



2 August 1944
Auschwitz-Birkenau

European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma

Commemorative act on the occasion of the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma on 2 August 2023 at the former German Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau

Program

Roman Kwiatkowski, Chairman of the Roma Association in Poland

Romani Rose, Chairman of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma

Gerda Pohl, Holocaust survivor

Nicola Beer, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Michał Kamiński, Vice-Marshall of the Polish Senate

Mateusz Morawiecki, Letter of the Prime Minister

Georgina Laboda, Dikh He Na Bister, Youth memorial initiative



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The spoken word is valid!

Roman Kwiatkowski, Chairman of the Roma Association in Poland

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we celebrate the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Roma and Sinti.

Seventy-nine years ago, the last Romani men and women prisoners of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp – 4,300 people – were driven to the gas chambers. In this way, the criminal ideology of Nazism wanted to erase from the map of Europe a nation that had existed in its history for almost 700 years.

But the Roma and Sinti survived the Holocaust, just as they survived every period of persecution and exclusion, which is why we attach so much importance to the presence of fewer and fewer survivors among us – witnesses of the Holocaust. They also survived to bear witness to the truth about the times of contempt and their consequences.

We are glad that more and more young people are here with us every year. This is very important because young people are the guarantors of preserving the memory of half a million Roma and Sinti murdered during World War II. That is why for over thirty years, on the initiative of the Roma Association in Poland, together with the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, we have been meeting at this monument.

The increasing number of guests is also significant to us – it is a testimony that the extermination of the Roma and Sinti is no longer just an unknown and marginal episode of World War II but has been permanently inscribed in the tragic history of those times. The day of August 2 is forever engraved in the calendars of many countries as the official day of remembrance of our murdered brothers and sisters.

For the second time, and hopefully, for the last time, we meet at the monument in Birkenau in the shadow of the ongoing war not far away. The determination of Ukraine's defenders, including the local Roma, would not have been enough to resist the armed power of the invaders if not for the solidarity of nations and governments of the free world. With great force, the current situation has shown how vital the need for cooperation, rejection of national egoisms, and resignation from particular interests is when Europe does not want to repeat the tragic lesson from 80 years ago.

But the enemies of freedom do not always come to our world from abroad. Racist and nationalist ideologies are still alive in 21st-century Europe. For us, the Roma and Sinti, so tragically experienced by history, every manifestation of exclusion and discrimination is a wake-up call against repeating the tragic times of 80 years ago. Democracy and freedom must be defended against internal enemies with the same determination with which we protect them against external invaders.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the essence of Roma's identity is memory, language and culture. It is thanks to them that we enrich the culture of the majority societies in which we live. And we

also absorb the culture of the world around us. There is no contradiction between being a Roma, a Sinti and a citizen of one of the countries where we found our home generations ago.

However, there must be a significant change in relations between states and Roma communities. All support and assistance programs for our minority – including those that directly implement European Union directives – must be implemented with the participation of Roma and Sinti and not over their heads. It is we who know our problems and needs best; it is us who – based on everyday experience – can assess the sense and effectiveness of these programs.

There are too many cases of spending public money in a way that does not improve our community and sometimes even antagonizes us with the majority of society. Some projects are incomplete, others duplicate the state's policy towards the entire society, and others have no reason to exist. They all have one thing in common – Roma and Sinti do not participate in their creation, they are not asked for their opinion, and they are left with the role of passive consumers of aid.

I want to emphasize this very strongly – only such support of the Roma community will bring the desired results, in which Roma and Sinti will have a decisive influence on its planning and implementation. Responsibility and participation in shaping our destiny are the most essential factors of civic and social integration of the Roma. We must not underestimate that our language, culture and traditions should be treated as the foundations of identity, which in societies that recognize diversity as a unique value must be cared for and protected.

We, Roma and Sinti, enjoy our distinct identities. But we do not cease to be citizens of the country that is our homeland. We share rights and obligations with all compatriots; we do not seek privileges or special treatment in any area unrelated to our traditions, culture and language. Besides, the state's social, health and educational policy concerns us as much as society.

A great event in this field is the establishment of the Roma Culture and History Center in this area. Such an institution – established with our participation and in which we will have a say in defining its goals and methods of operation – is an element of real support for the Roma community. This is a clear signal that Roma culture is not colourful folklore but part of the culture and history of the entire nation. It is hard to imagine a better integration – not by uniformizing the society, but by drawing on its multicultural heritage.

