

**Commemoration Ceremony
on the occasion of the European Roma Holocaust Memorial Day
Strasbourg, 2 August 2022**

**Shane Griffin, Deputy Permanent Representative,
Permanent Representation of Ireland to the Council of Europe, on behalf of the Irish
Presidency of the Committee of Ministers**

Director Luciani, Mr Manda, Ms Taba, Ambassadors, colleagues,

I'm honoured to be here today to represent the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers as we commemorate the Roma Holocaust.

As you know, on this night, 78 years ago, almost 2,900 Roma and Sinti men, women and children were brutally murdered in a single night.

This is called the night of the “Porajmos”; the devouring.

Some 23,000 Roma and Sinti people were sent to so-called Gypsy camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. 21,000 were killed by starvation, disease and in the gas chambers.

In total, it is estimated that between one third and two thirds of the European Roma community, approximately half a million people, were exterminated.

Not all Roma and Sinti who were murdered died in industrialised death camps such as Auschwitz. Many endured compulsory sterilisation, forced labour, mass shootings, and arbitrary killings.

The genocide against the Roma and Sinti affected people across Europe, from communities in France to those in Ukraine and Greece.

In addition to this horrific genocide, a further 500,000 Roma were displaced, dispossessed or had their identity papers destroyed during World War II.

For many years there was little or no recognition of this genocide. Crimes against the Roma and Sinti were not specifically prosecuted during the Nuremberg Trials. Survivors were not recognised as victims of the Nazi persecution and received little or no compensation or restitution for their lost property.

Indeed, the genocide of the Roma people wasn't formally recognised until 1982. As a result, this has been referred to as ‘the forgotten holocaust’.

Although the history of the “zigeunerlager” in Auschwitz-Birkenau has now been well documented, little has been produced on the mass killing in Treblinka, Sobibor or Majdanek. Until recently, the Roma and Sinti experience was simply integrated into the history of “other victims” or the “mosaic of victims”.

As we commemorate the Roma Holocaust, we must ask why it took so long for the Roma and Sinti genocide to receive formal recognition, why this cultural forgetting occurred.

Because if we don't, the past will continue to have a significant and tragic impact on the future.

Today, the Roma has been characterised as the largest and most disadvantaged community in Europe with an estimated population of between 10 and 12 million. Discrimination of Roma continued after the war and contemporary anti-Roma sentiment and hate speech remains popular in Europe.

This ‘cultural forgetting’ of Roma history is an important reason why the European Roma, the largest ethnic minority in Europe, continue to suffer extreme poverty, marginalization and identity-based violence.

Thus, commemoration should not and cannot be an end in itself. In order to be meaningful, commemoration needs to remember the past in order to shape our common future.

The Holocaust did not begin with gas chambers. It started with hate speech against minorities. The Nazis effectively used propaganda to win the support of millions to facilitate persecution, war, and ultimately genocide, including of the Sinti and Roma minorities.

This organisation was founded just five years after the tragic night we commemorate today, with the express goal of ensuring that the murder and systematic annihilation of human life like this must never be allowed to happen again.

Unfortunately, recent years have seen an alarming rise in racist, ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and xenophobic rhetoric. This culminated in the shocking disregard for human life that we have witnessed in Ukraine over the last 159 days, where thousands of men, women and children, Ukrainian-speakers, Russian-speakers and others, have been killed.

Unfortunately, alarming rhetoric has not just been confined to this conflict.

As a result, the most fitting tribute to those killed 78 years ago would be to ask ourselves: what are each of us doing to combat hate-speech in Europe today?

And to make a pledge to the living:

1 – to work to assist Roma and travellers to improve their conditions, and to work against damaging stereotypes;

2 – and to immediately and actively speak out against the ideologies that led to this tragedy in the first place.

If the Holocaust teaches us anything, it tells us loudly that when the human rights of one group are violated, no group can feel safe.

Thankfully, the Council of Europe is continuing its excellent work to prevent the spread of prejudice against Roma and Traveller peoples, through the Recommendation on combating hate speech, approved by the Committee of Ministers in April, and work on implementing the 2020 Recommendation on including the history of Roma and Travellers in school curricula. The 2020-2025 Council of Europe Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion also focusses on combatting discrimination through the training of legal professionals, developing civil society capacity and empowering Roma communities, especially women and youth.

For our part, the Irish Presidency looks forward to hosting the 6th meeting of the Committee of Experts on Roma and Traveller Issues (ADI-ROM) in Ireland on 14-15 September in Galway.

The Sinti and Roma people are an integral part of the ethnic and cultural richness of European societies, in which they have lived for many centuries.

Their survival, and that of their culture, was the most powerful weapon against the Nazis' attempt to destroy them. It is imperative that we continue to promote this, and work against the discrimination and marginalisation which the Sinti and Roma people are still subjected to today.

Thank you.