

# European Center for Antigypsism Research

## The Roma Holocaust in Italy in the Nazi Period

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The origins of the Roma people persecution in Italy should probably be found in the Fascist period (1922-1945). In fact, Roma became object of discrimination in 1926, when the government felt that Italy had a "Gypsy problem". According to Giovanna Boursier, who studied the Roma conditions during the Fascist and Nazi period in Italy, «in terms of the law, the Roma do not seem to have been included in the regime's racial policies», but in fact they were persecuted.

There are no complete, reliable data on the Roma victims of the fascist persecution, nor it is possible to clarify the reasons of the discrimination. Researchers face great difficulties in reconstructing what happened and where. They can only count on scattered documents and oral testimonies collected over time.

The available documents show the theorising on the supposed "Gypsy threat". In 1926, a circular of the Ministry of the Domestic Affairs ordered the expulsion of all «foreign Gypsies» in order to «cleanse the country of Gypsy caravans which, needless to recall, constitute a risk to safety and public health by virtue of the characteristic Gypsy lifestyle».

«All of them, even those claiming to be Italian at the time of their arrest, were expelled, re-arrested and expelled again in the period from 1928 to 1940», states Boursier in a short essay published by the Council of Europe.

The racial laws against Jews were approved in September 1938. Formally, they were not intended to hit the Roma community too, but Roma were targeted by policies on law and order.

There are two phases of the Roma persecutions, says Boursier. The first is prior to September 1940: Roma were expelled from the country and dumped at the border. Of course, they came across the border almost immediately more than once.

The second phase is between 1940 and 1943. On September 11, 1940, an internment order was extended to Italians too. A circular to all prefectures stated that "Gypsies" had to be held throughout the country «under strict supervision in the most appropriate location in each province». The treatment reserved to Roma was «due to the fact they sometimes commit serious crimes because of their innate nature and methods of organization and due to the possibility that among them there are elements capable of carrying out anti-national activities», states the circular.

During the second phase, Roma were interned in camps. Some of them were sent to the Tremiti Island and in Sardinia. A quite large community was sent in Boiano, Agnona (both in Molise) and Tossicia (Abruzzo). In those camps they were the majority of the prisoners. Roma were interned in the biggest Italian camp at Ferramonti (Calabria) too, or sent to Austria and Germany.

According to the personal files in the archives, those Roma interned (men, women, children) were itinerant market traders, horse breeders or coppersmiths and travelled to sell wicker baskets or embroidered cloths.

In Boiano, prisoners were housed in the five sheds of an old tobacco factory, in conditions so inhumane that even the fascists sought to move them to other premises. Actually, Roma and Sinti were moved in August 1941, when the camp was closed. There were 65 of them.

They were sent in Agnona, in a former Benedictine convent. Records show that the camp was used for Roma only and that the authorities opened a school «for the intellectual and religious instruction of minor children of Gypsies» interned there. According to a document of late April 1943, there were 146 "Gypsies". Despite that document stated that everything was proceeding well, Tommaso Bogdan, a Rom now living in Rome, says his brother starved to death in Agnona and his parents did not survive their escape from the camp.

The camp in Tossicia was opened in 1940 and closed in 1943, when Italy signed the armistice. In 1942, there were 142 Roma interned there.

Actually we do not know much about how Roma lived and moved after 1943. There was at least one case of a transfer of Roma to Germany: the Levakovich family (mother, father and eight children) were transported in 1994 after six years of "free internment" (compulsory residence) in Ravenna. Some others fled the camps and joined up with the partisans and the Resistance.

by Ornella S.

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