drank the water drawn in this way. It was forbidden, because the water was contaminated. Later, typhus and other diseases occurred. Children died, the elderly and others, up to 50 people a day."*<sup>82</sup>

Roma from Luhačovice]. In: Milý Bore. Brno 2003, pp. 391–396; Nečas, Ctibor: Špalíček romských miniatur. Osoby a dějství z romského dramatu, které se odvíjelo na scéně historické Moravy, pp. 104–106.

<sup>78</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 195.

<sup>79</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 89; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 163; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), p. 310.

<sup>80</sup> Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 343–344; Kubica, Helena, Setkiewicz, Piotr: The Last Stage of the Functioning of Zigeunerlager in Birkenau camp (May – August 1944). In: Memoria. Memory – History – Education 2018, p. 15. Available online at: <https://newsstand.joomag.com/en/memoria-en-no-10-july-2018/0531301001532506629> [2021-02-19].

<sup>81</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=54705](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=54705) [2021-02-19].

<sup>82</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 90





The camp hospital (Häftlingskrankenbau), called the "Revier", was in charge of the very limited health care available for the prisoners, and was only established by the end of March 1943, when around 10,000 people were already living in the "gypsy camp". It originally consisted of two, later, due to the enormous increase in the number of patients of six wooden barracks. The hospital's facilities were almost non-existent in the first weeks of the camp's existence. Patients, of whom there were up to 2,000 in the Revier at during the worst times, lay on three-story wooden bunk beds, the same as in the barracks. On bunk bed measuring 1.85 x 2.8m had to accomodate four to five, often even more patients. The initial number of 200 patients in one block soon increased to 400 to 800 people in the early summer of 1943. Patients were allocated to different barracks according to the diseases they suffered.<sup>83</sup>

SS-physicians were in charge of the hospital, for the longest time Dr. Josef Mengele held this function. His assistants were SS-paramedics, the so-called SDG (Sanitätsdienstgrad). The highest prisoners functionary here was the hospital elder (Revierältester), most of them were no trained doctors. Under the supervision of SS-doctors, the actual medical service was performed by prisoner doctors. However, their ability to help the sick was very limited, as there was a lack of water, medicine, hygiene, adequate nutrition, and no possibility for an adequate isolation of patients with infectious diseases. Untrained people from the ranks of Roma prisoners worked in the hospital as nurses, whose task was to distribute food and measure the temperatures of patients.<sup>84</sup>

Two Czech Jewish prisoners were also among the prison doctors in the "gypsy camp". Pediatrician prof. Dr. Berthold Epstein (1890-1962, prisoners number 79104<sup>85</sup>) worked at the Medical Faculty of the German University in Prague, where he also headed the II. children's clinic and held a private practice. After the occupation of the Czech lands in 1939, he resigned from both positions and moved to Norway, where he was arrested in 1942 and deported to Auschwitz. Together with prof. Epstein also Dr. Rudolf

<sup>83</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 50; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 88; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 328–329; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 163; Id.: Židovští lékaři v cikánských táborech [Jewish doctors in gypsy camps]. In: Romano džaniben 7/2000, no. 1–2, p. 59; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 130.

<sup>84</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 51–52; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, pp. 88–89.

<sup>85</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=64834](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=64834) [2021-02-19].



Weisskopf-Vítek (born 1895, prisoners number 71261<sup>86</sup>) worked at the hospital in the “gypsy camp”, who was a dermatovenerologist in Prague-Karlín before his internment.<sup>87</sup>

The most common diseases included diarrhea, which occurred as a result of poor nutrition and drinking contaminated water, as well as typhoid fever and spotted fever. Furthermore, scurvy, scabies, malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery and smallpox also spread uncontrollably in the “gypsy camp”. In addition, children and adolescents suffered from noma or water cancer, a disease caused by extreme malnutrition. The camp hospital had not enough space for everyone who got sick, so people died on the blocks. Due to the spreading epidemics, the health situation in the “gypsy camp” was so catastrophic that in May 1943, the reception of new transports had to be stopped for some time.<sup>88</sup> The suspicion of typhus was also a pretext for the camp commander to order newly arrived prisoners directly into the gas chambers. In March 1943, about 1,700 Polish Roma from the “gypsy camp” in Szepetow were murdered without prior registration, in May 1943 more than a thousand people from Bialystok shared their fate.<sup>89</sup>

