

# Roma Subaltern Memories and Education: *Porrajmos*

Chiara Nencioni

## Abstract

The Roma have lived through the European history but often receiving a marginal position in historical accounts, even of the Holocaust (*Porrajmos* in *romani*).

Discriminated even today, they have a rich oral tradition to express their culture and to pass on their memories, including that of the *Porrajmos*, literally «swallowing», «great devouring», which indicates the persecution they suffered during fascism and the extermination perpetrated by the Nazis. Due to deep-seated stigmatization their stories are quite unknown outside their own community. Even in the academic world, there is a strong tendency to assume that the Roma are unable to produce their own vision, perspective, or ideology.

Knowing and understanding the stories of the Roma is the first step towards building an inclusive pathway. To teach about *Porrajmos* is necessary, because Anti-Roma discrimination undermines the core values of our democratic societies. We need to ensure that young people learn about the genocide of the Roma to honour the victims and to help to fight discrimination that persists today.

Here you can find some guide-lines and tool kits.

## Key words

Roma, *Porrajmos*, education, discrimination, memories

## Roma Subaltern Memories

Roma people live in Europe as an integral part of European societies, being present in all European countries even before the founding of modern states. For many generations, Roma participated in the development and prosperity of local societies and contributed to European cultural, social, and economic life. Today, the Roma population constitutes the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with an estimated total of about 12 million people with diverse histories and identities. Roma people have a specific identity as an ethnic minority group and also a national identity as citizens of their respective nations.

The Roma are, however, still one of the most discriminated and disadvantaged groups in Europe, facing hatred and human rights abuses, discrimination, persecution, violence, economic and social deprivation. They often receive a marginal position in historical accounts, even of the Holocaust (*Porrajmos* in *romani*).

They have a rich oral tradition (*romani* is not a written language) to express their culture and to pass on their memories, including that of the *Porrajmos*, literally «swallowing», «great devouring», which indicates the persecution they suffered during fascism and the extermination perpetrated by the Nazis. But, due to deep-seated stigmatization and because of their marginalisation, their stories are quite unknown outside their own community. Even in the academic world, there is a strong tendency to assume that the Roma are unable to produce their own vision, perspective or ideology.

For example, what the Roma suffered during *Porrajmos*, passed long under silence (and is still a little-known history) both because among the survivors not many wanted to tell their stories and among these, few had the tools to do so, and because in the «prevailing society» quite nobody wanted to listen to them. Therefore, only few Roma wrote *memoirs* to preserve the memory of what they experienced during the Nazi-fascist persecution. For a long time, they relied on a few interviews and an orality that risked being lost.

Knowing and understanding the stories of Roma is the first step towards building an inclusive pathway.

### **Why to teach *Porrajmos***

Usually, in every school around the 27<sup>th</sup> of January there are many initiatives to celebrate and talk about the Holocaust. Indeed, January 27<sup>th</sup> is Holocaust Remembrance Day, established by UN Resolution 60/7 of 1<sup>st</sup> November 2005. Italy had already established a Remembrance Day on the same date through Law no. 211 of 20<sup>th</sup> July 2000 «to commemorate the extermination of the Jewish people - *Shoah* -, the racial laws, the Italian persecution of Jewish citizens, and Italians who suffered political deportation, military imprisonment and death. As well as those who, even in different camps and alignments, opposed to the extermination project and, at the risk of their own lives, saved other lives and protected the persecuted<sup>1</sup>».

However, the legislator forgot to commemorate the 500.000 Roma victims of the genocide. *Porrajmos* is an unknown and forgotten extermination.

Even in school and university books there is no specific reference to what *Porrajmos* was.

We definitely need to talk about it, and teach about it, because anti-Roma discrimination undermines the core values of our democratic societies. We need to ensure that young people learn about the genocide of the Roma to honour the victims and to help fight discrimination that persists today.

