

## INTERVIEW 03.08.2015, KRAKAU

### **Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska:**

Please introduce yourself and tell us about the organisation you represent.

### **Romani Rose:**

My name is Romani Rose. I was born shortly after the end of World War II in 1946 in Heidelberg, in Germany. Since 1982, I have been the Chairman of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma. That is an umbrella organisation based in Heidelberg that defends the interests of the minority of Sinti and Roma in Germany at the federal level. It also becomes active in response to international developments.

### **Malgorzata Kołaczek:**

Looking back upon the beginnings of the Central Council, what was it like? What obstacles did you have to overcome, how did the public react to the Central Council?

### **Romani Rose:**

To begin with, I have to explain how I became involved in this work. 13 family members, including my grandparents, were murdered in different German concentration camps. My grandfather was killed in Auschwitz, my grandmother in Ravensbrück, and further 11 members of my family were killed. It left an imprint on me, of course. I grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. What I mean is that my father survived feeling guilty for having been unable to help his parents, that they had been murdered in concentrations camps. Using false documents, he was able to hide away in Europe. He felt that he had abandoned his parents, that he could have helped them if he only had gone to Auschwitz. My upbringing was shaped by this, by my father's sense of guilt towards his parents.

The Federal Republic of Germany was founded in 1949 and was quick to recognise the Shoah. After the barbaric crimes committed by the National Socialists in Europe, this was an important prerequisite for being once again included into the civil international community. The Allied Powers gave no attention to the genocide of 500 000 Sinti and Roma in Nazi-occupied Europe, and so the crime was of no political importance to the Federal Republic. It was regarded as an adjunct of the Shoah and not as a separate crime that had been organised and bureaucratically executed just like the Shoah. At the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt) in Berlin, the Nazis had established the so-called Racial Hygiene Research Unit. It was tasked with tracing and registering all Sinti and Roma living in the German Reich. The research was based on genealogies created from church registers, christening certificates, and marriage certificates. Our church, the Catholic Church, had betrayed us. Then, 'race opinions' (Rassegutachten) were produced. The Nazis declared that even people with one-eighth Gypsy heritage were 'racially inferior' and had to be exterminated. As such, it was enough for one of the eight great-grandparents to be a

member of the minority. Certificates written in Nazi code language spoke of 'evacuation'. 'Evacuation' meaning the transfer to a concentration camp with the goal of murder.

However, since the Holocaust was not officially recognised, racism continued unchallenged in the bureaucratic institutions of the newly founded Federal Republic – in particular in security service and police authorities. Sinti and Roma of the post-war generation were still registered and harassed by the police, subjected to arbitrary controls and arrests. Even after the war, authorities continued to vilify the minority, stating that Sinti and Roma were genetically predisposed to delinquency. The Nazis had said the same: this race has certain negative attributes. In the era of National Socialism, this had applied also to Jews and had been the basis for their persecution. Still, this stopped when the Federal Republic of Germany was founded.

However, we – survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants – had to deny our identity as members of the minority due to this continued criminalisation that left us without a chance to fully participate in society. For many years, I hid my identity from the outside world, too. The Germans did not rehabilitate us, they did not acknowledge the injustice committed to us and provided neither moral nor financial reparation. When I speak of financial reparation, I mean compensation to the survivors. We as descendants were not entitled to compensation, despite the fact that whole families - altogether 500 000 people - fell victim to the Holocaust in Europe.

These experiences formed the background for my own politicisation.

Today, the Federal Republic of Germany is a constitutional democracy. There are different political parties: the FDP (Free Democratic Party), the Green Party, the CDU (Christian Democratic Party), the SPD (Social Democratic Party), the Left Party – all these are democratic parties. Society is committed to coming to terms with and accounting for the Nazi crimes. All this has contributed to the democratisation of Germany. It has also given the minority a chance to achieve recognition of the injustice suffered. On this basis, in 1956 my father and my uncle initiated the political self-organisation of the persons concerned. At that point of time, however, it had no chance of success. In the year 1971, my family, or rather my uncle, effected the construction of the memorial for the Sinti and Roma murdered in Auschwitz. However, the crimes committed by the Nazis against our minority were only recognised due to a strong civil right movement that was primarily organised by the post-war generation, who had drawn attention to their concerns through various public events since the end of the 1970s.

Today, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma is a nationally and internationally recognised institution. The Holocaust of the Sinti and Roma was officially recognised in 1982 and Sinti and Roma were granted the legal status of a national minority in 1995. The history

of the Nazi crimes have been anchored in in the education system, though not to the desired extent. Plaques of remembrance and memorials have been placed in various towns and municipalities, reminding people of the Sinti and Roma that had lived there and then been deported by the Nazis. Germany is a federal republic and our institution counts 17 state and member associations based in several federal states. The Central Council carries out tasks on the federal level, whereas the state associations carry out tasks on the local level. Among our achievements are the treaties and public law agreements between our state associations and the federal states of Rhineland-Palatine, Hesse, Bremen, Baden-Wuerttemberg and - in the near future - Bavaria. These treaties and agreements concern the protection and support of our minority. The Schleswig-Holstein state constitution - the highest level of the law in a federal state - officially acknowledges us as a minority that is entitled to protection and support. This is an important prerequisite for the equal participation of our minority in social life in Germany and sets an example for all of Europe.

