

GILDA-NANCY HORVATH

Human Rights Expert & Journalist

Board Member European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture

ROMA AND SINTI IN EUROPE

FROLLO: "A »gypsy girl«? In our chamber?"

Quite deliberately, after consultations with the Roma and Sinti community, we have chosen to keep the term »Gypsy« in the text of THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME, but to mark it with quotation marks. The reason for this is that under the title »Gypsies«, Roma and Sinti, among others, were already persecuted and murdered before and during the Middle Ages. We do not want to make this historical fact invisible by removing the word pointing to it – rather, it should be shown and pointed out. We explicitly point out that »Gypsy« is a foreign term under which more than 500,000 Rom*nja and Sinti*zze were murdered under National Socialism.

Rom*nja and Sinti*zze (both plural) is the general collective term for the ethnicity and includes the self-designations Romni (singular female) / Rom (singular male) and Sintiza/Sinteza (singular female) / Sinto (singular male). In Austria, they are officially referred to as the "Roma ethnic group." From the fact that some Roma and Sinti refer to themselves as »Gipsy« or »Gypsy«, outsiders often derive the right to call them the same. However, the term is perceived as an insult by most Roma and Sinti. Especially in journalism, the self-designation of the communities should be used e.g. Roma, Sinti, Kalderash, Lovara etc.

From the early Middle Ages, the word »Gypsy« was used to designate people who did not live sedentary lives. This included the Roma and Sinti, who were expressly forbidden to settle and faced constant persecution and discrimination during their involuntary journeys in Europe. The non-settlement of Roma and Sinti must not be romanticized as an expression of special love of freedom – it is the result of expulsion and persecution. That the Roma and Sinti voluntarily followed a "migratory instinct" is a stereotype that ignores the facts of history. The truth is rather that various prohibitions were imposed on the Roma and Sinti that did not allow them to settle: Bans on settlement, prohibition to acquire land, exclusion from many occupational groups, as well as persecution, expulsion and even publicly permitted murder in the status of "vogelfrei" (outlawed) (15th century in Central Europe) forced the Roma and Sinti to move on and on, organizing their occupational activities within that narrow framework that is possible on migrations in the first place. This phase lasted in Central Europe for more than 500 years. In Romania, the Roma officially lived as "tolerated" in slavery until about 100 years ago – which is still felt in the country today.

PHOEBUS: "Where do you actually come from?"

There are almost no written sources on the origin and history of the Roma and Sinti. The thesis that Roma and Sinti would have originally come from India arose from linguistic research. There they lived as serfs and slaves – the lowest level in the Indian caste system, called "Athinganoi". Linguistically, the term »gypsy« is also said to derive from this word. According to the research of linguists, they migrated between the 8th and 10th centuries via Persia, Asia Minor or the Caucasus (Armenia), and from the 13th century reached the Balkans via Greece and finally Central, Western and Northern Europe, then America. However, there is a heated debate about the migratory routes of the Roma and Sinti, as these migrations happened in waves and probably many different routes were used in parallel by different groups. Thus, there was possibly also a route via North Africa to Spain. The source material on this is not very extensive.

Gradually, more and more groups in Europe freed themselves from their Indian bondage and became active in various occupations, e.g. as independent commercial travelers, circus operators or entertainers, producers and repairers of tools, and breeders and traders of horses.

The first attempts to register and "re-educate" Roma who had settled down are documented by Maria Theresa. One of her measures was to take Roma and Sinti children away from their families in order to let them grow up and educate them with peasant families. This cruel measure did not work, because the children ran away from the peasant families or were taken back by their own families. Nevertheless, the measure went down in history, because it gave rise to the horror story that »gypsies« would steal children. In reality, these were their own children, previously taken away from them by the state.

ESMERALDA: "I know only one thing. I come from nothing. Just like you."

Neither the history nor the cultures of the Roma and Sinti can be uniformly grasped or described. The plurality can be well seen in the diverse language "Romanes" – this has more than 28 dialects and has undergone a natural transformation over the centuries, like most languages. This is also due to the fact that many groups over time discarded their wanderings and in the course of this became familiar with the cultures, religions, customs and languages of the respective countries. Therefore, Roma and Sinti do not have a globally uniform religion.

Today, 95% of all Roma and Sinti are settled and no longer migrate. It is estimated that about 12-15 million Roma and Sinti live in Europe. Another 2-3 million Roma and Sinti are said to live in Turkey. They are citizens of the countries where they live. Especially in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, the Czech Republic as well as in Slovakia and the Balkans, Roma make up a relevant share of the total population and are therefore politically relevant – and often a pawn in political strategies. There are many other communities in Russia, America and Asia.

Disney
DER
GLÖCKNER
VON NOTRE DAME
DAS MUSICAL
NACH DEM ROMAN VON VICTOR HUGO UND DEM BERÜHMTEN DISNEY FILM

The group of Sinti has been settled in the German-speaking area for about 600 years and lives - contrary to the propagated prejudices – so integrated in society that they remain almost invisible in public as Sinti.

CLOPIN: *(defiantly raises his fist in the air)* "Zorale sam!" [We are strong!]

The Romanes language is now officially threatened with extinction, according to UNESCO. In many countries, for example, use of the language in the Middle Ages was punishable by harsh penalties ranging from cutting off the tongue to the death penalty. This led to a diminished use of the language – out of self-protection. However, the awareness of historical discrimination and the knowledge of the Nazi genocide tragically unites all groups and forms the basis for a clear anti-fascist consensus in the vast majority of all communities.

Some representatives – especially those from art and culture – are known to a wider public today, these include Franz Liszt, Pablo Picasso, Maxim Gorki, Django Reinhardt, Charlie Chaplin, Marianne Rosenberg or the rapper Sido. The historical achievements of Roma and Sinti in the context of European art and culture are little recognized – although achievements such as the invention of Spanish flamenco or the influence on Hungarian folk music and classical music by Roma and Sinti communities are open secrets.

The forced sterilizations of Roma and Sinti in Eastern Europe until the 1990s, the abuse of children in post-war orphanages, the systematic deportation of Roma and Sinti to special schools still have an impact today on the catastrophic situation in some regions where Roma are not guaranteed access to clean water, electricity, heating, schools or medical care.

The correlation of historical discrimination, persecution, murder and social exclusion and social status in the present are obvious. Yet the injustice done to Roma and Sinti over centuries remains a blind spot of social, academic, and political discourse, as does its impact on the present. The first international civil rights movement began as early as April 8, 1971, within the framework of the UN. Experts of the communities themselves have been working since then against the "construct »Gypsy«" that confronts them daily in the media, in politics and in the civil rights movement.

More information about the musical THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME at the Ronacher:
gloekner.musicalvienna.at