In this way, Poland has become a unique country in our part of Europe. It is difficult to find a better example of policy towards minorities focusing on what is most important for each ethnic group – maintaining its identity and making it an indispensable part of the national culture. For this, today I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this work, especially the voivodship board and the councillors of the Małopolskie sejmik. You have testified that our coexistence on one earth is integral to Polish and Roma culture and identity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, next year we will celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Holocaust of the Zigeunerlager Auschwitz-Birkenau. I hope that we will meet then free of many fears that

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accompany us today and that the memory of the Holocaust will be, above all, a lesson in history and memory and not a warning against a new threat of fanaticism and racism. Future generations can never experience the fate of their ancestors, and for this, we are all responsible to them.

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Romani Rose, Chair of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma

Dear Vice-President of the European Parliament Ms Beer,

Dear Deputy Marshal of the Senate Kaminski,

I am particularly pleased to welcome Ms Gerda Pohl, who will speak today on behalf of the survivors, all of whom I would like to welcome very warmly,

I would also like to welcome the delegation of the German Federal Government:

Consul General Mahnicke, the Special Commissioner for Holocaust Remembrance in the Federal Foreign Office, Dr Klinke, the Federal Government Commissioner against Antigypsyism, Dr Daimagüler, the Minister of Justice from Thuringia, Ms Denstädt, as well as the members of the German Bundestag, Ms Polat and Mr Lindh,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we remember the 4,300 Sinti and Roma who were murdered 79 years ago in Auschwitz in the night of 2 to 3 August. They were the last members of our minority in this extermination camp who, despite their fierce resistance, were forced into the gas chambers by the SS. In remembrance of this, in April 2015, the European Parliament declared 2 August as European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma.

We welcome the fact that the Vice-President of the European Parliament Nicola Beer is with us today to remember and commemorate the 500,000 murdered Sinti and Roma in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Places like Auschwitz, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka, Jasenovac, Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald and Dachau have become the largest cemeteries of our minority in Europe.

Auschwitz stands as a symbol for a crime against humanity and the ultimate breach of civilisation committed by the Nazis against 500,000 Sinti and Roma and 6 million Jews. But after the end of the Second World War, this specific form of antigypsyism continued. The German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier expressed this with the following words in October 2022:

‘Authorities, the police and the judiciary discriminated against, stigmatised or criminalised members of the minority; in academia, politics and the public sphere, the genocide of the Sinti and Roma was concealed, denied or suppressed; claims for compensation were not recognised for a long, far too long time [...] I also want to ask for forgiveness today in the name of our country for this second suffering inflicted on the Sinti and Roma in the post-war period.’

Ladies and Gentlemen, remembering the victims of the Holocaust of Sinti and Roma does not mean transferring guilt to today's generations, but rather a shared responsibility for democracy and the rule of law. Because remembering history always means living responsibility for the present.

It is with great concern that we observe an anti-democratic attitude and right-wing extremism throughout Europe, which is again manifested through violence against Sinti and Roma, against Jews and other minorities. Antigypsyism, antisemitism and racism are once again part of everyday life in many European countries today. The living situation of Sinti and Roma in many countries is still characterised by a structural and deeply rooted antigypsyism that further excludes a large part of our minority, as citizens in their home countries where they have lived for 600 years, and denies them equal participation.

In Eastern Europe, for example, a large proportion of Roma live under apartheid-like conditions and are excluded in areas of education, housing, employment and healthcare. The most recent reports of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency of 2022 clearly show the extent of antigypsyist exclusion: more than 80 % of the Roma minority especially in Central and Eastern Europe are threatened by poverty and 50 % suffer from severe material deprivation. Educational segregation has even increased in recent years. Over 50% of children and youth attend segregated educational institutions, for example in Bulgaria and Slovakia. In Romania, 40% of Roma households still have no access to clean tap water.

These inhuman conditions have their roots in centuries-old antigypsyism. Human dignity is thus taken away from the Roma minority in their home countries. For the millions of members of our minority, it is a mockery when – in the knowledge of the undignified living situation of the largest minority in Europe – official speeches speak of human rights within the European Union.

It must be the claim of the European Union and its member states to outlaw antigypsyism in the same way as antisemitism. We know from our history that antigypsyism was the cause of the suffering, of pogroms and attacks against our minority and led to the Holocaust under the Nazi regime.

The European Union proudly refers to the Charter, in which human rights are highly valued. For this very reason, it must be the obligation of democratic states not to continue to ignore the degrading and inhuman conditions towards our minority in their home countries.

We welcome the fact that Germany and some other countries have adopted the definition of antigypsyism of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and recognised it for implementation at the national level. The IHRA Working Definition of Antigypsyism is an important instrument to outlaw antigypsyism and to counteract it decisively. We call on the member states of the European Union to recognise and implement this IHRA Working Definition.

