



27 JANUARY 1945: LIBERATION OF #AUSCHWITZBIRKENAU

Statement of the European Roma and Travellers Forum

On 27 January 1945, Soviet soldiers liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration and extermination camp.

When Soviet soldiers arrived, they found several thousand emaciated survivors and the smouldering remains of the gas chambers and crematoria after the Nazis had attempted to destroy evidence of their crimes. Approximately 1.1 million men, women and children were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

“The Gypsies had been murdered in a proportion similar to the Jews, about 80% of them in the area of the countries which were occupied by the Nazis.”

Simon Wiesenthal, in a letter to U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council dated December 14th, 1984

According to various resources, over 500,000 Romani and Sinti were killed by the Nazis. However in a research cited by Professor Ian Hancock estimated the death toll to be about 1.5 million out of an estimated 2 million Roma and Sinti, – murdered by Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. Hundreds of thousands other Roma were imprisoned, shot and buried in mass graves in forests, taken into forced labour, forcibly sterilized or subject to cruel medical experiments. One example is the one of Josef Mengele’s agonizing and often lethal experiments with Jewish and Roma twins, most of them children.

The Remembrance Day should not only commemorate those who died in this tragedy but also those who died recently of violence motivated by hatred, discrimination and criminal victimisation. **“Europe continues to witness challenges to its core principles and values, through far-right and xenophobic trends translating into anti-Gypsyism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and other discriminatory behaviours”** said Miranda Vuolasranta, President of the European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF).

Regardless of ethnic origin, religion or belief, everyone has a fundamental right to be treated equally, to be respected and to be protected from violence. This is why we must continue to remember the devastating consequences of discrimination and continue to promote equality, inclusion and multiculturalism.

Taking a stand together to protect the rights of all citizens, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender expression and/or gender identity is a daily struggle that we must continue to lead hand in hand. The COVID-19 pandemic has been having far-reaching implications for human rights. As the virus spread across the world, many countries put in place a range of measures to prevent people’s exposure to the virus and slow its spread. Confinements, lockdowns, travel restrictions, and border closures have been among such measures. Violations of human rights in the context of COVID-19 response emerged very quickly. People already in precarious situations were put at even greater risk.

The European Roma and Travellers Forum therefore call on national governments as well as inter-governmental organisations, civil society organisations and individuals to join this struggle, to act and react to defend human rights and the values of democracy. **The COVID-19 pandemic should not be used as an “excuse for human rights violations.” It is the states’ responsibility to protect our societies, to ensure protection of the human rights and the security of all citizens.**

We call for a stronger commitment and action of the Council of Europe, the European Union the United Nations, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), institutions and civil society to fight racism, discrimination, anti-Gypsyism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia and far-right and xenophobic movements. It is imperative that decision-makers do everything possible to prevent such destruction and inhumanity from ever happening again.