

“Nazi Aggression and Population Changes Among the Czechoslovak Roma”

Nazi aggression and the resultant trauma of W.W.II are the direct causes of the current Roma population spread in the Czech Republic, particularly the Roma population in the Sudetenland. The affect of W.W.II on the Roma population can be seen in several ways, including the murder of thousands of Roma by the Nazis, the general upheaval caused by the displacement of millions of people throughout Europe, and the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland in the postwar period.

Nazi aggression and Nazi policies toward the Roma was the main factor in Roma population shifts during this period. Even before Prague fell to the Nazis, Nazi policies affected the Czech Roma population. In Germany Roma were subjected to institutionalized discrimination from the beginning of Hitler’s reign of power in 1933. Originally persecuted as “asocials” by 1938 the Nazis had begun targeting Roma on explicitly racial terms. News of this persecution ( including involuntary sterilization and many documented cases of Roma used as human guinea pigs) quickly spread throughout the region, causing Roma to flee Nazi occupation.

The Sudetenland was annexed by Germany on September 29, 1938 following the Munich Agreement. The territory was formally occupied by Germany on October 15th. After occupation the Sudetenland during this period was absorbed into the German state proper. Following the annexations of Austria and the Sudetenland, many Roma fled the Nazi occupation to Czechoslovakia, increasing the Czech Roma population to 6,5000 in 1939<sup>1</sup> .

A October 3, 1938 article in the New York Times mentions emigrations from the Sudetenland, newly under Nazi control after the signing of the Munich Agreement. The article focuses on the exodus of Czechs from the area, but also mentions that Roma were among

<sup>1</sup>Quenter Lewy, The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 149.

those fleeing the area. Vadnay writes that, "Gypsy caravans also are hurrying from Sudetenland. Gypsies well know how the Nazis treated their people in Burgenland. Although they claim to be the only pure Aryan group in Europe, they were placed on the same footing as Jews<sup>2</sup> ."

Czechoslovakia was not occupied until later, on March 15, 1939. At this point the country was divided into the Slovak Republic and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. While the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia fell under direct Nazi control, the Slovak Republic was nominally independent, with a Nazi puppet government. On November 20-24, 1940 the Slovak Republic formally joined the Axis powers, along with Hungary and Romania.

The March 1939 occupation of Czechoslovakia brought Nazi policies toward the Roma to the Czech lands. The first Nazi policies toward the Roma were aimed at nomadic Roma, however at this time between 70-80% of Czechoslovak Roma were sedentary, so the impact of these measures was limited. As a part of these policies, Roma were prohibited from traveling or gathering in groups. There were two Romani labor camps to which those caught in violation of these rules were sent: the camp Lety near Pisek in Bohemia and the Hodonin camp near Kunstat in Moravia . During the war these camps saw between 2,600-2,800 inmates (including other "undesirable" elements of society), with 327 deaths at Lety and 197 deaths at Hodonin<sup>3</sup> .

In August 1942 there were 5,830 Gypsies and Zigeunermischlinge (Roma of mixed parentage) in the Protectorate. Of these 4,000 were sedentary, a status which initially shielded them from prosecution, however after 1942 even sedentary Roma could be sent to the labor camps. The situation of the Roma worsened when transports from the labor camps to Auschwitz became on March 7, 1943 when six transports left for the notorious concentration camp in Poland. By March 19th, 2,679 Roma had been sent to Auschwitz<sup>4</sup> .

<sup>2</sup> Emil Vadnay, "Gypsies Join Flight from Sudeten Zones" (The New York Times, 3 Oct. 1938) 3.

<sup>3</sup> Levy 150

<sup>4</sup>Lewy 150

The Nazi deportations of Czech Roma were brutal and far-reaching, with few Roma exempted. In early May, Brno police reported that nearly all of the Roma in their district had been deported. By October 19, 1943, 4,386 Roma had been deported from the Protectorate. In all, 4,493 Czech Roma were sent to Auschwitz.<sup>5</sup> After these mass deportations to Auschwitz, there was no longer any need for the labor camps and the Lety and Hodonin camps were closed.

As the Slovak Republic was an independent state and thus not under formal German control, policies toward Roma in Slovakia were different than those faced by Roma in the Protectorate. Slovak Roma were barred from using public transportation, children were not allowed to attend school and their travel was closely regulated, however Slovak Roma were in large number spared from deportation to concentration camps. It is important to remember that Slovak Roma, however, did die during W.W.II, including the many Roma killed during the Nazi invasion. As Arne B. Mann wrote in his article, "Formove etnickej identity Romov na Slovensku": "Po obsadeni Slovensky nemeckou armadou prislo na mnohych miestach k masovemu vyradz'ovaniu Romov."<sup>6</sup>

Will Guy summarized the situation of Slovak Roma during WWII., writing in his article "The Czech Lands and Slovakia: Another False Dawn?" that "...in Slovakia, although many men served in forced labor camps, most of the estimated 100,00 Roma survived the war. Those in Slovakia owed their survival to the Nazi 'divide and rule' policy, for the eventual planned extermination of all Roma was delayed in the puppet state of the fascist Slovak Hlinka Party."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Levy 151

<sup>6</sup> Jana Plichtova, *Minority v Politicke: Kulturne a Jazykove Prava* (Bratislava: Cesko-Slovensko vybor Eurupskej kulturnej nadodie, 1992), 236.