Although the efforts of Roma activists and few historians, more work remains to be done to ensure that the Nazi-fascist crimes against the Roma are acknowledged and understood broadly. There is a

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/norme/legge\\_211\\_2000.pdf](https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/norme/legge_211_2000.pdf) (ultima consultazione 11 luglio 2024).

link between past and present antigypsyism, so educators should respond to negative stereotypes about Roma also teaching *Porrajmos*<sup>2</sup>.

Working on the persecution and genocide of the Roma advances recognition of an essential chapter of European history during the Nazi-fascist era, casting light on an under-acknowledged historical event, deeply rooted prejudices, and ongoing antigypsyism discrimination. A lack of recognition of *Porrajmos* in mainstream society has contributed to the persisting marginalization of Roma people today, underscoring the importance of advancing education and remembrance to foster historical understanding and contemporary social justice.

### **Cultural and historical framework: the name, the origin, the first persecutions.**

First of all, a cultural and historical framework is needed, that gives a look to the historical trends of the Roma: the migration of their communities and the policies adopted towards them. The aim of this *excursus* is to outline a general framework, which useful to every teacher in order to explain Roma culture and history and to construct educational paths.

In dealing with the issue of the subaltern memories of the Roma, a few terminological clarifications are needed in order to correctly frame our object of investigation. Often the derogatory heteronym «gypsy» «zingaro», «gitano», «gitan», «zigeuner» is used to refer to them. It derives from the Greek *athinganoi*, meaning «untouchables» and has a negative connotation. To refer to them, we must use the term «Roma», which simply means «man», as established at the first world Roma congress on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1971 in London<sup>3</sup>.

Studies on comparative linguistics, cultural anthropology, history, genetics suggest that the first migration of Roma communities originated in the Indian peninsula<sup>4</sup>.

In the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, there are scattered settlements in what is now part of Turkish and Greek territory<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to an increasing number of accounts compiled by chroniclers and travellers, the path of these groups could be traced from 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards; in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, caravans of «gens cingara» had passed through numerous cities in Western Europe<sup>6</sup>. 1422 is the year in which chroniclers begin to speak of «cingari» being present on the Italian territory<sup>7</sup>. The approach of the local populations was initially curious and welcoming, motivated by a strong Christian

---

<sup>2</sup> Chiara Nencioni, *Spiegare il Porrajmos a scuola*, in [https://www.toscananovecento.it/custom\\_type/spiegare-il-porrajmos-a-scuola](https://www.toscananovecento.it/custom_type/spiegare-il-porrajmos-a-scuola) (ultima consultazione 13 luglio 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Luca Bravi, *Rom e non zingari*, Roma, CISU, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Kenrick, *Zingari, dall'India al Mediterraneo*, Roma, Centro Studi Zingari, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolò Da Poggibonsi, *Libro d'Oltremare*, Charleston, Nabu Press, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.abuondiritto.it/storage/app/media/notizie/Allegati/toolkit-antiziganismointerattivo-1.pdf> (ultima consultazione 13 luglio 2024).

<sup>7</sup> *Cronaca di Bologna del 18 luglio 1422*, in Antonio Ludovico Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, tomo VII, Milano, Typographia Palatina, 1731.

background, since the caravans of «gens cingara» are associated with those of pilgrims. But, at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a diffident attitude spread, which resulted in drastic repressive. Studies explain this decisive change in perspective precisely by reading the *Bible*. The rising wave of persecution against the so-called «gypsies» would have its roots in the stories of Cain and his sons, condemned to perpetual nomadism: in the first nomadic groups that arrived from the East, living under tents, working iron or performing dances and music, one is quick to recognise the sons of Cain, and in particular Jabal «he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock [...] and Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron<sup>8</sup>». Rooted in this period is the famous legend which focuses on the «gypsy» as the blacksmith who prepared the nails for the crucifixion of Christ. Since the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, intolerance, according to the «scapegoat» scheme, has also been taking root in society. An infinite number of proclamations and edicts, promulgated throughout the Italian peninsula but with greater intensity within the Papal States, forbade the «gens cingara» from settling, decreed physical punishment for those found begging, going so far as to issue the formula that «whoever kills a gypsy does not commit a crime<sup>9</sup>».

