



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 14 Commitments Regarding Roma and Sinti

As prepared for delivery by Dr. Ethel Brooks
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Mr. Moderator,

As a Romani-American, I am honored to be a public member of the US delegation to this Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

This year, the Polish Parliament established August 2[, the anniversary of the liquidation of the Romani camp at Auschwitz in German-occupied Poland,] as a national day to remember the Nazi genocide of Romani people in the Holocaust. We commend Poland for its recognition of Romani suffering and losses incurred during the Holocaust. Representatives of the United States, including Ambassador Ian Kelly and the U.S. Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues, Douglas Davidson, participated in the commemoration and in the seminar organized by ODIHR that focused on improving teaching about the fate of Romani people during the war. We look forward to the long-delayed completion of the memorial in Berlin for Sinti and Roma victims of genocide.

We believe teaching about the genocide of Romani people is critical for several reasons. In order to understand the experiences of Roma after World War II, one must learn about the magnitude of population losses due to mass executions, and the impact that torture, forced labor, confiscation of property, medical experimentation, sterilization and other forms of persecution had on individuals as well as whole communities. For Roma in many countries, wartime atrocities were followed by continuing human rights violations.

But there is another compelling reason to teach about the fate of Romani people during the war. As Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Thomas Hammarberg noted in his opening remarks at the 2007 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, "Even after the *Porrajmos* and the Nazi killing of at least half a million Roma—probably 700,000 or even more—there was no genuine change of attitude among the majority population towards the Roma...Long after

the Nazi period, Roma families have been chased from place to place – not being welcome anywhere.”

There has been no genuine change of attitude among the majority population in Europe toward Roma. It’s a sweeping statement, but we believe Commissioner Hammarberg’s assessment continues to be true.

The idea that Romani people are inherently criminal was at the very center of Nazi racial theories regarding Roma. Accordingly, Roma—as descendents of an Aryan people—were fine on their own. But Nazi racial hygienists concluded that, as a result of intermarriage between Roma and non-Roma, Roma had been left with mixed, “degenerate” blood and genetic predispositions to criminality. Moreover, Roma were portrayed as “unadaptable”—that is, this condition could never be changed. These Nazi racial theories provided the rationale for the sterilization, persecution, and eventual extermination of Roma.

Heeding the lessons of history, we must be mindful of the danger that is unleashed when an ethnic group is targeted for discrimination in this way. Contemporary bigotry and discrimination against Roma often exploits the same racist ideology embraced by the Nazis. Unfortunately, rhetoric broadly portraying Roma as “unadaptable” or as criminals—traffickers, prostitutes, thieves, drug pushers—remains pervasive throughout the OSCE region. There have been several instances in which influential European politicians have stigmatized Roma, labeling an entire ethnic group as “criminal” or “genetically lacking discipline.” One of the most egregious examples of such rhetoric was a statement made by the Vice Mayor of Milan last year that Roma are “dark-skinned people, not Europeans like you and me.”

This kind of discourse, combined with the extreme economic marginalization of Roma, can ignite a tinderbox of inter-ethnic tension between Roma and non-Roma. My delegation is profoundly alarmed by violent anti-Roma protests in Bulgaria, where demonstrators called for Roma to be turned “into soap,” and in the Czech Republic, where mobs assaulted people and destroyed property, shouting slogans calling for Roma to be gassed. These protests, in addition to the anti-Roma actions in Gyongyospata, Hungary, in April highlight the urgent need for greater measures to counter those who fuel bigotry against Roma and to diminish the extreme marginalization of some Romani communities.

As Vaclav Havel warned in 1992 at the unveiling of a memorial to Romani victims of the Holocaust in the Czech Republic, “Even today, we sometimes hear

people calling 'gypsies to the gas chamber.' Even today, we can observe indifference to these calls, quiet support for those who are yelling them, cowardly spectators, the renewal of divisions between people according to their ethnic origin. All of this must be faced up to again, and again, because it is the tried and true territory of racism.” Twenty years later, we still face these challenges.

This past weekend, I had the opportunity to visit the new monument at the “Zigeunerlager” Family Camp at the Auschwitz Memorial Museum. I was extremely heartened to pay my respects at the memorial and view the exhibition on the genocide of Roma. Heightened scrutiny of Romani experiences during the Holocaust is entirely appropriate and should be commended; but we must all intensify the struggle against anti-Romani violence, persecution and discrimination that continues throughout the OSCE region to this day.

Thank you.