

## The Mechanics of Marginalisation; the Gypsies and genocide, 1900–2009 (O Baro Parrajmos)

### The history of Anna Maria “Settela” Steinbach



The date is 19th May 1944. The image is one that is familiar to many, the haunting face of a young girl gazing out from the doors of a transport train, moments before they are closed by a man in overalls. Her head is wrapped in what appears to be a turban or long scarf that also covers her throat, her gaunt features stretched into a mask of anxiety and fear. In the film that was made by Rudolf Breslauer about the place she is leaving, the Westerbork transit camp (about an hour from Amsterdam), her face is before our eyes for a mere seven seconds. We are not told her name nor why she is in this terrible situation but her face continues to appear before us wraith-like, for long after the film has moved on.

The story of this young girl, her misidentification and subsequent search for her true name and fate is in some ways axiomatic. She was a young Sinti girl (Sintiza), and was of Romani (Gypsy) origin, born in Buchten in southern Limburg in

Holland. Her father carried out small trade and was a violinist and she, like all of her family, friends and community were defined by the Nazi occupation forces in Holland as “lives unworthy of life” (Binding & Hoch, 1920), part of the “Gypsy plague” (Himmler, 1937; quoted in Hancock, 2002: 39) to be “treated as hereditarily sick” (Johannes Behrendt, 1939; quoted in Hancock, 1989). The solution to this “abhorrence” had been discussed frequently by the Nazi elite, and the measure drawn up to “deal with the Gypsy problem” (Heinrich Himmler, 1938; quoted in Hancock, 2002: 43) was “the elimination without hesitation of this defective element of the population” (Office of Racial Hygiene, 1939; quoted in Hancock, 1989). To this end, the Romani and Sinti populations in occupied territories were to be treated exactly the same as the Jews, according to an order issued by Reinhard Heydrich on 31st July, 1941. Their transport in trains like the one we see Settela peering from, had been decided at an earlier conference in Berlin, chaired by Heydrich. It was agreed to remove 30,000 German Gypsies to Poland in goods wagons, and in December 1942 Heinrich Himmler signed an order dispatching Germany's Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz-Birkenau, “with no regard to their degree of racial impurity” (Burleigh & Wipperman, 1991:121-125). Clearly, Settela and her community were destined to be exterminated on the grounds of their perceived “race”. For the racialized Nazi state (1933-1945), the Roma and Sinti from Germany and the occupied territories represented a threat coterminous with that of the Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Communists, homosexuals, mentally and physically disabled and black people. Only in the case of the Jews and the Gypsies were these groups designated for eradication on “racial grounds”. The Roma and Sinti were also present at all of the extermination camps, not merely the Auschwitz-Birkenau death-camp. At Chelmno for example 5,000 Romani people were originally imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto were murdered

soon after December 1941, shortly after the camp opened (*Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust*, 2000: 166).

I mention these facts in some detail as it is often claimed by those who wish to do so that the only group to be treated thus by the Nazi regime were the Jews. Despite research that has demonstrated the similarity of the treatment of the Jews and Gypsies from eminent historians and researchers like Michael Burleigh (1997), Richard J. Evans (1989), Ian Kershaw (1998) and Gita Sereny (1974), together with the *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust* (2000), part of the Yad Vashem project, the continued perception amongst many Holocaust scholars, and much of the literature relating to the Holocaust (see for example *Historical Atlas of the Holocaust*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996 that contains no references to “Gypsies”, “Roma” or “Sinti”), is that the experience of the Jews is, and remains unique in the dark history of genocide. Thus, an earlier edition of the *Encyclopaedia of the Holocaust* (1990-) whilst acknowledging the terrible warped logic of Nazi thought regarding the Gypsies was similar, goes on to claim that the resultant treatment of Gypsies was not. One of the texts used in British schools on the subject also echoes this claim to uniqueness (Gilbert, 1993: 824). Even those reference works that do provide us with information (sometimes relatively brief), always refer to the topic under the heading “Gypsies” (under the index item “Roma – See GYPSIES; there is not one reference to “Sinti” in the general reference works). Yet as early as 1949, the then Secretary of the Gypsy Lore Society clearly recognised the essentially shared experience of the Jews and the Gypsies when she wrote in number eight of the recently established magazine of American public opinion, *Commentary* “...these two peoples shared the horror of martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis for no other reason than they... existed. The Gypsies, like the Jews, stand alone.” (1949: 455) The Society had not been particularly concerned with the fate of European Gypsies during the war years, even when knowledge of their persecution and destruction became apparent. If one glances through the issues of the *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* for the years 1939-1946 it would appear to you that the primary concerns of the members are still the genealogies of Welsh Gypsy families, the etymologies for certain obscure Romani words and the debate surrounding origins. The queries from members contain language that would appear to reflect the kind of thinking about “race” and “blood” that at its extreme, appears in the doctrines of fascist states in Europe during this period. The notion that the Gypsies represented the vestiges of the Aryan “race” on their last migration from India was still very prevalent amongst those who discussed the issue in the pages of this scholarly publication. The views of Dora Yates, as a member of the Society and a Jewish person, seem particularly significant in this context.