From the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, increasingly restrictive laws lead to explicit forms of public persecution, culminating in murders planned by the citizenry and tolerated, if not encouraged, by the institutions.

The moment when the process of re-educating «gypsies» began in the various countries corresponds approximately to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a period when nation states were defined and, with them, the need to frame those who could consider themselves «useful citizens» in the service of each country's government and who could not. State education immediately reveals itself as one of the most appropriate tools to inculcate in the populations the sense of belonging to a national group. The «re-educational paths» dedicated to the Roma, however, are often confronted with failure, generating, in the collective imagination, the identification of «gypsy» people as «non-citizens», incapable of being part of any process aimed at a presumed normality. The stereotypes of the nomadic, sociopathic, deceiver become categories in late 19<sup>th</sup> century in positivist anthropology and biologically-based racialism, which at that time merged with evolutionism. So, the idea of savage races, inferior because biologically limited was born. In *L'uomo delinquente*, Cesare Lombroso wrote «The gypsies could be called, in general, like the Bedouins, a race of associated malefactors<sup>10</sup>». The development of this interpretation «led to only one consequential solution: the gypsy plague could not be solved by

---

<sup>8</sup> *Bible, Genesis, IV, 21-22.*

<sup>9</sup> Paolo Carlo Stasolla, *Il figlio di Abele: 1565-1665 cento anni di storia zingara in Italia tra Stato e Chiesa*, Roma, Fondazione migranti della Conferenza episcopale italiana, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente*, Hoepli, Milano, 1876, p. 114.

educational intervention; it could only be prevented, and sterilisation and the death penalty could be the only means to nip it in the bud<sup>11</sup>».

### **Porrajmos in Nazi Germany**

Like the Jews, the Roma were declared an «alien race» in 1935 by legislation based on the Nuremberg laws. The shift to a racial construct was the core of the Nazi policy of the persecution of the Roma, facilitating much harder methods than previous forms of persecution.

It was the Reich Criminal Police under SS Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler who, together with scientists of the Berlin «Racial Hygiene Research Unit», carried out a total registration of all Roma in the Reich and created the ideological and practical basis for the genocide. The Roma were forced out of social and professional life. Since 1935, dozens of detention camps were set up just for this minority in the Reich. The Roma were isolated from the rest of the population and recruited for forced labour.

The German decree of 8<sup>th</sup> December 1938 «Struggle against the Gypsy Plague» argued that the «Gypsy question» should be addressed by focusing on the intrinsic characteristics of this «race». The «gypsies» are Aryans, it is true, but degenerated and contaminated with peoples of «inferior races», which makes them subjects to be ghettoised, sterilised, deported and finally eliminated, in that genocide that the Roma communities call *Porrajmos* (Devouring) term preferred by Ian Hancock<sup>12</sup> or *Samudaripen* (All Dead), term coined by Marcel Courtiade<sup>13</sup>.

Germany pushed ahead with mass deportations from the Reich including Austria, as well as from annexed parts of Poland, Belgium, northern France, the Netherlands and the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia. The Roma from those territories mostly fell victims in concentration and extermination camps, especially in Auschwitz-Birkenau (1943-1944) where there was a specific *Zigeunerlager*. In Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, most Roma were murdered outside camps. The «final solution of gypsies question» took place liquidating the *Zigeunerlager*. The number of prisoners in that camp decreased as individuals fit for work were transferred to other concentration camps: Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, Flossenbürg. After their departure, about 4,300 people remained. Despite their desperate resistance, on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 1944 SS-troops led all prisoners out of their barracks, loaded them

---

<sup>11</sup> Luca Bravi, *Tra inclusione ed esclusione. Una storia sociale dell'educazione dei rom e dei sinti in Italia*, Trezzano sul Naviglio, Unicopli, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Hancock, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, London, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Marcel Courtiade, *En guise de preface. Interview avec Rajko Djuric*, in *Sans maison, sans tombe*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1990.

on trucks and transported them into gas chambers and their bodies burned in trenches next to Crematorium V<sup>14</sup>.

