

Monument for Sinti and Roma victims of Nazis highlights German government hypocrisy

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On October 24, a central memorial for the 500,000 Sinti and Roma murdered by the Nazis was unveiled in Berlin. The monument is sited immediately next to the Bundestag (parliament) building. It is also close to the Holocaust memorial for the Jews murdered during Nazi rule.

The ceremony to unveil the monument was attended by representatives of the Sinti and Roma communities, a representative of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, and the vice president of the International Auschwitz Committee. Top representatives of the German political establishment were present, including Federal President Joachim Gauck, Chancellor Angela Merkel, Culture Minister Bernd Neumann and Bundestag President Norbert Lammert.

Also in attendance were various party representatives such as Gregor Gysi and Petra Pau (Left Party), Renate Künast (Greens), Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowereit (Social Democratic Party), and former federal president Richard von Weizsäcker. The ceremony was transmitted live on television.

Israeli artist Dani Karavan created the monument in accordance with guidelines provided by the Sinti and Roma communities designed to point to their common history of persecution. The monument consists of a circular black basin filled with water, twelve metres in diameter, with a triangle-shaped column at its centre representing the piece of fabric that Sinti and Roma were forced to wear in the concentration camps.

Every evening, the column will retract, appearing again the following day bearing a fresh flower. This stands for recurring sorrow, recurring life and a constant reminder to keep alive the memory of the crimes committed against the Sinti and Roma.

The poem "Auschwitz" by the Italian Roma musician and poet Santino Spinelli is worked into the edge of the basin. A glass wall near the basin provides information about the history of the Nazi persecution of the Sinti and Roma in Europe.

The chair of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, Romani Rose, and the Dutch Sinto Zoni Weisz delivered moving speeches. Last year, Weisz was the first Sinto to address the German Bundestag, where he called upon deputies to make public the "forgotten Holocaust". As a child he escaped deportation to the camps but lost his entire family.

Romani Rose, who lost 13 family members in the camps, has long been active in the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement in

Germany. He held a hunger strike at the Dachau concentration camp in 1980 to draw attention to the genocide against the Sinti and Roma.

Both speakers visibly struggled with their emotions. Many of the Sinti and Roma present cried when Weisz recounted the history of his family. Practically every family has lost members. The memory of the nightmare of the Third Reich and the fear of its repetition remain tangible today.

In the background but very present at the ceremony was a sense of the hypocrisy of unveiling a memorial over half a century after the crimes were committed, compounded by the escalating persecution of Sinti and Roma today in Germany and throughout Europe.

Following the speech by Chancellor Merkel, one angry audience member demanded to know what was happening to the Sinti currently being deported from Germany to Eastern Europe. A speaker on the platform simply talked over the objection, declaring, "That is not the issue here today."

This arrogant response underscores the fact that the German government has no interest in documenting and exposing the crimes of the Nazis against the Sinti and Roma, providing restitution for these crimes, or looking honestly and objectively at Germany's postwar history.

Following the Second World War, old Nazis were able to continue their careers. Practically the entire judicial and civil service apparatus of the Third Reich was taken over by the "democratic" Federal Republic of Germany.

The size of the pensions received after the war by such officials and judges included their service under the Nazis, while their victims were often treated as outcasts. The documentary film *Django's Song* by Tom Franke and Kuno Richter depicts a Sinto from Oldenburg, who describes how Sinti visiting the doctor's surgery after the war were often confronted with the very medics who had sent them to the concentration camp.

In 1956, just seven years after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Supreme Court rejected a compensation case benefiting Sinti and Roma, declaring that they had not been persecuted in the Third Reich on racist grounds, but because they displayed criminal tendencies. "They often lack the moral instinct to respect the property of others, and like primitives are driven by an unbridled cupidity", the verdict read.

The Sinti and Roma fought up to the 1980s without success for moral and financial compensation for the crimes committed against them by the Nazis.

There are many hair-raising stories. The above-mentioned hunger strike in 1980 was directed against the Bavarian state Interior Ministry, which refused to allow Sinti to view the files of the “Landfahrerzentrale” (Central Agency for Vagrants), the immediate successor to the fascist “Reichszentrale zur Bekämpfung des Zigeunerunwesens” (Reich Headquarters to Combat the Gypsy Pest). The Landfahrerzentrale had relied on files created by the Nazis. Some of those working in the agency had been so-called “Gypsy specialists” in the Third Reich.

