

Wartime testimonies of Roma and Sinti come to life in a unique database

Prague, 2 August 2023

Narratives by Romani survivors from the Czech lands and Slovakia about their experiences during World War II are now available on the websites www.svedectviromu.cz and www.romatestimonies.com. Researchers from the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences have chosen today, the International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day, to launch the site. The processing and search capabilities of online database are unique in the world. The database will eventually contain approximately 250 testimonies about the specific fates of Czech and Slovak Roma and Sinti affected by the war and Nazi repression.

The Roma and Sinti Testimonies online database is the result of a several-year project of the [Prague Forum for Romani Histories](#), which has been operating at the Institute of Contemporary History since 2016. The database includes detailed abstracts of all the testimonies in Czech and English, plus a detailed search option, a map display of selected events, annotations to the sources used, and a glossary of selected terms.

"The key idea of our project is to convey the perspective of the Roma and Sinti themselves, their personal and irreplaceable experience of World War II, which is a neglected topic, even though the consequences of the wartime genocide and persecution are still felt by Romani communities today," explains Kateřina Čapková, head of the steering committee of the Prague Forum for Romani History at the Institute for Contemporary History of the CAS. *"Even in the few publications about the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti, the perspective taken from documents written during the war by the state administration and police forces often prevails,"* the scholar points out.

"We hope that the Roma and Sinti Testimonies project will contribute to greater awareness of their genocide and will be an indispensable source of information for researchers, Romani communities, teachers, journalists and anyone else interested in this important topic," the historian adds.

That is one of the reasons why the team decided to publish the database this year, now that the database contains roughly half of all printed testimonies. Even so, the abstracts together with the commentaries would make a 335-page book. Over the next two years, all war testimonies that have been published in print – which the researchers at the Institute of Historical Research estimate to number at around 250 – should be gradually retrieved and processed.

Commemoration of the Roma victims of 2 August 1944

This date is the sad anniversary of the end of the so-called Gypsy family camp, which was part of the extermination concentration camp complex at Auschwitz-Birkenau. On the night of August 2-3, 1944, more than four thousand mostly German, Czech and Polish Roma were

killed in the gas chambers. Out of a total of about 6,500 Czech Roma and Sinti, only some 600 returned home from the concentration camps.

One of them was Božena Valdová, whose testimony from 1988 is compiled in the database. She was transported to Auschwitz at the age of 14. *"We took a passenger train. The only stop was in Ostrava, after that there was no stop anywhere. At that time we were taken by our Czech gendarmes. The gendarmes sent me to get water. They were counting on the fact that by the time I got back, the train would be gone. But I didn't want to leave my parents."* Božena Valdová and her father were selected by the Nazis at Auschwitz for slave labour in other concentration camps. They were the only ones in the family to survive the war.

Understanding European history in context

Institutions abroad have also expressed interest in presenting the project. *"In the autumn, we will be presenting the database and our future plans for it at the Holocaust Museum (USHMM) in Washington. The researchers there found our project of great interest,"* said Kateřina Čapková, noting that the Prague Forum has also established cooperation on the database with the Central European University in Vienna, where Professor Angela Kócze, head of the Roma Studies Department, is interested in the database.

The Roma and Sinti Testimonies database project is one of the outcomes of Kateřina Čapková's [project of excellence](#) from the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic. The development of the database was generously funded by the American [Bader Philanthropies Foundation](#). The Czech Academy of Sciences also supported research related to the database within the framework of the Global Conflicts and Local Interactions programme as part of its [Strategy AV21](#).

The Prague Forum for Romani Histories is an academic platform which, through international conferences, workshops, exhibitions and publications, facilitates and initiates academic research on the history of Roma and Sinti in the 19th and 20th centuries and highlights the importance of studying Romani history to achieve a comprehensive understanding of European history and the present. The Prague Forum for Romani Histories also places great emphasis on ethical aspects in researching and processing Romani history.

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Testimonies of Roma and Sinti

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