It is estimated that up to 500,000 Roma people were murdered, while many were imprisoned, used as forced labourers, or subjected to forced sterilisation and medical experimentation. Across Fascist Nazi-occupied Europe, the persecution of Roma was carried in different ways by different perpetrators, including occupying forces and local populations, which contributed to varying experiences among Roma communities.

### **Porrajmos in Fascist Italy**

In Italy, the concept of the racial inferiority of the «gypsies» was elaborated by race science linked to the physician and scientist Renato Semizzi and the anthropologist Guido Landra, the extender of the *Manifesto of Racist Scientists*, who wrote: «Gypsies are vagabonds *par excellence*, devoted to begging, scrounging, fraud, theft, lying and deception. [...] They are easy-going, unfaithful, fearful, cunning in danger, vindictive, cynical, arrogant, shameless with the weak, weak but intelligent<sup>15</sup>». Addressing the issue of crossbreeding between Roma and non-Roma people, Renato Semizzi argues that «fusion would produce somatically homogeneous, but psychically impaired elements, since the quality of the European Aryan parent could not attenuate or even less annul the quality of the Aryan Gypsy parent, even if these should, by fortunate combinations of genes, remain recessive<sup>16</sup>».

Fascist totalitarianism persecuted Sinti and Roma. Starting in the 1920s, fascist politics progressively radicalized outlining four periods of reference<sup>17</sup>:

1922-1938: the rejections and the forced removal of «gypsy» foreigners (or presumed to be such) from the Italian territory;

1938-1940: the ethnic cleansing against all «gypsies» in the border regions (especially north-east) and their confinement in Sardinia and other isolated places;

1940-1943: from 11<sup>th</sup> September 1940, the Roma were to be «rounded up as quickly as possible and concentrated under strict surveillance in the most suitable locations in each province. All gypsies (either foreign or Italian) were arrested and a network of concentration camps in Italy, uniquely reserved to the «gypsies», was created. E.g. Boiano (Campobasso); Agnone (Isernia); Tossicà (Teramo); Gonars (Udine); Prignano sulla Secchia (Modena); Berra (Ferrara), Little-known places but with tragic names for so many Roma families in Italy.

---

<sup>14</sup> Helena Kubica, Piotr. Setkiewicz, *The Last Stage of the Functioning of Zigeunerlager in Birkenau camp (May – August 1944)*, In *Memoria. Memory – History – Education*, The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Guido Landra, *Il problema dei meticci in Europa*, in «La difesa della razza», vol. 2, 1940, pp. 11-15.

<sup>16</sup> Renato Semizzi, *Gli zingari*, in «Rassegna di clinica, terapia e scienze affini», vol. 37, n. 1, 1939, pp. 64-79.

<sup>17</sup> Chiara Nencioni, *A forza si essere vento. La persecuzione di sinti e rom nell'Italia fascista*, Pisa, ETS, 2024, p. 51.

1943-1945: the arrest of «gypsies» by the Italian Social Republic and their deportation to Nazi concentration camps where they were killed.

### **Aftermath: Liberated but not acknowledged**

With the Allied victory over Nazi Germany, the killing stopped. The camp survivors were literally left with nothing. Many had lost their families and owned only what they wore. Societies were often unsympathetic to the Roma survivors and continued to be hostile to them. At the same time, there was no organised international aid for this group of victims. In many countries, discriminatory measures like registration and criminalisation or segregation continued. In the post-war trials, the persecution and murder of the Roma was dealt with only peripherally. Despite numerous efforts by survivors since the end of the war to bring those responsible to justice, the perpetrators remained unpunished. Because the persecution was not recognised as a Nazi crime and its racist root was neglected, the victims received no or very little compensation. It was only thanks to the consistent and organised efforts of Roma survivors, their families and a part of civil society that the crimes against the Roma started to be acknowledged at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The memory of the persecution and genocide of Roma became part of the public culture of remembrance only late and marginally.