Despite this, racism and discrimination still exist in Germany. Right now, in the current economic and refugee crisis, there is an increase in right-wing extremist violence. This violence targets not just the refugees, but also - for example in Eastern Europe - the Roma. This happens in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia. In Hungary there have even been cases of murder. Such attacks occur in Germany, too.

Yesterday, we visited Auschwitz and commemorated the 3000 Sinti and Roma murdered in the night of 1<sup>st</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1944. Among these were old people, women, children, and men. Altogether, 21 000 Roma and Sinti were murdered in Auschwitz, and this figure includes only the registered victims with the camp number tattooed on their arm. However, Roma from some transports were sent to the gas chambers directly upon arrival, without having been registered first.

On memorial days, politicians frequently make the obligatory declarations about being willing to take on responsibility and that the past must not be forgotten. Yet at the same time, democratic politicians practise populism and criminalise our minority in various ways, all in order to secure the votes of right-wing voters. In view of history, this is not only dangerous but also irresponsible. Technically, the Federal Republic of Germany should have to answer for this to the international community. However, this will only happen if someone in the United States of America asks Mrs Merkel: why does Antiziganism exist in Germany? Yes, if President Obama asked Mrs Merkel about Antiziganism and the Holocaust, then people in the Federal Republic of Germany would be more sensitive in dealing with this issue.

**Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska:**

As you have already said, it has been a very long road to the formal recognition of the extermination of the Sinti and Roma. Even nowadays, there are many who would deny the

Roma victims the same status that has been granted to the Jewish Holocaust victims. There are voices saying that Sinti and Roma were persecuted not on grounds of race. This is the position taken by Professor Yehuda Bauer. The discussion revolves mainly around the issue of expression: Should the extermination of Sinti and Roma be described as Holocaust, genocide, or Porajmos? Many people maintain that since the term 'Holocaust' refers to the racial mass murder of that minority, it is reserved for the Jews. How would you respond to that?

**Romani Rose:**

On 15<sup>th</sup> April 2015, the European Parliament officially acknowledged the Holocaust of the Sinti and Roma. It has formally acknowledged these crimes of the Nazis as Holocaust. There are some very distinct names in use: Holocaust, genocide, Porajmos. The minority introduced the term Porajmos. Deriving from Greek, the term Holocaust describes the crimes of the Nazis as what they truly were: a systematic, bureaucratically meticulous extermination process of both minorities that took place throughout Europe. You quoted Mr Yehuda Bauer. He was the Director of the Yad Vashem Institute in Israel. I consider it embarrassing, when two victim groups argue over whom Hitler or Himmler had paid more attention to. I think our people would have preferred to receive no attention at all. The European and international communities have made a commitment to the Jews to oppose anti-Semitism in every way because anti-Semitism had led to this incomparable catastrophe. However, if the word 'Holocaust' denotes this commitment, then we must have a right to it, too. Just like the Jews, Sinti and Roma were murdered in the entire influence sphere of the National Socialists, solely because of their biological existence, just because they were Sinti or Roma.

The Jews have introduced the term 'Shoah'. It is a Hebrew term and they are welcome to use it. We have no objection to that. However, the term Holocaust is not reserved to the Jews. It expresses in particular what happened both to the Sinti and Roma and the Jews, together. The authorities have always treated our minorities as scapegoats; they were siblings in the European history of persecution. We embarrass ourselves by arguing over who has suffered more at the hands of Hitler, there is nothing to discuss. Exceptions were made for Jews, too. In some circumstances, a half-Jew could be Germanised. Field Marshal Milch was a Jew, yet Göring had said: "I decide who is a Jew". The Nazis were rather arbitrary. However, it is generally recognised that both Jews and Sinti and Roma were to be exterminated.

If the Jews wish to adopt their own term, then they are welcome to use the term 'Shoah'. We will hold on to the term 'Holocaust'. As for 'Porajmos' – I am not sure whether President Obama, Mrs Merkel, the French or Polish presidents know the term. We do not need an expression in our language. We need a word that describes the crimes committed to our minority by the Nazis, and the word 'Holocaust' conveys this meaning. We will

continue to use the term and everyone with the correct attitude towards history will do the same.

**Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska:**

The construction of the Berlin Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims is one of your achievements. Could you please describe the process that led to it?