<sup>7</sup> Guy 288

At the end of the war, only 582 Roma returned to Czechoslovakia from the camps.<sup>8</sup> In their article "Historical and ethnographic background: Gypsies, Roma and Sinti" Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov summarize the destruction faced by the Czech Roma population, writing that "...during the Second World War the local Czech and Moravian Roma and Sinti were almost entirely annihilated in Nazi concentration camps...Only a few families of Czech and Moravian Gypsies survived the Holocaust."<sup>9</sup>

The next event which affected the Roma population was the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland, following the Potsdam conference in 1945. While the decision at the Potsdam conference was that all Sudeten Germans who could not prove that they had resisted the Nazi occupation would be forced to leave the area, in reality around three million Germans were forced out of the area, essentially the entire Sudeten German population. On May 19, 1946 the American newspaper the Chicago Daily Tribune covered the German expulsion, writing that "Millions of Sudetenland Germans, whose families have lived in that area for generations, are being shipped into allied occupied Germany and their property confiscated by the Czechoslovakian government..."<sup>10</sup>

The expulsion of the Sudeten Germans, many of whom had ancestors in the region as early as the 13th century, is even today an intensely controversial issue between the Czech Republic and Germany. In the article "Dateline Sudetenland: Hostages to History," Timothy Ryback describes the horrors of this incident, writing that: "According to Sudeten German sources, as many as 250,000 people died from the combined horrors of exposure, malnutrition, disease and Czech brutality in the months following the collapse of Nazi rule. Czech historians do not deny the butchery, but they insist that the number was closer to 30,000."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Miklusakova, Marta and Ctibor Necas "The History of the Roma Minority in the Czech Republic." (Roma in the Czech Republic. 13 June 2000. Radio Prague. 30 April 2006 <<http://romove.radio.cz/en/article/18913>>)

<sup>9</sup> Will Guy ed. Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press) 38.

<sup>10</sup> Chicago Daily Tribune. "Charges Czechs Expel Germans and Seize Land" (19 May 1946) 12.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy W. Ryback, "Dateline Sudetenland: Hostages to History." (Foreign Policy, No. 105 (Winter 1996-1997)) 164.

This expulsion also affect the local Roma population. While Roma were among those who fled Nazi occupation of the Sudetenland, they were also among those expelled from the region after the war. On such case is mentioned in the September 1, 2004 Joint EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program/European Roma Rights Center Shadow Report, the case of a Roma woman born in the early 1940s in the Sudetenland and then expelled along with the Germans as a child.<sup>12</sup>

To understand the postwar climate in Czechoslovakia it is important to consider that in this period there were over 25 million people on the move throughout Europe, displaced during the war.<sup>13</sup> Among these 25 million were many Germans, including 12 million ethnic Germans who were displaced from Nazi occupied territories.<sup>14</sup> Between 1945 and 1950, thousands of ethnic Germans returned to Germany; among these were the Sudeten Germans expelled by the Czech government. Of the ethnic Germans who chose to return to Germany, 65% settled in West Germany while 32% settled in East Germany.<sup>15</sup>

The aftermath of the war also caused other ethnic groups to leave Czechoslovakia during the postwar period, and during this period this time 50,000 ethnic Ukrainians left Czechoslovakia. Many people as well migrated to Czechoslovakia, including 115,00 Czechs and Slovaks from Hungary and Carpatho-Ukraine, who migrated westward, settling in southern Bohemia and Moravia, the Sudetenland and central Slovakia.<sup>16</sup> Roma were also among those who migrated into Czechoslovakia in the postwar period, including Roma from Romania and Hungary.

During the postwar period, Roma also migrated within Czechoslovakia, primarily from

<sup>12</sup> Joint EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program/ European Roma Rights Center Shadow Report, Sept. 1, 2004 <[http://www.soros.org/resources/articles\\_publications/publications/eumap\\_roma\\_20040121/roma\\_shadow\\_20040121.pdf](http://www.soros.org/resources/articles_publications/publications/eumap_roma_20040121/roma_shadow_20040121.pdf)> 10

<sup>13</sup>Leszek A Kosinski, "Changes in the Ethnic Structure in East-Central Europe 1930-1960" (Geographical Review, Vol. 59, No. 3 (July 1969)) 388-402

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Fassman, Heinz and Reiner Munz."European East-West Migration, 1945-1992."(International Migration Review, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Autumn 1994)) 521.