### **Guidelines for Teaching and Learning about the Persecution and Genocide of the Roma during the Nazi-fascist era.**

The Italian Ministry of Education prepared National Guidelines for teaching Shoah (prot. n. 550, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2018) but there are not yet similar Guidelines for teaching *Porrajmos*.

Ferruccio Parri National Institute (network of 67 Institutes for Resistance and Contemporary History in Italy) is aimed to create a guidance in teaching *Porrajmos* from primary school to high school. Indeed, on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023, Ferruccio Parri National Institute and the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit stipulated an agreement according to which to achieve the following objectives:

1. to develop actions aimed at contributing to the development of civic education and at strengthening students' acquisition of skills in the socio-historical field, for a conscious exercise of active citizenship;
2. design and implement educational and training profiles planning and implementing in-service training initiatives for teachers in the field of history and social history, as well as on methodological and didactic innovation.

In particular, the guidance addresses the lack of recognition of the crimes against the Roma, the lack of research about this history and the lack of quality teaching materials, and, consequently, a lack of experience among teachers and education professionals in dealing with this subject matter.

The guidelines can offer support in how to foster learning about this history as well as learning from it. They take into account the working definition of antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in 2020:

Antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination is a manifestation of individual expressions and acts as well as institutional policies and practices of marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, devaluation of Roma cultures and lifestyles, and hate speech directed at Roma as well as other individuals and groups perceived, stigmatized, or persecuted during the Nazi era, and still today, as “Gypsies.” This leads to the treatment of Roma as an alleged alien group and associates them with a series of pejorative stereotypes and distorted images that represent a specific form of racism<sup>18</sup>.

Educational stakeholders can use guidelines as *vademecum*, an opportunity to foster historical understanding, critical thinking and an awareness of the need to protect the rights and dignity of all minority groups. Guidelines support educators in explaining the distinctions and similarities between the experience of the Roma and that of other groups targeted by the Nazi regime and their collaborators, including Jews.

Ferruccio Parri guidelines are divided into the following sections:

1. Justification and Rationale: Why teach about the genocide of the Roma?

- We encourage the use of learner-centered approaches and privilege Roma perspectives, supporting learners in drawing appropriate connections between the Roma nazi-fascist *Porrajmos* and marginalisation of Roma people today.
- Learners should be given the opportunity to discuss the relevance of the historical experience of *Porrajmos* for today discrimination on three levels: 1) in relation to the situation of Roma communities, 2) the anti-gypsyism in today’s societies, 3) a general understanding of genocidal processes which supports learners in being able to recognise the warning signs of atrocity and genocide.

2. Content: What to teach about the genocide of the Roma?

- The first recommendation is to introduce the history of the persecution of the Roma into mainstream research, memory culture, and education.
- Students, according to their age, should be introduced to the historical conditions and key stages in the process of *Porrajmos*, which varied depending on national and local contexts. Re-examining national narratives of the period, teachers can discuss with learners the fact that in some cases nations find it hard to reconcile with their difficult past.

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antigypsyism-anti-roma-discrimination> (ultima consultazione 22 luglio 2024).



3. Pedagogy: How to teach about the genocide of the Roma?

- Creating positive and inclusive learning environments is staple.
- Learning about the rich culture of the Roma can be a powerful prelude to the study of *Porrajmos*. So, a good starting point to engage students, is listening and dancing Roma music. It can foster an empathic approach.
- Poetry, painting, film and theatre, visual arts are also powerful authentic sources from which to base creative learning encounters and deepen the understanding of history itself. We recommend using art creatively in teaching activities with students under 12.
- Visiting places of memory, museums, exhibitions/online exhibits relevant to the Roma persecution and genocide is a good practise to involve students in learning.

4. Roma Voices: Featuring perspectives from Roma community members: community leaders, survivors (if possible) and descendants.

- Engaging in dialogue with local Roma communities is essential, especially teaching *Porrajmos* in primary schools, because a good practise is to involve pupils in collecting family's memories as a starting point.
- It is important to involve Roma in commemoration. That's why, since 2019, we started a strong and useful collaboration with UCRI (Union of the Roma Communities in Italy).