I wish to make it very clear that my intention is to raise the issue of why the subject of the Romani experience of the Holocaust is less well recognised, and frequently separated from that of the Jewish experience, especially as part of the teaching of the history of this period. In the education system in Britain we have had a specific service dedicated to the needs of Gypsies in schools, and those Traveller Education teams (as they are known) have made a tremendous impact upon the teaching of the Holocaust as part of the national curriculum. The topic of the “forgotten Holocaust”, as it has come to be known after an important documentary made some years ago, is one that is well-represented in those schools that have Romani, Roma and Irish Traveller pupils (or English, East European and Irish Gypsies). It is also a topic for teachers and their classes, in the sense that “other” victims of Nazi persecution are also included, in schools with a strong Afro-Caribbean community, and the government recognises the importance of drawing parallels between the Holocaust and other genocidal episodes in the teaching and remembrance of these. This year is the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide and much is being done to bring together survivors

from both episodes to relate their experiences and promote the idea that there are many lessons still to be learnt from them, despite the important work that has been done in the UK to date. As a member of a Traveller Education team myself in the London Borough of Haringey a couple of years ago, the opportunities for raising awareness about the subject presented itself on Holocaust Remembrance Day (27th January), during the activities surrounding International Roma Day on the 8th April and on 2nd August when the anniversary of the destruction of the *Zigeunerlager* at Auschwitz-Birkenau took place. Despite this work, the issue remains one that is largely unexplored in the remainder of British schools (and universities), and apart from Germany (where the subject is kept quite distinct from that of the Jewish Holocaust or *Shoah*), the rest of Europe's education provision generally.

What is behind this myopia? What reasons are there to explain the dearth of information in schools and colleges about this subject? As Ian Hancock, the foremost Romani historian has demonstrated, it is not the absence of a single Nazi policy statement, of the kind associated with the infamous Wannsee Conference that lies behind this differentiation. In his cogently argued essay *Jewish Responses to the Porrajmos (the Romani Holocaust)* (1989), Hancock suggests that "...[r]esistance to the Gypsy case must be due to part to the lateness of its arrival on the academic scene; scholarship on the *Porrajmos* is comparatively new..." The assumption behind the popular perception of the Holocaust, shaped largely by documentaries and films such as *Schindler's List* (1993), is of a unique experience, unparalleled in human history. The one film that may be compared in some ways to Steven Spielberg's epic, Alexander Ramati's *And the violins stopped playing...* (1988), is hardly ever screened, and not entirely because of perceived differences in artistic quality, I would suggest.

There are less savoury reasons why the Romani Holocaust, or *Porrajmos* as it may be more correctly described, is absent from European school curricula, university degree modules and the popular consciousness. Whilst anti-Semitism is (as it should be) an unacceptable expression of racism, anti-Gypsyism is endemic, as we recently saw in the village of Firle, in the county of Sussex in England. George Monbiot of the *Guardian* newspaper, in the wake of the incident where a caravan depicted as home to a Gypsy family was burnt at a public celebration, wrote, "[r]acism towards Gypsies is acceptable in public life in Britain." (November 4th 2003). He went on to describe the alternative scenario, where the family painted standing at the windows of the vehicle were black instead of Romani and use of the term "Yid" (a derogatory epithet for Jew, derived from Yiddish) was frequent on public radio in comedy programming. "It is, or so we should hope, unimaginable". Monbiot's condemnation of the public expressions of hatred of Gypsies ends with a question; does hatred remain acceptable because we envy and romanticise them? The hatred, envy and romanticisation is embedded deeply in the European consciousness, expressed in the beatings, rapes and murders in certain countries of Eastern Europe (shortly to join the European Union), or in the exclusion of any detailed reference to Gypsies in the subject of the Holocaust in schools in France, Holland and Sweden. Even in those countries where this topic is included in the curriculum, as in the United Kingdom and Germany, the level of violence and prejudice is still unacceptably high and popular understanding of the communities, low.