<sup>15</sup> Fassman 523

<sup>16</sup> Fassman 523

Slovakia to Bohemia and Moravia. Roma migrated west from Slovakia for a number of reasons, and with the annihilation of the Czech Roma during W.W.II, they today make up a majority of the current Roma population in the Czech Republic.

One of the primarily reasons for Slovak Roma migration to the west was that from 1945-1947 Slovak Roma were forcibly relocated to the Sudetenland to combat a large labor shortage. This labor shortage was primarily the result of the expulsion of the Germans from the Sudetenland after the war. The May 19, 1946 Chicago Daily Tribune article on the Sudeten German expulsion mentions this labor shortage, quoting a "former Sudetenland Catholic priest." the Rev. Emmanuel J. Reichenberger, who said that: "Czechoslovakia has asked to keep some of the skilled Sudetenland German workers because otherwise they cannot man the factories," he said. 'Most of them were there prior to World War I when they were citizens of Austria. They are being shipped from their land like cattle. <sup>17</sup> "

In Milada Horakova's article "Roma in the Czech and Slovak Republics" she writes that "The Roma population living today in the territory of the Czech Republic immigrated after the Second World War, mostly from "segregated, shantytown settlements in Rural Slovakia." <sup>18</sup> The Roma were settled and dispersed during several organized migration waves to the depopulated and traumatized areas of the former Sudetenland. In 1947 around 16 percent of the total number were settled in Czechia (16,752) from which 6,341 (37.8 percent) lived in the border areas. <sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that in the west Roma were given the least desirable jobs, with men working in the mines and factories and as heavy laborers. Roma women worked as street sweepers, dishwashers and cleaners, they continued to migrate from Slovakia.<sup>20</sup> The importance of family and social networks among the Roma helped to lead more Roma to the

<sup>17</sup> Chicago Daily Tribune. "Charges Czechs Expel Germans and Seize Land" (19 May 1946) 12.

<sup>18</sup> Guy 289

<sup>19</sup> Milada Horakova, "Roma in the Czech and Slovak Republics" (European Migration Center, 30 April 2006. <[http://www.emz-berlin.de/projekte\\_e/pj41\\_pdf/Horakova.pdf](http://www.emz-berlin.de/projekte_e/pj41_pdf/Horakova.pdf)> ) 10.

<sup>20</sup> Guy 289

Sudetenland as Roma later followed neighbors and family members involved in these first transports. In her book "Romové v českých zemích v letech 1945-1989", Nina Pavelickova discusses these waves of migration east, writing:

"První vlny rozsáhlejších romských migrací byly zřejmě zčásti zivelné, týkaly se také již zmíněných přesunů převážně košounských skupin do příhraničních oblastí, například do dalších regionů, které opouštělo německé obyvatelstvo. V následujících měsících se k nim přidaly poměrně početné skupiny usídlených slovenských romských rodin, které hledaly buď spontánně, nebo i na základě neborových akcí podnikatelů, resp. v souvislosti s celostátním příkazem o pracovní povinnosti v českých zemích pracovní příležitosti."<sup>21</sup>

Although the postwar Romani population was profoundly affected by Nazi aggression during W.W.II, it is important to remember that there were other factors at work as well. As Horakova writes: "After the Second World War, the Sudetenland regions were settled by a heterogeneous population from Bohemia rural areas and Slovakia, especially the rural and urban proletariat, or supporters of the Communist regime and members of the so-called 'Red Guard'. They settled on the land and property that had belonged to the Germans..."<sup>22</sup> In this way we see that Roma who migrated west from Slovakia did so in part to take advantage of land formerly owned by Germans, but also due to the new postwar political climate.

Nazi aggression and the turmoil of W.W.II affected all of the people of Europe, including the Roma of Czechoslovakia. The Roma of Czechoslovakia were most affected by the racist Nazi policies toward them which led to the near extinction of Roma in the Protectorate, by population upheavals caused by the war throughout Europe and by the expulsion of Sudeten Germans in the immediate aftermath of the war. Due to the grand scope of this issue, there are many important details of this case, particularly the fact that Slovak Roma for the most part survived the war, while Czech Roma in the main did not; that the political situation of the Sudetenland led to the expulsion of nearly all Sudeten Germans, and

<sup>21</sup> Nina Pavelickova, Romové v českých zemích v letech 1945-1989. (Praha : Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinu komunismu, 2004) 23.

<sup>22</sup> Horakova 10

the strong family networks of Roma which led to an increased number of migrations after the end of government-sponsored migrations to the Sudetenland. Through an examination of these factors, along with the history of racism against Czechoslovak Roma in society, the direct connection between the Nazi aggression of W.W.II and the current population distribution of Roma in the Czech Republic can be seen.