The Central Council considers it a positive change and a signal of the rule of law towards the German Sinti and Roma that the Federal Criminal Police Office, through its President Holger Münch, signed the IHRA Definition of Antigypsyism on 27 January this year, thus counteracting and outlawing any form of antigypsyism in its authority. Today, I appeal from Auschwitz to all interior ministers of the German federal states to follow this step, to scientifically investigate the history of injustice of the police in the Nazi state and after 1945, and thus to finally put an

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end to the racist and antigypsyist special registration and criminalisation of Sinti and Roma by the police on the basis of their ancestry.

From this place, I appeal to the European Parliament and the governments of the EU Member States to accept the legacy of Auschwitz and to recognise that the dignity of every human being is inviolable. It is our common task to enforce this in the democracies. Thank you!

Gerda Pohl, survivor of the Holocaust

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very moved and touched that today – on the occasion of the European Holocaust Memorial Day for the Sinti and Roma – I am allowed to speak to you as a representative of our survivors.

This is the first time ever that I have made a speech in public. So please forgive my excitement. My late husband Horst Pohl fought for his life here in Auschwitz. That is why it is particularly important to me to remember the Holocaust against us Sinti and Roma at this very place.

I grew up with five siblings in Swinemünde in West Pomerania. My grandfather was the proud owner of a travelling theatre. Our whole family helped to delight and entertain the audience with plays in many places. But then the war broke out, my father Martin Hoffmann had to serve in the Wehrmacht in 1940. In 1942, like all members of the Sinti and Roma, he was expelled from the Wehrmacht for ‘racial reasons’.

Meanwhile, we Sinti were no longer allowed to leave Swinemünde. The Nazis called this ‘fixing’ (Festsetzung). At the same time, the reprisals became worse and worse – my older siblings were no longer allowed to go to school. It was increasingly difficult for my mother to get food.

We lived in constant fear of deportation for four years. At night we slept all dressed, put blankets and the bare necessities at hand so that we could escape if there was a raid.

During this difficult time, we received support from our neighbours – the German Anasbach family. We were able to hide from the Gestapo through their help again and again. Many of our relatives were already in the concentration camp and we were threatened every minute of the day with the same fate.

But we were spared thanks to Mr Hilke, who was a friend of my grandfather. He worked at a government office. That's how he found out about the planned deportation of the Sinti and Roma to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. He held back the documents on our family. Without him, I would certainly not be standing before you today.

One day Mr Hilke warned us that we had to hide. He could do nothing more for us. So we quickly packed up a few things and fled into the woods.

We were terrified and very hungry. In the autumn of 1944, we fled to the west. We were on the road for six months – always accompanied by the fear of being discovered and murdered in the concentration camp.

I would also like to remember the fate of my husband Horst Pohl. No one ever warned or supported his family. He was born in Masuria in 1934. In January 1942 he was arrested with his parents and siblings for ‘racial reasons’, first detained in prison and then deported to a labour camp. From there he was sent with his family to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944 – at

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the age of ten. At this very place where we are standing today, his father and his youngest brother were murdered. And he himself was abused by pseudo-medical experiments.

He managed to escape the gas chambers and was transported to Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen and Bergen-Belsen.

After the liberation, his mother was afraid to take her half-starved son to the doctor because she could no longer trust any medical practitioner. And he himself had an almost panic fear of hospitals. It might have been possible to cure his serious illness, from which he died in 1988 at the age of only 54. Experts later denied that there could be any connection to the abuse by the SS in the concentration camps.

Even after the war, we had to suffer many humiliations as Sinti in Germany. Immediately after the end of the war, my mother Marie Hoffmann wanted to enroll us in school in Bremerhaven. But the parents of the other children refused and only after long discussions we were admitted – at first only as a trial. We were diligent, but were bullied by classmates and teachers. These experiences – like the Nazi era – also left a lasting mark on my later life.

In recent years, things have perhaps become a little better. There is a little less discrimination and exclusion – also because institutions like the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma fight tirelessly against it. But we have to be careful that it doesn't start up again. The electoral successes of right-wing parties in many European countries and the massive appearance of violent right-wing radicals frighten me.

Therefore, I ask you from the bottom of my heart, fight racism wherever you encounter it. Above all, I would like to call out to young people: You have in your hands what the future of Germany, Europe and the whole world will look like.

Thank you very much.

Speech of Nicola Beer, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Dear survivors of the Roma and Sinti Holocaust,

Dear Ms Pohl,

Dear Mr. Rose, Mr. Kwiatkowski and Mr Cywinski,

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and responsibility for me to speak as Vice-president of the European Parliament in front of you today on the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma.

In 2015, the European Parliament declared the 2nd of August to be the European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma. On this day, in 1944, the last 4300 Sinti and Roma were brutally murdered in the gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They all had their own story to tell, dreams to pursue and their lives to live.