There is nothing romantic about the story of fourteen-year-old Settela and her family. She was deported from Westerbrok transit camp and arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau some days later, terrified, exhausted and humiliated by the shaving of her hair (hence her head covering in the image we have of her). In the appalling conditions of the goods wagon, she would have stood for most of the journey, pressed against her mother and nine sisters and trying to avoid the splashes from the overflowing, stinking bucket of excrement that was the only available

latrine in the space. Stumbling into the harsh spotlights of the siding at Auschwitz once the train had ceased its interminable journey, she would have been abused by guards, screamed at in a language she did not understand, beaten with short whips or the end of a rifle butt, and forced into the machine of death and destruction that was the camp. After the torment of life in the *Zigeunerlager* (Gypsy camp) for three months when she may have been part of the gruesome experiments carried out by Dr Josef Mengele, she and her mother and sisters were escorted by the guards and Gypsy musician inmates to the gas chambers, where she would have suffocated in the Zyklon B fumes before her body was incinerated in the crematorium ovens on the night of the 2nd and 3rd August 1944. She became dispossessed even in death, as her image was frequently described as that of an unknown Jewish girl in Holocaust literature, and it was only in 1994 that her name was reclaimed by a Dutch journalist Aad Wagenaar and published in the book he wrote about the experience of researching her case, *Settela: Het meisje heeft haar naam terug* (*Settela: The Girl Has Her Name Back*, 1995; also in English, 2005). Her image has become iconic, with the inclusion of her in one of Kasia Pollock's *Gypsy Holocaust Series* of collages, which Kasia, herself a Sintiza woman, has produced. Settela has featured in a number of exhibitions in Europe about the Romani *Porrajmos*, and has become something of a symbol for the whole Romani community who suffered, a reminder of the terrible vulnerability to persecution that remains part of the experience of many, many Romani people today.

To learn the lessons from history, we need to teach the history in the first place to begin to understand its import. It has not been my intention to recast the arguments already made by Hancock (2002), Kenrick (1972) and others much more eloquently and persuasively elsewhere. Romani history is in the process of being re-written at the present time, from the questions of origins to the experience of Gypsies in the last days of the Ottoman Empire. In many ways, there is a new paradigm emerging, one which will release the historians of our people from the structures that have hampered their understanding of the experience over time of Gypsies in various societies. The history of the Romani *Porrajmos* is one of those areas of research where much has already been done; the emergent narrative exists in contradistinction to the dominant story of the Holocaust. However, it is not yet part and parcel of this story in the wider discourse, or the popular consciousness. Introducing our students and schoolchildren to the history of Settela Steinbach may be one way to begin addressing this.



### **International Remembrance Day of Roma Victims of the Porrajmos (Romani Holocaust) 2009**

This year 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2009 will be dedicated to an International Remembrance Day of Roma Victims of the *Porrajmos* (Holocaust). The night of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1944 was when more than 3,000 Roma and Sinti incarcerated in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp perished in the gas chambers and whose remains were cremated in the ovens.

This Memorial Day was first suggested by the Roma National Congress and the International Romani Union at a 'Hearing' of the Council of Europe's European Roma and Travellers, in Strasbourg on June the 29<sup>th</sup> 2009. The suggestion was adopted by all participants at the event "Together against the anti-Gypsyism in Europe", who proposed that

at 12:00 Roma, Sinti, Gypsies and Travellers should take to the streets to light candles and pray in public for those murdered by the Nazi regime and since through racist violence, particularly Roma, Sinti, Gypsy and Traveller children who, like Settela continue to suffer abuse, persecution and sometimes fatal violence towards them in Europe today.

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The extraordinary collages entitled *Gypsy Holocaust Series* No. 1 and No.2, by the Sinti artist Katarzyna (Kasia) Pollock can be found at [http://www.katarzynapollok.de/kunst/settela\\_steinbach.html](http://www.katarzynapollok.de/kunst/settela_steinbach.html) and <http://www.katarzynapollok.de/kunst/guttenberger01.html>

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