Auschwitz

Victim Group Profile

Roma and Sinti

Roma and Sinti were identified in concentration camps by a black (or brown in some camps) triangle sewn to their uniforms.

250,000 to 500,000 people murdered in total; 21,000 in Auschwitz

The Romani, or Roma, are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group. Most of the Romani persecuted and murdered by the Nazis belonged to the Sinti and Roma family groupings, generally referred to as Roma. The Roma peoples trace their ancestry to traditionally nomadic people, although by the 20th century, many settled in the Soviet Union, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. The Romani language is based on Sanskrit, a classical language that originates in Southern Asia. Religion among Romani varied, as some were Christian while others were Muslim. Historically, Romani people lived a nomadic, wandering way of life. Many Romani were craftsmen, traders, and peddlers, but others were performers. As such, throughout their history, various authorities discriminated against and persecuted Romani peoples as a foreign entity. Romani were derogatorily referred to as “Gypsies ” because of the mistaken belief that they had migrated to Europe from Egypt. The number of nomadic Romani was on decline before the Second World War. In total, around 1 to 1.5 million Romani lived in Europe before the war, with about half in eastern Europe.

The Nazis viewed the Romani as a threat to their racial supremacist ideology, as they were not pure Aryan, and did not live a settled lifestyle. Because of their lifestyle, the Nazis believed that all Romani were criminals and therefore “asocials.” The Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which established the Nazi definition of Jews and stripped their citizenship, were extended to also apply to Romani. The Nazis created further legislation to persecute the Romani. Deportations of Romani began in 1939 to concentration and internment camps, and then later then later to killing centres. About 21,000 of 23,000 Romani deported to Auschwitz died in the camp. Many others were killed in mass shootings throughout German-occupied Europe. Romani also experienced starvation, sterilization, forced labour, arrest and other forms of persecution.

By 1945, it is estimated between 200,000 and 500,000 Roma and Sinti had been murdered in the genocide known as “Porajmos” (translated to “the devouring” in some Romani dialects).

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Auschwitz

Survivor Profile

Julia Lentini (née Bäcker) with her large family in Germany, 1938. Julia is on the far left. (USC Shoah Foundation)

Julia Lentini

Julia Lentini (née Bäcker) was born in April 1926 in Eisern, Germany. Julia had a very large family of fourteen siblings, eighth brothers and six sisters. The family would travel altogether around Germany throughout the summer for their father's business. Julia's father was a horse trainer, basket weaver, and woodworker. The children maintained their studies while travelling and had more stable schooling in the fall when the family would return to their more permanent home in Biedenkopf.

The Nazi takeover in 1933 did not affect the family much, as Julia and her sisters worked on farms and in a knitting factory. They were able to remain in their home until March 1943, much longer than most Romani who deported earlier. The family was deported to Auschwitz, where her family was able to stay together in the so-called "Gypsy family camp." Julia worked in the kitchen with some of her sisters, and survived typhoid fever. Her parents and one of her sisters died of disease and starvation, while one of her brothers was taken away and never seen again. Julia was taken from the rest of her family in early 1944 and deported to the Schlieben concentration camp in Germany where she once again worked in the kitchen. After being hospitalized from brutal lashings she received from the guards for stealing food, the camp guards fled the camp after a nearby munitions factory blew up. The Red Army liberated them a few days later in mid-May 1945.

Julia returned to the family home in Biedenkopf, where she was reunited with a number of her siblings that had survived. While back home, Julia met and then married Henry Lentini, an American soldier stationed nearby. The two moved to the United States and lived in California, having two daughters.

Auschwitz

Victim Group Profile

LGBTQ+ Individuals

LGBTQ+ individuals were identified in concentration camps by a pink triangle sewn to their uniforms.

Gay Men: thousands murdered in total; around 100 in Auschwitz
Totals unclear for other LGBTQ+ groups

Even before the Second World War, gay men faced discrimination in Germany, as well as throughout Europe. Under Paragraph 175 of the German Criminal Code, it was illegal for any man to have relations with another man. In spite of this, gay and lesbian culture flourished during the Weimar Republic period in Germany during the 1920s. Berlin in particular had a lively gay and lesbian cultural and bar scene. The Weimar Republic was relatively more accepting of LGBTQ+ communities and individuals.

