

*By Brigitta Balogh and Colin Clark*

*We must remember and honour the Roma Holocaust of World War 2 and the memories of those we lost. But in remembering the past, we cannot lose sight of the contemporary racisms and genocide that our communities face today.*

Acts of collective and individual commemoration define who we are, our shared humanity, our very souls. This month, we have witnessed a number of events across Europe that sought to bring to public attention the atrocities that occurred on August 2, 1944 at the 'Gypsy camp' at Auschwitz-Birkenau. We must remember those who lost their precious lives. *Dekh He Na Bister* – look and don't forget – is much more than just a slogan, it is a call to resist as well as remember.

Indeed, Roma Holocaust Memorial Day acts as a powerful and emotive reminder as to what happened on August 2, 1944. On that day, at Auschwitz-Birkenau, between 3,000 and 4,000 Roma and Sinti women, children and men were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers. It was a devastating fate for the families, their only 'crime' being who they were, sharing an ethnic identity, labelled by the Nazi regime as "Zigeuner". It was a racialised genocide and the legacy of this lives on.

A repeated phrase earlier this month, whether at institutional and national events or circulated via social media, was "To avoid repeating the horrors of the past, Europe needs to remember the Roma Genocide." But, the problem is that this is simply not enough. And, worse still, the 'remembering' can sometimes be employed as a mask or a distraction to the awful realities of what Roma communities are facing today. That is, if we look back too much we do not see what is right in front of us. The immediate and 'the here and now' is also vital to bear witness to, to take action to confront and challenge.

And what do we see in front of us? We hear about the murderous pogroms of Roma in Ukraine by far-right groups. We witness populist Government Ministers in Italy talking about the need for 'lists' of Roma families residing in that country. We note France actively deporting Roma back to their country of origins, totally at odds with notions of European Union free movement. We read about the attacks on Roma in Bulgaria and the racism endured by families who simply want to work and live in safety. We hear reports of the constant evictions of roadside sites in the UK and the very real fears of Roma communities dreading the consequences of

Brexit. Indeed, the risks of Brexit are many, including derailing the integration processes for Roma already living in the UK. The list is endless. The overall picture across Europe just now for Roma, Sinti, Gypsy and Traveller communities is precarious, uncertain and life-threatening. It is not an exaggeration to say that the social, economic and political conditions we live under just now are reminiscent of the time prior to the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe. Why are European Union bodies, and other international organisations, so keen to 'remember' the past but also reluctant to initiate action today? Who will the 'new' fascists come for first? To be sure, as guardians of various EU Treaties, the European Commission is responsible for ensuring that community law is correctly applied across member states. But the Commission is somewhat hesitant to use its authority - only threatening France on two occasions with infringement proceedings but no action was ultimately taken. Likewise, infringement proceedings against Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic was taken and it gave us some hope that generations of injustice suffered in enforced segregated education would be broken. However, the years go by and the status quo in education remains. Similarly, Italy has breached EU anti-discrimination and race equality legislation for years, but the European Commission states it has not seen 'enough' evidence of discrimination against the Roma in that state to launch legal action. What will it take to provoke action? Another Genocide?

The Roma Holocaust Memorial Day is, importantly, a time for remembrance, reflection and respect. This should never change. It is a highly symbolic day for our collective memories that was fought for and needs to be protected. We cannot forget the past. But we would argue that this powerful day should not be used, co-opted or appropriated by institutions and public bodies that then turn 'a blind eye' to what we can all see occurring today, right in front of our very eyes. This hypocrisy cannot be allowed to endure.

Perhaps, alongside the examples and practices of historical remembrance, we should be witnessing high profile calls to action to combat contemporary acts of racism and fascism. This is especially true for institutions such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission who are at the heart of the European project and whose member states, such as those mentioned earlier, routinely flout laws designed to promote

citizenship, human rights and freedom of movement. This institutionalised myopia is as disingenuous as it is dangerous. It cannot go unchallenged. Today, it is evident that the idea of a common 'Union', something that binds Europe together in order to meet some of its shared political challenges, has not faced greater challenges since the post-War period. Populist, right-wing forces are actively destabilising notions of solidarity and a common humanity. Their 'fake news' agenda and simplistic solutions are gathering support. If it is not Roma who are being targeted as 'scapegoats', then it is Muslims. If it is not Muslims, it is migrants and refugees. It is important that when looking back and remembering we do not lose sight of what we can see in front of us. And for organisations charged with fighting for equality and justice, double-standards will not be tolerated when it comes to the present or the past.

In closing, we would argue that across Europe we now see a 'Roma industry' dominating proceedings and this is an industry often built on the misfortunes of Roma, Sinti and Traveller communities across Europe. The industry has comfortably nurtured itself on systematic issues of Roma exclusion and discrimination for decades now. The reality is that as communities we still face primary issues in our everyday lives such as access to education, employment, healthcare and housing. These issues of access, take-up and delivery of core social policy issues have been long recognised but there are no practical solutions currently out there to effectively tackle them. We need community-led leadership because we can only empower ourselves as outside interests have already proved beyond much doubt that *gadzhe* institutions cannot empower us.

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