In the 1920s, the crisis-ridden Weimar Republic, with its many unemployed and homeless, had already set up “Zigeunerzentralen” (Police Gypsy Bureaus), which gathered intelligence on Sinti, Roma and “other Gypsy-like itinerant persons”. Bavaria was the pioneer with its 1926 law to “combat Gypsies, vagrants and the work-shy”. In Hesse, following the Bavarian model, the Social Democratic state interior minister and trade union leader Wilhelm Leuschner introduced the “law to combat the Gypsy menace”, which was passed in 1929.

It was only in 1982, more than thirty years after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany, that Sinti and Roma were recognised to have been persecuted by the Nazi regime on racist grounds, and their mass elimination recognized as genocide. But this was not made public.

The German Democratic Republic (East Germany) also condescended merely to erect an unobtrusive monument at the Marzahn Cemetery on the outskirts of East Berlin. Sinti and Roma were never recognised as national minorities in either of the postwar German states.

It took another ten years, at the behest of the Sinti and Roma communities, before the Bundestag relented and agreed to erect a central memorial. It then took a further twenty years before it was actually unveiled. During this entire time, Sinti and Roma have been confronted with the claim that their persecution could not be compared to the Holocaust of the Jews. In the meantime, many victims have died.

Despite their expressions of gratitude to Chancellor Merkel, the bitter tone of the two Sinti speakers could not be missed. The oft-used word “hope” could only partially hide their disappointment.

In his speech, Rose warned of the growth of racism in Europe and Germany, which was not restricted to far-right groups, but was increasingly found in the midst of society. According to Rose, the political and judicial response to the right-wing ideology of violence is a touchstone as to whether lessons are drawn from the war and the Holocaust.

Rose mentioned the victims of the neo-Nazi terrorist group from Zwickau, which for all those present brought to mind recent press reports on the involvement of the secret service in the far-right scene. He greeted from the podium the representatives of Berlin’s Muslim community, who are also increasingly confronted with racist attacks.

In her long-winded speech, Chancellor Merkel did not have much to say other than to repeat a few platitudes about human dignity and civil courage. She spoke of the “incomprehensible”

that had knocked Germany off its course and from which one had to learn. How one can learn from something that is incomprehensible, she did not say. Merkel then promised that Germany would continue to pursue the rights of the Sinti and Roma in the European Union.

The opposite is the case. Immediately following the unveiling, Merkel’s interior minister, Hans-Peter Friedrich (Christian Social Union—CSU), gave out with a tirade in the media against refugees from Serbia and Macedonia, whence come the majority of Roma, who are fleeing from unbearable living conditions and racist persecution. One day following the unveiling, he proposed that benefits paid to these refugees be cut. The human rights organisation Pro Asyl accused him of launching a “populist campaign against Roma from the Balkan states.”

Sinti and Roma are also systematically persecuted in Italy and France. The French government has dispersed them from their camps and deported them en masse to Romania and Bulgaria.

In Eastern Europe, the terror faced by Roma and Sinti recalls the Nazi era. In the Czech Republic and Hungary, uniformed fascist gangs organise regular marches in Roma neighbourhoods, encouraged and tolerated by the authorities. Attending school and getting access to medical care have become increasingly difficult.

The Merkel government, which is mercilessly driving forward austerity measures throughout Europe, bears the main responsibility. German calls for financially drained governments to protect the “human rights” of the Roma are hypocritical to the core.

Friedrich’s predecessor as interior minister had also proceeded against Sinti and Roma. In 2002, Otto Schily (Social Democratic Party—SPD) negotiated a so-called readmission treaty with Albania and Yugoslavia, which included “combating illegal migration from the Balkan region.”

Many of those affected had fled to Germany in the 1990s as a result of the civil war in Yugoslavia. In April 2010, Thomas de Maiziere (Christian Democratic Union—CDU) signed an agreement that obliged Kosovo to take back 14,000 refugees. Some 10,000 were Roma who had fled the terror being carried out by the German-supported Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

Recently, if one listened carefully, the long plaintive sounds of a violin could be heard coming from a small park near the Brandenburg Gate. Refugees had set up a camp and begun a hunger strike protesting their persecution and demanding the right to stay and work in Germany. On the eve of the unveiling of the monument, police forcibly dismantled and closed down the camp.



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