Vlasta Serynková (born 1922 in Pilsen, prisoners number Z-7934<sup>90</sup>) recalled: *“There was a lot of typhus, scabies, tuberculosis in the camp. The prisoners had no medicine. We got injections, nobody knew what they were. Mortality was high. We left the dead on the block for three days and took their rations. After three days, we reported their deaths. My mother died in Auschwitz, she was burned, my sisters Anna and Antonia and eight children, and my brothers Karel and Eduard. My brother Eduard was beaten by the Germans because he could no longer work, because of hunger. Only one brother returned, Alois.”*<sup>91</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=244692](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=244692) [2021-02-19].

<sup>87</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Židovští lékaři v cikánských táborech, p. 59.

<sup>88</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 45, 54–55; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 89; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 336–338; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 163–164; Id.: Židovští lékaři v cikánských táborech, p. 60; Id.: Romové na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1740–1945), pp. 310–311.

<sup>89</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 22–23; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 76; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 337; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 163; Id.: Nad rubrikami hlavních knih osvětivského cikánského tábora, p. 357.

<sup>90</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=208429](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=208429) [2021-02-19].

<sup>91</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 205.



The most endangered group of people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" were the children who came there with their parents and other relatives and those children, who were born directly in the camp - initially in the barracks, from the end of March 1943 in the camp hospital. In total, about 370 children were born in the "gypsy camp" (among them about 60 with protectorate affiliation), but none of them survived.<sup>92</sup> In the spring of 1943, a so-called kindergarten (Kindergarten) was established in the "gypsy camp" with a crèche for children under the age of six. Their mothers had to hand them over to the nurses after the morning roll call and picked them up only after returning from work in the afternoon. Later, orphaned children were permanently placed in the kindergarten, their number constantly increasing. In total, about 9,000 children under the age of 14 were imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" (ie about 39% of all people imprisoned in the "gypsy camp"), the vast majority did not survive the internment. Those who lived through the summer of 1944, were at least ten years of age and had a fitting physical appearance, Dr. Mengele selected for the last transport to the Buchenwald and Ravensbrück concentration camps. Younger or sick children, along with the other remaining prisoners of the "gypsy camp", were murdered in early August 1944 in the gas chambers.<sup>93</sup>

### Medical experiments

Many Nazi German scientists and physicians participated in the development of Nazi ideology with their research during and before World War II, concerning such topics as racial theories about the supremacy of the German nation, racial hygiene, etc. Their findings were then put into practice by other physicians, especially in concentration camps. There, SS doctors could use defenseless living people, especially Jewish and Roma prisoners, for their research and experiments that they otherwise would not have been able to carry out.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Cikánský tábor v Auschwitz-Birkenau a jeho nejmladší vězňové [The Gypsy camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau and its youngest prisoners]. In: Časopis matice moravské 113/1994, p. 172; Id.: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 89; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 329; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database. Available online at: [https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_advance\\_search.php](https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_advance_search.php) [2021-02-19].

<sup>93</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 56–71; Nečas, Ctibor: Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938–1945, p. 88; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, pp. 130–131; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database. Available online at: [https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_advance\\_search.php](https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_advance_search.php) [2021-02-19].

<sup>94</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 63–64; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, pp. 349–358; Heberer, Patricia: Romové a Sintové ve světle nacistické lékařské a eugenické politiky, pp. 29–35; Winau, Rolf: Medizinische Experimente in den Konzentrationslagern [Medical experiments in the concentration camps]. In: Der Ort des Terrors [Místo teroru]. München 2005, pp. 166–178.



