

Mr. Ciprian Ioniță, Jurist: ‘Travel notes from Transnistria: why we need to remember’

Introduction

Since childhood, I have been very keen to learn more about the deportation of Roma to Transnistria, ordered by the dictatorial regime established in Romania by Marshal Ion Antonescu between 1940 and 1944. I come from a family of Kalderash Roma and had the privilege to discuss and meet with Roma who had been deported to Transnistria during World War II. The experience I gained from participating in the project *Roma Genocide Remember to Resist!* helped me put into perspective the stories I had heard from other Roma Holocaust survivors during my childhood. I had the opportunity to meet heroes and not victims of the errors made by the regime led by Marshal Ion Antonescu during 1940- 1944.

Next, I will present three aspects related to the condemnation of the crime perpetrated by the Antonescu regime during 1942- 1944 and will conclude my presentation with some final remarks.

Point no. 1. The deportation of Roma to Transnistria was a real event

Those who perpetrated crimes against humanity believed that the truth about their heinous acts would never come to light, but they were wrong. As a general rule, those who perpetrated or acted as accomplices to the perpetration of crimes which shocked the world were convinced that they heinous acts would never go punished. But the truth is the truth. In support of this statement, I would like to quote the illustrious Mahatma Gandhi: ‘Even if you are a minority of one, the truth is the truth’. Sooner or later, the truth will come to light, but what is to be done when we learn this truth?

The Roma and Sinti population living in Germany during the National-Socialist era was considered as a burden for the social care system. This factor, combined with similar considerations, had a decisive influence upon the extermination process of the German Roma and Sinti. The official decree for the deportation to Auschwitz was signed by Heinrich Himmler in December 1942. In Romania, the local Roma population was seen as ‘undesirable’. The deportation to Transnistria of the local Roma population started in 1942. The Roma deportees were settled in the following districts in Transnistria: Golta, Ociakov, Berezovka and Balta. Unfortunately, the exact number of the Roma deportees to Transnistria is still unknown. It is estimated that approximately 25 000 nomad and sedentary Roma were deported to Transnistria.

On March 16, 1997, the President of the Federal Republic of Germany made the following statement: ‘The genocide of the Sinti and Roma was carried out from the same motive of racial mania, with the same premeditation, with the same wish for the systematic and total extermination as the genocide of the Jews. Complete families from the very young to the very old were systematically murdered within the entire sphere of influence of the National Socialists.’

Point no. 2. The victim’s right to be heard

The commemoration of the sacrifice of the Roma deportees to Transnistria represents an important step towards uncovering the truth. I believe that the moment has come to make the

little-known history of the Roma genocide in Transnistria more accessible to both Roma and non-Roma youngsters in order to fight against racism and negative Roma stereotypes.

While conducting field-work in Ukraine, I could not help but notice a series of confusions regarding the identity of the victims of the deportations to Transnistria. For instance, in the Krasnenke locality from the Odessa county a memorial plate was erected on the place where a group of Roma deportees had been murdered. The plate indicated that the Roma deportees were originally from Serbia instead of Romania. There are other such places in Ukraine where Roma deportees were executed, but their tragedy continues to be neglected by the local authorities. No historical monument or memorial plate has been erected to commemorate their tragedy during World War II.

Despite all adversities, the Roma deportees managed to maintain their dignity. The recollections of a local eyewitness from Berezovka (in Ukraine) lend support to this statement: ‘the Roma deported to our village included people who had maintained their dignity, women who wore precious jewelry and beautiful clothes and strong men. In addition, we, the native population from the village, shared their suffering caused by the occupation troops, as well as the harsh winter. Unfortunately, some of the deportees managed to survive and some did not. We had a shelter for the winter, while they did not.’

Point no. 3. Those who forget the errors of the past risk to repeat them

The material and spiritual losses of the Roma who survived the deportations to Transnistria are irreparable. A nation ready to admit its past mistakes, including those perpetrated ‘in the dark’, is considered a strong one. The time has come for the Romanian state to make efforts towards uncovering the whole truth about the genocide perpetrated against the Roma population, organized by the wartime regime led by Marshal Ion Antonescu.

Until this moment, the Romanian authorities have not initiated the necessary steps for ensuring that the victims of the diabolical regime led by Marshal Ion Antonescu received even the smallest relief. The financial compensation owed by the Romanian state to the victims who perished at the hands of the diabolical Antonescu regime are long overdue. It is necessary that the civil society initiate a joint action in order to file a petition to the Romanian authorities on behalf of the Roma survivors of the deportations to Transnistria. Elie Wiesel, a well-known Holocaust survivor, stated the followings: ‘I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.’

Conclusions.

One thing is certain: the persecution of the Roma by the Antonescu regime remained within living memory and both those persecuted (the Roma deportees) and the majority population can attest to that. The Romanian state is a civilized one. Therefore, it is imperative that the Romanian state, particularly the Department of Education and Culture, provide opportunities for learning more about this dark chapter in the modern history of the Romanian state. The Roma genocide is connected to the national identity.