



Pharrajimos: Gypsy Holocaust

"Civilization, the orderly world in which we live, is frail. We are skating on thin ice".
(Zygmunt Bauman)

"As long as your ideology identifies the main source of the world's ills as a definable group, it opens up the world to genocide". (Steven Pinker)

On August 2nd, the Roma ("Gypsy") people commemorate **Pharrajimos**, (The Devouring); a systematic extermination of nearly a quarter of their entire population during the Second World War. This year, in the U.K., Roma from around the country gathered in London, at the Holocaust Memorial Stone in Hyde Park, and outside the Imperial War Museum, to protest the silence of history on the suffering and persecution of the Roma. These people feel, and not without reason, that their suffering has been airbrushed from history; censorship by omission, and that such collective and willful amnesia renders them vulnerable to yet another iteration along this deeply rooted and still replicating fractal of discrimination, verbal abuse and worse. And, sadly, they may be right.

As Roma activist Katalin Barsony, film maker and executive director of the Budapest based Romedia Foundation explains; ignoring this painful issue will not make it go away. Persecution reached a peak during World War II, within the Third Reich and throughout Axis occupied countries. For Roma, it is important for their people, together with all awake and aware people of our world, to recall and finally

acknowledge specific events that transpired on August 2nd, 1944 in the Auschwitz-Birkenau labor and death camps. Like Jews, Roma were considered "untermeschen", and therefore SS guards, using flame throwers and attack dogs, "in good conscience", herded Roma of all ages into a special (Zigeunerlager) "Gypsy" camp, where at least 20,000 sentient souls were gassed. Many of their children who were not adopted or gassed, were relegated to Nazi Dr. Mengele's obscenely horrific medical experiments. (newstatesman.com, August 2, 2016). Along the Eastern Front, Roma were often killed on sight by the Einsatzgruppen (paramilitary death squads). (Ian Hancock,2005).

While commemoration of Roma Genocide Remembrance Day has gained some ground in recent years; now recognized in Poland, Hungary and Ukraine, progress is both painfully and predictably slow. West Germany, for example, did not acknowledge this Roma Holocaust until 1982. And after their re-unification a memorial was dedicated to Roma and other victims of National Socialism (Nazism) in Berlin in 2012. Now 60 years on,12 million Roma people, within Europe, represent the continent's largest and most discriminated-against, ethnic minority.

During a recent visit to Romania, a country that has perhaps the largest population of Roma, I learned that their government had recently and actually requested that their Parliament in Bucharest accept a proposal to change the official name of the Romany to Tigan, a derivative of a Greek term for "untouchable". The Romanian government claimed that this name change is necessary due to a possible confusion amongst the international community, between this despised ethnic minority and citizens of Romania; a nation proud of its historical status as the last colony of the Roman Empire. (TIME, December 8, 2010). As recently as 1990, possibly even later, in the country that was Czechoslovakia, Roma women were forced to undergo sterilization in an effort to reduce their tribal population. (livescience.com).

In the absence of written texts or even oral histories, it is now believed, due to genetic and linguistic studies, that these nomadic people known as the Roma, Sinti, Tinkers, Travelers, Bohemians and other names; originated in Northern India and migrated West during Medieval times when many of these new arrivals were enslaved and persecuted as heathens. The term Gypsy came into use in Europe along with a mistaken idea that these brown skinned, itinerant people, came from

Egypt. In English, this term is considered somewhat pejorative in relation to the slang usage of "gypped" meaning "cheated" along with a racist stereotype of Roma as a roving band of sly, mysterious, thieves and con-artists; although they are well tolerated, even celebrated, as folk musicians as long as they entertain through colorful costumes, song and dance. While Roma share the common language of Romany, which contains many diverse dialects, most are bilingual, in having adapted to their country of residence, as well as accepting the predominant local religious faith.

Roma culture has many and varied traditions, beliefs and customs. In general, family and extended family is of prime importance, many favor arranged and even child marriage; literacy and education outside of the community is not a priority, and this has provided a significant barrier to assimilation. While they reside in many countries throughout the world, their true numbers are unknown, given that they distrust local authorities and decline to register or be counted, due to fears of persecution.

History and human nature being what they are we cannot be certain that genocidal policies toward Roma and other vulnerable populations will never happen again. Fascism is on the rise in Europe and other parts of the world; even fashionable, and literally "all the rage" with a proliferation of ultra-nationalistic, xenophobic movements, which draw upon endemic racism; now fueled in part by mass migrations and refugee crises generated by endless war, soaring poverty and a series of economic downturns. With lightning on the horizon, the iconic words of Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) which began circulating during the 1950s are again becoming timely.

First they came for the Communists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the socialists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out

Because I am not a Jew

Then they came for me

And there was no one left

To speak out for me.