In the "gypsy camp", experiments on imprisoned people were carried out by SS doctor Dr. Josef Mengele and his subordinate assistants. Next to his general medical work, he was involved in race research from the beginning. He performed various anthropological and anthropometric measurements on Romani prisoners, but also medical experiments and experimental procedures, especially on young children and identical twins. Under Mengele's supervision, doctors also conducted research about noma, the causes of this disease and possible treatment. The Czech Jewish prisoner doctors prof. Berthold Epstein and Dr. Rudolf Weisskopf-Vítek were assigned this task. Other research undertaken at the Auschwitz concentration camp included attempts to develop a cheap method of sterilization, conducted by SS-doctors mainly on women but also on men. These experiments were mostly very painful and in many cases led to death.<sup>95</sup>

As part of the research of the "gypsy race" Dr. Mengele conducted, Jewish prisoner Annemarie "Dina" Gottlieb (1923–2009, prisoners number 61016<sup>96</sup>), a native of Brno, who was deported from Terezín to the "Terezín family camp" in the B-II-b section of Auschwitz-Birkenau in December 1943 had to draw portraits of selected men and women imprisoned in the "gypsy camp". Until today, seven colorful watercolor paintings have been preserved depicting unknown Romani and Sinti men and women from France, Germany and Poland. These unique watercolor paintings are part of the collections of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Auschwitz.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 64–68.

<sup>96</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=8283](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=8283) [2021-02-19].

<sup>97</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, p. 67; Nečas, Ctibor: Nad portréty cikánských vězňů [On the portraits of gypsy prisoners]. In: Universitas. Revue Masarykovy univerzity v Brně, 1991, no. 2, pp. 28–32; Id.: Dininy podobizny Romů [Dina's portraits of Roma]. In: Romano džaniben 7/2000, no. 1–2, pp. 68–76.



*Portrait of an unknown prisoner from France painted by Annemaria "Dina" Gottlieb in the "gypsy camp" in concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau for camp doctor Josef Mengele, 1944. (picture: Archive of the State museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau).*



## The liquidation of the “gypsy camp”

The liquidation of the "gypsy family camp" was decided by the SS leadership sometime in the spring of 1944. A first attempt to put this decision into practice was met with resistance by the about 6,500 prisoners who were present in the camp and who refused to leave their barracks.<sup>98</sup> This event was described after World War II by Tadeusz Joachimowski (1908-1979), a former Polish political prisoner in the Auschwitz concentration camp and administration clerk in the "gypsy camp" in 1944. Although the date of May 16 is often referred to as the day of the Roma resistance, the "uprising" of Roma and Sinti in the "gypsy camp" remains uncertain due to lack of research.<sup>99</sup>

The final liquidation of the "gypsy camp" was decided by SS leader H. Himmler in July 1944. In the meantime, the number of prisoners in the camp decreased as individuals fit for work were transferred to other concentration camps. On 15 April, 884 men and boys were sent to Buchenwald and 473 women and girls to Ravensbrück, on 24 May 82 men and boys to Flossenbürg and 144 women and girls to Ravensbrück. The last deportation trains from the "gypsy camp" to Buchenwald (918 men and boys) and Ravensbrück (490 women and girls) left on August 2, 1944. After their departure, about 4,300 people remained, mostly elderly and sick people, orphans, mothers with children, and their fathers, if they had refused to leave their families. On the evening of August 2-3, SS-troops led all prisoners out of their barracks, loaded them on trucks and transported them to the courtyard of Crematorium V. Despite their desperate resistance, they were chased into gas chambers and their bodies burned in trenches next to Crematorium V, which was out of order by this time.<sup>100</sup>

This mass murder was followed by the killing of prisoners who, after having been deported to other camps, came back to Auschwitz-Birkenau to die in the gas chambers

<sup>98</sup> On the first attempt of the liquidation of the „gypsy camp“ see for example: Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 77–78; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 340; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 170; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, p. 133; Rose, Romani (ed.): Nacistická genocida Sintů a Romů, pp. 288–289; Kapralski, Slawomir, Martyniak, Maria, Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, Joanna: Voices of Memory 7. Roma in Auschwitz. Oswiecim 2011, pp. 25–26.

<sup>99</sup> Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, Joanna: Resistance and Survival of the Roma and Sinti in Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 103–129; Kubica, Helena, Setkiewicz, Piotr: The Last Stage of the Functioning of Zigeunerlager in Birkenau camp, pp. 6–15.