The Nazis viewed gay men as a threat to their vision of increasing the German population through reproduction, seeing homosexuality as deviant. When they came to power, the Nazis banned all gay activity. They shut down gay and lesbian bars and clubs and banned gay publications. They arrested around 100,000 gay men, deporting between 5,000-15,000 to concentration camps. They were identified with a pink triangle on their uniforms. To escape being targeted, some gay men entered marriages of convenience with women. A number of LGBTQ+ individuals joined resistance movements or joined resistance groups.

Unlike gay men, the Nazis did not systematically target lesbians, though they still faced dangers and persecution. The same was also true of transgender or bisexual individuals. When individuals were arrested and sent to a concentration camp, they sometimes were marked in a black triangle which signified “asocial” (a loose Nazi term meant to encompass a wide range of peoples who did not conform with the ideal society imagined by the Nazis). Many LGBTQ+ individuals hid their identities to avoid persecution.

The stigma against LGBTQ+ individuals did not end with the war. Gay men were not recognized as victim of Nazism after the war and faced continued persecution under Paragraph 175, which was not completely abolished until 1994 and the reunification of East and West Germany. New research on queer experiences under Nazism, including transgender individuals and lesbians, is emerging more frequently over recent years.

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Survivor Profile

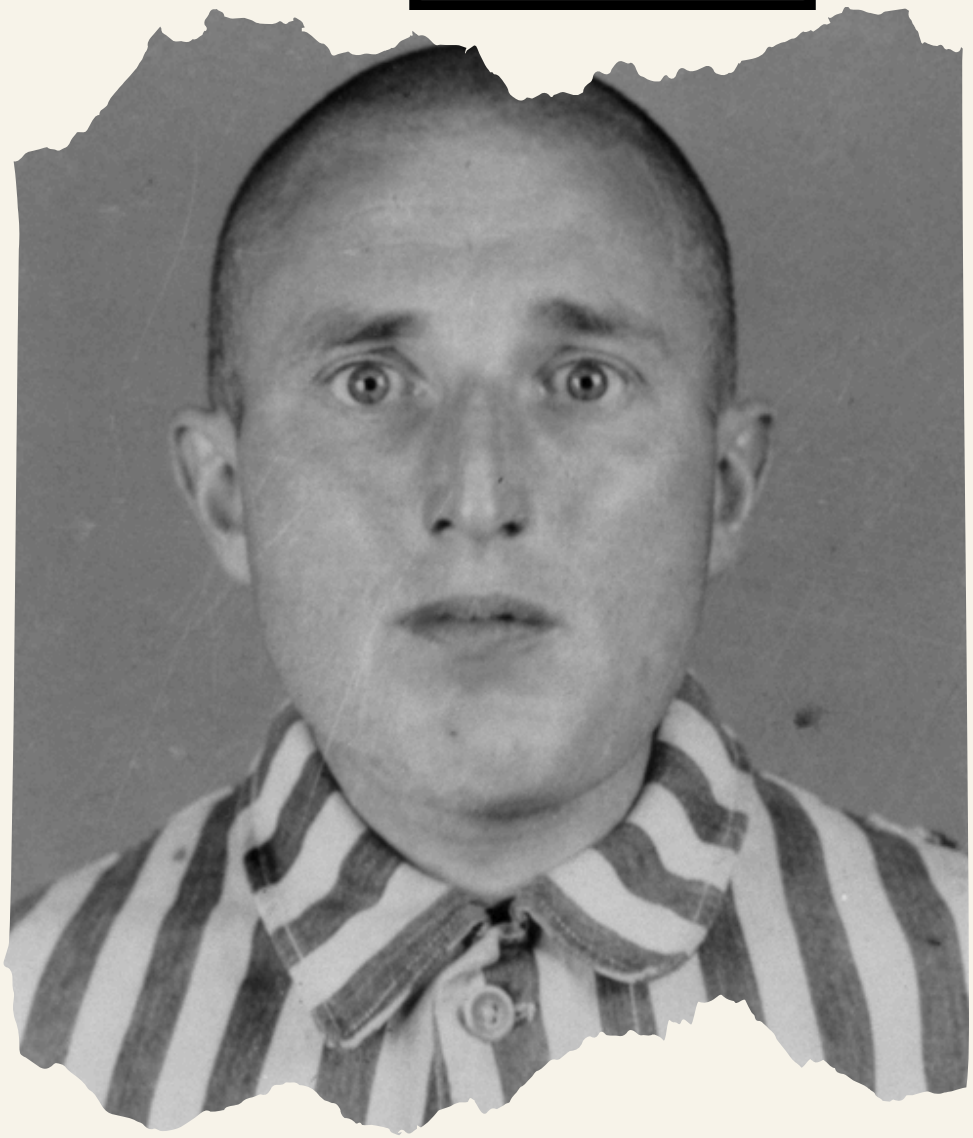

Photo taken of Karl Gorath while he was a prisoner at Auschwitz. (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

Karl Gorath

Karl Gorath was born in December 1912 in Bad Zwishenahn, Germany. The family soon after his birth moved to Bremerhaven, where his father worked as a sailor and his mother as a nurse in a hospital. Karl lived with his mother after his father died and began to train as a deacon at the local church. He also had some training as a nurse.

Karl was gay and faced the dangers of the Nazi rise to power. In 1939, he was denounced to the police by a jealous lover. The police arrested Karl under Paragraph 175 and imprisoned him. After his prison sentence, they deported him to the Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany, where he was marked with a pink triangle. His brief training as a nurse allowed him to work in the Wittenberg subcamp prisoner hospital. After he refused to decrease the bread ration for Polish prisoner, Karl was punished and transferred to Auschwitz, where he was reclassified as a political prisoner and wore a red triangle. While in Auschwitz Karl had a Polish lover named Zbigniew. Karl remained in Auschwitz until its liberation by the Red Army in January 1945.