5. Additional Resources: providing materials for teaching and learning about *Porrajmos* and a list of key terms.

- As *Romani* intellectuals have proposed several terms to name the persecution and genocide against the Roma during the Nazi era (such as *Porajmos* and *Samudaripen*) it is important to consult with the local Roma community and experts about the proper terminology in local and national contexts.
- The derogatory term «Gipsy» has to be banned and substituted with the term «Rom» (meaning «people» in *romani*). This umbrella term includes more than 40 different related groups.

**What National Institute Ferruccio Parri does:**

Above all, educators should be confident that the Roma genocide can be taught effectively and successfully with careful preparation and appropriate materials. So, National Institute Ferruccio Parri intends

- To prepare texts, short essays, videos, online teaching materials, educational tools for children,
- To collect testimonies, photos, video interviews,
- To create artistic material such as graphic novels,
- To organize commemorative events,

- to re-write school curricula (that can be extended through interdisciplinary cooperation, for example by dealing with specific aspects in parallel in the courses of history, literature, philosophy, art or theology) and textbooks,
- to organize trainings for teachers and educators at museums and memorial sites, as well as agents of non-formal education. These professionals play different roles in their educational environments, and all can benefit from thinking critically about “why, what, and how” to teach about *Porrajmos*,
- To develop knowledge of the persecution and genocide of the Roma and of Roma Resistance in the face of Nazi-fascist and raise awareness about the consequences of antigypsyism/anti-Roma discrimination,
- To promote critical thinking about the persecution and genocide of the Roma during the Fascist dictatorship and its legacies,
- to provide an expert-led framework that reflect our own national history,
- To contribute to human rights and discrimination prevention education. Though rooted in the past, our work is future-oriented, seeking to foster broader recognition and inclusion of Roma people in our culture and society.

### **Working with Roma memories.**

Chiara Nencioni, *A forza di essere vento*<sup>19</sup>.

The book is divided into two parts: the first one is a scholarly reconstruction of the fascist racial legislation against the Roma and a description of Italian concentration camps for gypsies; the second one reports the memories of Roma (first and second generation) who experienced the *Porrajmos*.

The author, using in particular memories recorded in [www.porrajmos.it](http://www.porrajmos.it) (virtual museum) but also some witnesses collected by USC Shoah Foundation (<https://sfi.usc.edu/education/roma-sinti/it>), worked collecting, transcribing and interpreting the voices and memories of Roma victims of *Porrajmos* and/or participants in the Resistance in various ways.

The book has the undisputed merit of having put into print the words that direct witnesses of the fascist persecution had entrusted to interviews and to an orality that risked being lost. The result is a community voice, as is often the case when dealing with these populations, which essentially asks to be heard. It is a story «from below» that retraces the many stories of a neglected affair, the reconstruction of which is not only an indispensable tool for the historians, but serves to reflect on the present of a people still today not looked kindly and victim of suspicion and prejudice.

Otto Rosenberg, *Das Brennglas*<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>19</sup> Chiara Nencioni, *A forza di essere vento. La persecuzione di sinti e rom nell'Italia fascista*, Pisa, ETS, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Otto Rosenberg, *Das Brennglas*, München, Droemer Knaur, 2002.

The first case of a written memory of the *Porrajmos* is *Das Brennglas (The Burning Glass)* by Otto Rosenberg, published in 1998, so 50 years after the events. Otto Rosenberg was a German sinto, deported when he was child to Marzahn, then to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Bergen Belsen, the only survivor of his large family. In his diary, he tells the entire course of persecution and physical elimination experienced in Nazi Germany.