The pain and sorrow felt by their loss is vividly illustrated in the poem by Santino Spinelli, *Auschwitz*:

'Sunken in face
extinguished eyes
cold lips
silence
a torn heart
without breath
without words
no tears'.

This poem is engraved in the metal frame of the water bowl of the National Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe murdered under National Socialism, which was opened in 2012 in Berlin.

Nearly half a million Sinti and Roma were barbarically murdered – unimaginable acts of terror, death and destruction caused by the Nazi regime. Many of them died in the death camp here in Auschwitz-Birkenau. The horrific crimes that the Germans committed fill me personally with shame, anger and grief.

Remembering the Holocaust today is necessary. Indispensable. The atrocities of the Second World War have taught us one main lesson: Never again!

We need the reminder both today and in future that these unforgivable acts against humanity should never be repeated in Europe, nor in any other part of the world. It is our duty and responsibility to remember. It must be our collective accountability to educate the next generations about the Holocaust of Sinti and Roma.

To teach about their history as well as their current situation. Remembrance must also include fighting as a society against any form of discrimination and racism at its core.

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Despite years of work, we have not put a halt to discrimination in today's Europe: Antigypsyism remains a widespread form of racism in our societies. Polls have revealed that over 40% of Sinti and Roma have experienced discrimination in the past five years. These distressing figures run counter to our core European values and to our understanding of equality for all people.

This is absolutely unacceptable. It must be clear to everyone: Sinti and Roma are European citizens with the same rights, freedom and perspectives.

The European Parliament has to step up its efforts in this regard: combatting racism and negative stereotypes at their core, while at the same time raising awareness about the unique history and culture of Sinti and Roma. I welcome the EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation, which sets out clear targets for the member states to fight antigypsyism and discrimination in all fields of life.

However, today's commemoration should also serve as a reminder to every generation.

Totalitarianism, virulent nationalism and extremism must have no place in our society.

Together, we have to strive for a respectful life together, living with mutual understanding.

At the same time, we have a moral, societal and political obligation to uphold the memories of the victims of the Holocaust, as well as of the survivors.

You, Ms Pohl, and other survivors, are generous to share your life stories and experiences with us. Though they are often painful to listen to, they have the potential to increase empathy, to inspire us and to encourage us to fight discrimination, racism and all crimes against humanity.

That is why I am especially happy to see so many young people from all over Europe here with us today who come together every year in the European youth remembrance event 'Dikh He Na Bister', which translates to 'Look and don't forget' in Romani language.

It is important to engage and encourage people, politicians, youth and a vivid and thriving civil society to uphold our values and to strive for a society free from discrimination, hate and violence.

Our commitment to the victims of the Holocaust is that their memory will not be lost, but will continue through the generations.

I would like to thank everyone here today who is committed to preserving this memory.

It means a lot to me.

Thank you!

Georgina Laboda on behalf of 'Dikh He Na Bister' Youth Remembrance Initiative

Honorable guests,

Dear Gerda Pohl, dear survivors of the Holocaust,

every year we come here with hundreds of young people from around the world to commemorate together with you all those who had perished here in Auschwitz. We stand here to remember the Holocaust of 500.000 murdered Sinti and Roma in Europe.

For us as young people coming here, the most special moment has always been the opportunity to meet with our survivors. We remember all those precious moments that we spent with our friends, with the survivors Zoni Weisz, Krystyna Gil, Peter Höllenreiner, Jozsef Forgacs, Ivan Bilaszczenko, Rita Prigmore, Nadir Dedic and Raymond Gureme.

We are deeply thankful for your courage to share your stories with us. You opened our eyes for what has happened in the past. Your call for resistance, mutual respect and love will always be an essential part of our movement. You strengthened our courage to stand up against antigypsyism, antisemitism and all forms of racism that we, as young Roma and Sinti, still face today.

Dear survivors, your courage gives us hope but also a great responsibility. I stand here today on behalf of thousands of young people from across Europe. We promise to carry on the mission that you started.

We call this initiative 'Dikh He na Bister' which translates from Romani language 'Look and don't forget'. As young Roma, Sinti, Jewish and other young people from across Europe we are committed to raise awareness about the Holocaust of Sinti and Roma. We believe that Holocaust Education is crucial in order to fight antigypsyism today. Our fight for recognition of past and present injustices has not yet finished.

Our friend Raymond Gureme has been one of the most inspiring persons to many of us. Raymond was imprisoned in several concentration camps but managed to escape, and to join the French resistance against the Nazis. When he witnessed the growing racism across Europe in the last decade, he could not stay silent any more. Raymond told us and gave us our mission: Never on your knees, always stand up. Resistance!

I want to celebrate today his courage as well as the tireless commitment of all survivors, so it may lead us bravely in the future.

We will never forget – Dikh He Na Bister!