<sup>100</sup> Kladivová, Vlasta: Konečná stanice Auschwitz-Birkenau, pp. 79–82; Zimmermann, Michael: Rassenutopie und Genozid, p. 343; Nečas, Ctibor: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 170; Kenrick, Donald, Puxon, Grattan: Cikáni pod hákovým křížem, pp. 133–134; Rose, Romani (ed.): Nacistická genocida Sintů a Romů, p. 300; Kubica, Helena, Setkiewicz, Piotr: The Last Stage of the Functioning of Zigeunerlager in Birkenau camp, pp. 6–15.



as exhausted and unfit for work. To this end, on September 26, 1944, about 200 Roma boys were sent back from the Buchenwald concentration camp, and on October 10, 1944, 800 additional Roma, as well as a total of 217 Roma women and girls from the Ravensbrück concentration camp who arrived back in Auschwitz on October 11 and 14, 1944. Some went through selections and were brought back to Ravensbrück, the rest of them, just like all returned men and boys, died in the gas chambers.<sup>101</sup>

## Survivors and remembrance

Most of those imprisoned in the "gypsy camp" in Auschwitz-Birkenau died there as a result of hunger, disease and epidemics. Those who were young, healthy and fit for work and therefore deported further to other concentration camps, internment and labor facilities had a certain chance of rescue, even though they were exposed to devastating work, inhuman living conditions, forced sterilization or death marches in the last weeks of the war.<sup>102</sup>

Of all Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau and other concentration camps, only about 600 men and women returned to post-war Czechoslovakia.<sup>103</sup> Persistent humiliation, extreme physical and mental violence, as well as persistent anxiety, had a lasting impact on the physical and mental condition of the survivors and caused them trauma that haunted them for the rest of their lives. Leon Růžička (born 1924 in Litoměřice, prisoners number Z-1931<sup>104</sup>), who survived Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Mittelbau-Dora and Bergen-Belsen, recalled: *"After the liberation of the camp, I returned home. There, I searched in vain for my family members. I was the only one left, alone. How terrible! I cried with hatred for war. I hated it so much. All 27 members of our family, including 13 children and our good mother, all were victims of the war, either perished in the gas chambers or by inhuman abuse. I myself was ill and it took me several months to recover. But I never recovered completely."*<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Romové v České republice včera a dnes, p. 82; Id.: Holocaust českých Romů. Praha 1999, p. 171; Id.: Nad rubrikami hlavních knih osvětimského cikánského tábora, p. 366.

<sup>102</sup> Id.: Holocaust českých Romů, p. 141.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 173; Id.: Matriky moravských Romů, kteří přežili nucenou táborovou koncentraci [Registries of Moravian Roma who survived the forced camp concentration II]. In: Bulletin Muzea romské kultury 15/2006, pp. 124–128; Id.: Matriky moravských Romů, kteří přežili nucenou táborovou koncentraci II [Registries of Moravian Roma who survived the forced camp concentration II]. In: Bulletin Muzea romské kultury 16/2007, pp. 112–116.

<sup>104</sup> Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau: Auschwitz prisoners. Available online at: [http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id\\_osoba=198027](http://base.auschwitz.org/wiezien.php?lang=en&ok=osoba&id_osoba=198027) [2021-02-19].



The survivors usually tried to return to their hometowns or to the places from which they were deported, since they hoped to meet their relatives there. However, these returns were not easy for many of them. Usually, they couldn't find their homes and former residences, because Roma settlements or settlements on the outskirts of municipalities were often demolished by the relevant authorities after the deportation of their inhabitants, their belongings sold at public auctions, or their houses were allocated to other residents. The survivors, impoverished due to their persecution and deportation, thus had to cope not only with their poor health and the loss of their relatives, but also with the deterioration of their social status.<sup>106</sup>