Born in East Prussia in 1927, Otto grew up in Berlin. In 1936, during the Olympic Games, Hitler declared that «the city must be cleaned up». The racial policy began, leading to the construction of the first concentration camp in Marzahn, where Otto was deported with his family. There, he was examined by Robert Ritter and Eva Justin of the Centre for Racial Hygiene for their eugenics studies and forced into labour in a submarine bullet factory. He was also sent to prison, accused of labour rebellion and theft of military equipment simply for being found with a magnifying glass (hence the title of his autobiography). On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1942, Himmler ordered the deportation of all gypsies. Thus, on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1943, Otto was put on a train to Auschwitz. Not yet 16 years old, he was stripped of all his personal belongings and registered under the number Z 6084 (Z stands for Zigeuner), then transferred to the *Zigeunerlager*, a camp for gypsy families. Daily life in the camp consisted of beatings, torture, punishment, hunger, work, illness and death.

On the night between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1944, the liquidation of the *Zigeunerlager* was decided, but the gypsies still able to work were transferred. 1.407 of them, including Otto, were sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp, to carry out forced labour in the underground tunnels. From Buchenwald Otto was deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where he was released in April 1945.

This book is very important in education because it is the only testimony on *Porrajmos* written by a Sinto. It is written in a very simple way, close to oral language and it a short story: 140 pages.

#### *Gnugo DeBar: Strada, patria sinta*<sup>21</sup>

An Italian *memoir* is *Strada, patria sinta* by Gnugo DeBar. It is very useful in education, because it's about fascist persecution of Roma people in Italy. It tells the vicissitudes of a large family of Sinti deprived of their freedom during the regime led by Mussolini. The book is enriched with photos and images belonging to the DeBar family and illustrations by Antonella Battilani. It is therefore a book that can be read and looked at. It is an easy read, also to be considered children's literature.

Gnugo DeBar was born in 1940 in the fascist concentration camp of Prignano sulla Secchia (Modena), reserved for «gypsies» and in his book denounces the racially motivated persecution suffered by the Roma during Fascism.

---

<sup>21</sup> Gnugo DeBar, Luca Puggioli, *Strada patria sinta. Un secolo di storia nel racconto di un giostraio sinto*, Firenze, Fatatrac, 1998.

The book takes the readers into the world of the Sinti and the ancient art of the circus: Gnugo grandfather Jean, was a contortionist, his uncle Rus a tightrope walker.

The DeBar's family history is intertwined with the history of Italy during the XX century. All Gnugonfamily was interned in a fascist concentration camp, some of his relatives took part in the Resistance, with the nickname «Lions of Breda Solini» for their daring actions against the Germans in that area of the Mantuan province (today Rivarolo). But the social exclusion continues also today: in the 1980s the municipal administration decided to build rest camps for gypsies (this abomination exists only in Italy) and even the DeBars were forced to go there and there they still live.

In the preface to the book, Gnugo wrote: «This is a small story, for many a small story, but it is a true story. Part of it was told to me by my grandparents and my parents; part of it I lived. I tell it because it is important to remember». This sentence is fundamental to understand how memories are important for «gypsies».

The book was useful for creating a place of memory: the previously unknown camp of Prignano sulla Secchia is now subject of study and in 2010 the municipal administration placed a plaque in memory of the internment of the Sinti.

### **Johann Trollmann: the sinti boxer who taunted the Nazis.**

The story of Johann Trollmann is an excellent way to talk about sport, resistance against the racism, heroism and death.

Johann Wilhelm Trollmann, the boxer Rukeli, nickname coming from the *Romanì* word ruk «tree» for his statuesque physique, was born in Hannover in 1907 in a sinti family. He became a professional boxer at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, loved by the public for his style, unusual for the time, made up of agile, elegant, almost ballet-like movements that exhausted his opponents.

But a gipsy could not represent the great Germany at the 1928 Olympic games. The road to success was soon barred to him, the political climate worsened, Nazism overwhelmed everything, even his own life and that of his family. No matter that Johann was the best, the title of middleweight champion was denied him, despite his victory in the ring. Trollmann rebelled with the only means at his disposal: irony. He stepped onto the ring with his hair bleached and his body sprinkled with flour: a perfect Aryan. From that moment on, his life became impossible: first the divorce he was forced to go through to save his wife and daughter, then sterilisation, the war and finally the concentration camp and the last challenge, the decisive one, against an SS. He won and so he was sentenced to death. He was massacred on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1994, when he was 36 years old. Rukeli's story did not slip into oblivion only thanks to the testimony of prisoner and survivor Robert Landsberger who witnessed his murder<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/tag/robert-landsberger> (ultima consultazione 21 luglio 2024).