Despite liberation, Karl's arrest under Paragraph 175 remained on his record. He was arrested again after the war under Paragraph 175. The judge who sentenced him was the same judge who had sentenced him during his first arrest under the Nazis. In a time when very few gay survivors were speaking about their experiences, Karl fought to gain recognition for his experiences as a gay man and publicly shared his story. Karl died in 2003, having never received reparations for his imprisonment.

Auschwitz

Victim Group Profile

Non-Jewish Poles, and Soviet Prisoners of War

Non-Jewish Poles: 1.8 to 1.9 million murdered in total; 70,000 in Auschwitz
Soviet Prisoners of War: 3 million murdered in total; 15,000 in Auschwitz

Slavs are peoples who live primarily in eastern Europe and speak Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian, Polish, etc.). For Hitler and the Nazis, Slavs were a “subhuman” race made all the more dangerous because most Slavs lived in the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' Soviet Union. Most crucially for Hitler, the annihilation of Slavs in eastern Europe would secure lebensraum (“living space”) with rich resources for Germans to use to become a world superpower. The Germans committed numerous crimes against the peoples of Eastern Europe, including starvation, forcibly conscripting civilians into forced slave labour, and mass killings.

Germany’s invasion of Poland sparked the beginning of the Second World War. The Nazis viewed Poles as “racially inferior,” with Hitler only seeing ethnic Germans in Poland as “valuable.” Hitler and the Nazis sought to utterly destroy the concept of the Polish nation and culture. German soldiers, police, and SS shot thousands of non-Jewish Polish civilians. Germany sought to eliminate Polish leadership and anyone who could organize resistance. They conducted executions and sent many to concentration camps and killing centres, including Auschwitz. In fact, Auschwitz was created first to be a concentration camp for Polish political opponents, as well as those deemed a criminal by the Nazis. The Germans also forcibly expelled Poles from their land in an effort to “Germanize” it by bringing in German settlers. This effort also led to the forced deportations of tens of thousands of Polish children to Germany, who were taken from their families in an effort to Germanize them. As their need for labour arose during the war, the Germans deported 1.5 million Poles for labour in Germany. Polish resistance and partisan operations led to brutal pacification and retaliatory actions against Polish civilians. The worst of these came during and after the failed Warsaw Uprising in August of 1944, when 200,000 Poles were killed in the fighting or murdered in reprisals by SS and German army units. Additionally, the largest number of Jews killed in the Holocaust came from Poland (around 3 million).