**Romani Rose:**

It was a long process, and I cannot and do not intend to describe each and every step. There was an initiative for erecting a memorial for the Jewish Holocaust victims in the centre of Berlin. We spoke out and said that the word Holocaust includes the murder of 500 000 Sinti and Roma, too; if the state wished to honour the memory of the Jewish victims, then this memorial should include the Sinti and Roma who were likewise victims of the Holocaust. This process dragged on for many years. Finally, we agreed on two memorials. The 'Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims' is located directly in the centre of Berlin, in the immediate vicinity of the Bundestag and the Brandenburg Gate. With this memorial for our victims, the Federal Republic has acknowledged this part of German history. Chancellor Merkel delivered an important speech at the inauguration of the memorial. The Federal President of Germany and approximately 800 national and international guests had been present. This memorial is there to remind people that this crime was perpetrated against our minority, too. And that the democracy of today is obligated to oppose Antiziganism as vehemently as it opposes anti-Semitism. In 2012, the memorial was opened to the public 20 years after we first made our demand. It was a long road and I am pleased that we have succeeded. However, it is clear that even in a democratic state our rights are not a given, that we have to fight for them. You fight for them with democratic means, by instigating a public discussion about demands and discrimination. This discussion has to lead to appropriate decisions in politics.

**Malgorzata Kolaczek:**

In a manner of speaking, you were the pioneer of this Roma movement for the equal rights of Sinti and Roma. What is your view on the Roma movement in Europe? Can we even speak of a mobilisation and cooperation of European Roma? Or are these still efforts of individual people? What could be done so that Sinti and Roma unite overcoming national borders, and fight together for their rights?

**Romani Rose:**

First of all, Sinti and Roma are citizens of the states they have lived in for centuries. We are not a European minority. Because our own culture and the respective national cultures have influenced each other, we have developed different languages and cultures. Without the influence of Roma music, what would European classical music - Beethoven, Handel, Liszt – sound like?

Racism begins when we put cultural identity above national identity. I can be a Roma and still be Polish or German. I can have my own understanding of music and still enjoy the Polish Polka, or Wagner, or Beethoven. It does not matter. Culture belongs to humanity and anyone who identifies with that culture should be able to enjoy it.

It is vital for our future that we achieve equality in our national states. With 10-12 million members, the Roma minority is the largest one in Europe. These people are included into the societies in which they live – they are workers, employees, academics, and artists. Gradually, persons of note have begun to admit to their minority status. For example, who knew that Charlie Chaplin was an English Roma? Or that the famous actor Michal Caine is of Polish origin and a Roma? There are well-known athletes who are of Roma origin. However, racist pressure exerted by society forces our minority into anonymity. An ostracizing, clichéd image is promoted to the national and European public. Our minority represents the idea of poverty, and that is bad. In the past, Jews represented wealth and that was also bad because the Nazis murdered them for it, they were rich and people wanted to take away their possessions.

Minorities always bear responsibility for what is currently happening in society. There is no future for Europe if this continues. We have to stand true to our values. Every person is individually responsible for his or her behaviour. We - the German Sinti and Roma - express our solidarity with the Roma in Hungary, where they are being persecuted. Our solidarity is also with all Roma of Eastern Europe, in view of the Nazi barbarism and the Holocaust that took place in those countries. However, let me emphasise again that Roma are, first and foremost, citizens of the state they have lived in for centuries.

I think that is the biggest difference between Eastern and Western Europe. In Western Europe, we have had 70 years of freedom after the war. We participated in the democratisation process and now we, in Germany, can be openly critical of Chancellor Merkel. I am not certain if this is possible to such an extent in some Eastern European countries. In order to deal with their disadvantaged situation, the Roma of Eastern Europe have to first grow in awareness. There is a form of Apartheid in Eastern Europe. Like the Blacks in South Africa, Roma are put into ghettos and withdrawn from school. People say: It is part of their culture, they do not want to be educated, they do not want nice apartments, they want to live a simple life. That is racism: you take away all forms of equality and then declare it to be part of our cultural identity. We cannot accept this. Democracy is our weapon. It allows us to publicly criticise everything. The West has established certain values, but for these values are to be credible and supported, in the future we have to be on equal footing in the democratic systems of our home countries.

**Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska:**

In your speech yesterday, you mentioned that nowadays the discrimination of Roma can be viewed in a broader context of public discontent with migrants and refugees. In this context, what do you think about the new initiative to establish a European Roma Institute? In your opinion, what role could this institute play in overcoming discrimination and stereotyping of Roma?

**Romani Rose:**

It is not the case that Roma are on one side and the non-Roma on another. Today, we need to safeguard democracy and thus the European future. This cause has to unite all people in Europe. The right-wing extremists are looking for scapegoats, they blame Jews, Roma, Sinti and refugees for everything under the sun. However, their real goal is to destroy democracy. For 70 years, we have experienced inner and outer peace in Europe. Our generation grew up in peaceful times, in comfort, in freedom. Although democracy is not perfect, it is better than any dictatorship, for a dictatorship has always led humanity into the abyss. The Nazis did not just murder six millions Jews and 500 000 Sinti and Roma, they plunged Europe into the abyss. Because of that, we have to oppose these right-wing extremists together with all young Europeans. Every person is an individual and individually responsible for themselves. We are quick to speak of terrorism when it concerns other people, but we never speak of terrorism in connection with right-wing extremists. And this in view of right-wing extremists practising terrorism in Europe, in European democracies. We have to end this by educating people.

**Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska:**

Thank you for devoting so much of your time to us.