Only recently Germany recognised the value and authenticity of this story by awarding the Trollmann family the middleweight champion crown denied to Johann eighty years earlier.

Dario Fo, Nobel Prize for Literature, recovers in a book titled *Razza di zingaro*<sup>23</sup> this true and forgotten story. It's a book to be read in one sitting as it's very fluid and interesting, enriched by colored drawing made by Fo himself. In the preface the author explains: «Rukeli never lost his dignity and indeed the most beautiful lesson I have found in the story of this sporting hero is precisely the profound respect he had for his own dignity and that of others».

Fascinating Johann Trollmann life is object of many different narratives:

- the play *9841/Rukeli*, winner of Roma Fringle Festival in 2026, written by Gianmarco Busetto, who also plays the protagonist, and directed by Enrico Tavella<sup>24</sup>.
- a video narration by Federico Guerri. It is a two-voice dialogue (with subtitles) between Rukeli himself (voice by Federico Guerri) and a present-day interviewer who asks him why he made the choices to win even at the risk of his life (voice by Francesco Lancia) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGsozA5\\_j2I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGsozA5_j2I).
- a graphic novel titled *Rukeli* written by Vanni La Guardia, masterfully illustrated by Valerio Pastore<sup>25</sup>. It has an essential drawing technique, at times very graphic and rich in contrasts between black and white. In addition, the use of a few colour tints helps to create more depth and pathos. Comic strip is an incisive way to make the young reader identifying in the story being told and can make the youngest generations better understand the stupidity of racism in whatever form it manifests itself.

### **Educational tools:**

- <https://youtu.be/c3motsmnRUK>  
Educational video cartoon about the Nazi racism against the Roma and their extermination (directed Sira Fatucci, music by Enrico Fink, text by Santino Alexian Spinelli).
- <https://www.scuolaememoria.it/site/it/2021/08/02/la-persecuzione-di-rom-e-sinti-sotto-i-regimi-nazifascisti/>  
High School tools.
- <https://porrajmos.it/it>  
Virtual museum of the *Porrajmos* in Italy.
- <https://youtu.be/29FPBPNOAuA> , <https://youtu.be/roKB3AbpZAE>  
Video guide to *Zigeunerlager* in Birkenau.

---

<sup>23</sup> Dario Fo, *Razza di zingaro*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/teatro.delpane/videos/9841rukeli-spettacolo-vincitore-del-roma-fringe-festival-lui-era-un-pugile-zinga/2405221026430717/?locale=sq\\_AL](https://www.facebook.com/teatro.delpane/videos/9841rukeli-spettacolo-vincitore-del-roma-fringe-festival-lui-era-un-pugile-zinga/2405221026430717/?locale=sq_AL) (consultato il 21 luglio 2024).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.stormi.info/rukeli-il-pugile-zingaro> (consultato il 21 luglio 2024).

- <https://www.roma-sinti-holocaust-memorial-day.eu/history/block-13-the-permanent-exhibition-about-the-holocaust-of-sinti-and-roma/virtual-tour-block-13/>

Video guide to the permanent exhibition to block 13, in Auschwitz museum dedicated to Sinti and Roma extermination.

### **Conclusion**

It's believed that presenting the Roma as a constantly discriminated group draws public attention to them. It's not true: it rather consolidates the negative perceptions. Oral history research I conducted listening to their own voices, collecting their memories and using a fact-based study of their history helps to improve the Roma position and shed new light their civic engagement.

According to their narrative, many Roma were not only passive victims but also active architects of their own lives and of Italian freedom and democracy.

I firmly believe that oral history helps to overcome prejudices against the Roma, improves progressive cultural recognition of people remained on the margins of historiographic narrative and fosters the full right to citizenship.