One of the other brutal forms of German attitudes towards the “subhuman” Slavs, was their treatment of Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs), which violated all international laws and codes of conduct. This differed dramatically from German policy towards prisoners from other Allied forces, who were usually treated significantly better. About 57 percent of Soviet soldiers taken prisoner were dead by the end of the war. They died through shootings, mass starvation, exposure to the elements, disease, gassings, or slave labour. Millions of Slavs were killed as a result of German policy. The first gassing at Auschwitz was done on 600 Soviet POWs and a selection of camp prisoner.

Non-Jewish Poles were identified in concentration camps by an inverted red triangle with the initial of their country of origin sewn to their uniforms.. Prisoners of war received an upright red triangle.

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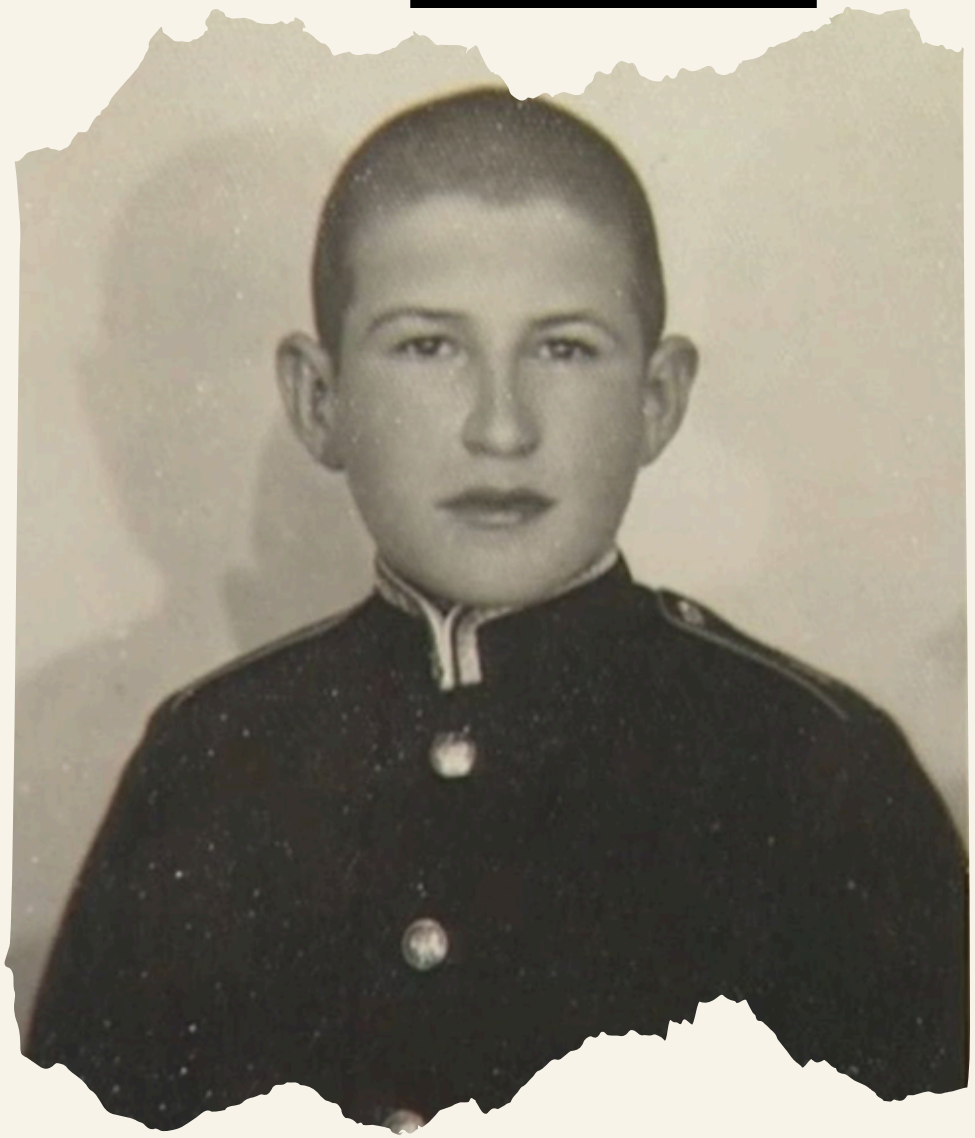
Survivor Profile



Sigmund Sobolewski while at Polish cadet school, 1937. (USC Shoah Foundation)

Sigmund Sobolewski

Sigmund Sobolewski was born in Torun, Poland in 1923. His father, also named Sigmund (as was his father), was an officer in the Polish Army so the family moved around frequently. Sigmund as the oldest of four children. The family was Catholic and middle class. His mother, Anna, and his father spoke fluent German, a fact which Sigmund notes would help save his life. His father was subsequently kicked out of the Army after a military coup overthrew the Polish government in 1926. Sigmund belonged to the Polish boy scouts and attended cadet school.