Among the survivors, particularly the survivors of the Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti, the memory of their tragic fate during the Second World War was, of course, alive and present. However, in fear that these horrors might repeat themselves, because of their stigmatization in the eyes of the public, and for persistent prejudices, some survivors refused to talk about the traumas they had experienced, or preferred not to speak about their Roma identity at all.<sup>107</sup> Aloisie Blumaierová (born 1926 in Bořitov, Blansko district), who was imprisoned in the Auschwitz, Ravensbrück concentration camps and a branch of the Flossenbürg concentration camp in Kraslice and later survived a death march, recalled: *"I returned home, but with poor health. I had rheumatism in my spine and mentally I was completely torn. I couldn't have children for a long time, and when they were finally born to me, I was still worried about them not having to go through something like me. Those were the consequences of my forced internment in the concentration camps."*<sup>108</sup>

Despite its seriousness, the topic of the Roma Holocaust, was not reflected by societies' majorities, both in Eastern and Western Europe, after 1945. The struggle of Roma and Sinti for recognition as victims of racial persecution during Nazism and for their inclusion into the collective memory lasted for several decades. It was not until the 1960s that the international Roma movement became active, one of its first demands being the

<sup>105</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 203; Růžička, Leon, Závodská, Milada, Sadílková, Helena: Včera a dnes (Vzpomínka cikána na nacistické lágry) [Yesterday and today (A gypsy's memories of the Nazi camps)]. In: Romano džaniben 20/2013, pp. 151–152.

<sup>106</sup> Slačka, Dušan. „Cikánská otázka“ na Hodonínsku v letech 1945–1973 [The “Gypsy question” in Hodonín during the years 1945-1973]. Brno 2015, p. 50.

<sup>107</sup> Sadílková, Helena, Schuster, Michal, Závodská, Milada: Holocaust Romů jako „neznámý“ nebo „zapomenutý“ [The Roma Holocaust as “unknown” or “forgotten”]. In: Dějiny a současnost 9/2015, p. 31.

<sup>108</sup> Nečas, Ctibor: Nemůžeme zapomenout = Našti bisteras. Nucená táborová koncentrace ve vyprávěních romských pamětníků, p. 84.





recognition of the racial persecution of the Roma.<sup>109</sup> Also, the first acts of remembrance to commemorate the victims of the genocide of Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti took place at the end of the sixties, respectively at the beginning of the seventies, thanks to the instigation of survivors and members of the first Czech Roma organization, Svaz Cikánů-Romů (Union of Gypsies-Roma) (1969–1973).<sup>110</sup> Despite these isolated efforts, however, public commemoration of the genocide of the Roma population in Czechoslovakia was minimal, there was only limited historical research and little recording of survivors' statements. The historical memory of the Roma as a group on the margins of society has thus not become part of the consciousness in greater parts of society.<sup>111</sup> It was only after 1989 that public remembrance, education and research on the topic developed. Commemorative events are regularly held not only at the places of the protectorate "gypsy camps". One of the oldest act of remembrance commemorates the mass deportations of Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz, and take place every year in Brno (in March), Lety u Písku (in May) and Hodonín u Kunštátu (in August). Since 2002, Roma victims of Nazism have also been included into the agenda of the International Holocaust Day of 27 January, commemorating the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1945.<sup>112</sup>

The tragic events of the Nazi genocide of Roma and Sinti are gradually gaining ground in pan-European and world history. The former Auschwitz concentration camp plays a crucial role in the context of remembrance and educational activities. In 2001, the permanent exhibition of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Auschwitz, in cooperation with the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, was expanded

<sup>109</sup> See for example: Nečas, Ctibor: Druhý aneb Neznámý holocaust [The Second or unknown Holocaust]. In: Spisy Právnické fakulty v Brně (řada teoretická), sv. 160, 1995, pp. 47–51; Thurner, Erika: Nacistická a poválečná politika proti Romům a Sintům v Rakousku, pp. 40–42; Von dem Knesebeck, Julia: The Roma Struggle for Compensation in Post-War Germany, Hatfield 2011, 352 p.

<sup>110</sup> For more information on the Union of Gypsies-Roma see for example: Lhotka, Petr, Schuster, Michal, Závodská, Milada: Svaz Cikánů-Romů 1969–1973. Doprovodná publikace k výstavě Muzea romské kultury „Svaz Cikánů-Romů (1969–1973) – z historie první romské organizace v českých zemích“. Brno 2009, 27 s.

<sup>111</sup> For more information see for example: Sadílková, Helena, Schuster, Michal, Závodská, Milada: Holocaust Romů jako „neznámý“ nebo „zapomenutý“, pp. 30–34; Slačálek, Ondřej: Upírané dějiny Romů. Rozhovor s Kateřinou Čapkovou, Helenou Sadílkovou a Pavlem Balounem. [The denial of the history of Roma. An Interview with Kateřina Čapková, Helena Sadílková a Pavel Baloun] In: SALON. Právo 11. 4. 2018. Available online at: <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/468655-upirane-dejiny-romu-rozhovor-s-katerinou-capkovou-helenou-sadilkovou-a-pavlem-balounem.html> [2021-02-19].

<sup>112</sup> Sadílková, Helena, Schuster, Michal, Závodská, Milada: Holocaust Romů jako „neznámý“ nebo „zapomenutý“, p. 34; Holocaust.cz: Památný den. Možná už do roka. [Memorial day. Maybe already next year] Available online at: <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/clanky-z-ros-chodese/ros-chodes-2003/brezen-6/pamatny-den-mozna-uz-do-roka/> [2021-02-19].



to include a section on the persecution of European Roma and Sinti.<sup>113</sup> In 2002, the tragic fate of the Roma and Sinti became part of the new permanent exhibition of the Auschwitz Museum dedicated to imprisoned people from the Czech lands. Among others, the Terezín Memorial and the Brno Museum of Romani Culture contributed to this exhibition.<sup>114</sup> The former "gypsy camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau becomes a place of remembrance each year on August 2, bringing together representatives of Roma organizations and governments, diplomats, survivors and witnesses not only from Europe. This date, commemorating the liquidation of the "gypsy camp" at Auschwitz-Birkenau and the mass murder of men, women and children imprisoned there in 1944, was declared the International Roma Holocaust Day.<sup>115</sup>



*Monument on the site of the former "gypsy camp" in concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau during the memorial act on August 2, 2018. (picture: Michal Schuster).*

<sup>113</sup> Rose, Romani (ed.): *Nacistická genocida Sintů a Romů*, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Holocaust.cz: Stálá expozice České republiky v Osvětimi [The permanent exhibition of the Czech Republic in Auschwitz]. Available online at: <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/aktuality/vystavy/stala-expozice-ceske-republiky-v-osvetimi/> [2021-02-19]; Holocaust.cz: Muzeum v Osvětimi [The museum in Auschwitz]. Available online at: <https://www.holocaust.cz/zdroje/clanky-z-ros-chodese/ros-chodes-2002/cervenec-9/muzeum-v-osvetimi/> [2021-02-19].

<sup>115</sup> Schuster, Michal: *Genocida Romů v českých zemích a její reflexe* [The genocide of the Roma in the Czech lands and its reflection]. In: *Romano vodi*, 25. 10. 2012, p. 10.



## Conclusion

The "gypsy Family Camp", in section B-II-e of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination Camp, formed an integral part of the Nazi genocide of Roma and Sinti and others categorized as "racial gypsies and gypsy half-breeds". During its existence from February 1943 to August 1944, about 23,000 men, women and children from various parts of Europe passed through the camp. Among them were about 5,500 Roma and Sinti from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, who were deported to Auschwitz during the years 1943 and 1944 from the Protectorate and the former Czechoslovakian territories annexed to the Reich. The catastrophic conditions in the camp, concerning nutrition, accommodation and hygiene were the major cause of mass mortality in the "gypsy camp" with only very limited health care. A total of about 19,300 people died in the camp, including about those 4,300 men, women and children murdered in the gas chambers during the liquidation of the camp on the night of August 2-3, 1944. The date of August 2 became a symbol of the "final solution to the gypsy question" and institutionalized as International Roma Holocaust Day. The victims are commemorated not only on the site of the former Auschwitz concentration camp, but also in a number of places in the Czech Republic.



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