Sigmund was called up by his cadet school during the German invasion and after the Polish defeat he illegally escaped from the Soviet-occupied eastern half of Poland to his family in Nisko in the German-occupied western half. Sigmund and his mother were arrested in May 1940 as part of the German AB-Aktion which targeted Polish intellectuals and upper classes. While his mother was later released, Sigmund was jailed in Tarnow for a month. Thereafter, he was part of the first prison transport the Germans deported to the newly constructed Auschwitz I prison camp, where he was classified as a political prisoner. Sigmund worked as an apprentice in a furniture factory for two years, until 1942 when he was assigned to the fire brigade for the camp and the surrounding area, which allowed him to smuggle food more easily. While in Auschwitz, Sigmund's father passed away.

As a more 'privileged' category of prisoner, Sigmund witnessed much of the camp's horrors, including the gas chambers, crematoria, medical experiments, and the daily cruelty and murder operations. On October 7, 1944, Sigmund and the fire brigade were called to put out the fires from explosions caused by the Sonderkommando revolt, witnessing prisoners attempting to escape and shootings by the guards.

In 1944, Sigmund was deported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. He continued working as part of the fire brigade, including the dangerous job of putting out fires after Allied bombing raids (where unexploded bombs would go off). After the Red Army began to attack Berlin in 1945, Sigmund escaped and was subsequently liberated by the American Army near the Elbe River close to the war's end.

Sigmund did not want to live under the communist regime in Poland, so he moved to France and then Britain where he joined the Polish Merchant Navy transporting goods. In 1949, he moved to Canada, arriving in Halifax onboard the Aquitania. He worked as a welder and then a salesman, Sigmund met his first wife, Iris, in Britain and they moved together but divorced after 10 years. He married his second wife, Ramona, in 1960. The couple had three sons, and they moved to Calgary after living for 22 years in Toronto. Sigmund became an activist and educator about his experiences in Auschwitz. Sigmund wrote his biography Prisoner 88: The Man in Stripes, in 1988 cowritten with Rabbi Roy Tanenbaum. Sigmund passed away in August 2017.

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Auschwitz

Victim Group Profile

Jehovah's Witnesses were identified in concentration camps by a purple triangle sewn to their uniforms.

Jehovah's Witnesses

1,500 people murdered in total; at least 152 in Auschwitz

Jehovah's Witnesses are a Christian denominational group whose followers believe in separating themselves from secular governments. Witnesses are law-abiding, but do not serve in armies, salute flags, sing anthems, or participate in politics.

As such, the Nazis saw them as a danger to their belief of a united Aryan state, as Witnesses would not swear allegiance to them or serve in the army. Unlike other Nazi victims such as Jews and Roma, Witnesses were persecuted for their beliefs. They had a "choice" to renounce their faith and save themselves, which most would obviously never do. The Nazis created legislation which banned Witnesses. They arrested many and imprisoned them in jails and concentration camps. Some 250 Witnesses were executed for refusing to participate in the war.

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Auschwitz

Survivor Profile

Victor Schnell

Victor Schnell (far right); with his wife Mary Schnell (second from the right), his father Adolph Schnell (middle), and his sister, Johanna Chudalla, with her husband, whose last name was Chudalla. The photo was taken in Poland before the Second World War. (USC Shoah Foundation)

Victor Schnell was born on June 1916 in Lodz, Poland, one of eight children. His father, Adolf, was a Baptist, and his mother, Sophie, was a Catholic who became a Jehovah's Witness in 1922. His mother would take the children to meetings as well as host bible session in the family home. As a result, Victor and almost all of his sibling also became Jehovah's Witnesses. Victor was baptized as a Witness in 1937.

After the German invasion of Poland, the gestapo arrested one of Victor's sisters in 1940 and deported her to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany. In May 1942, the Germans arrested Witnesses throughout Poland and sent Victor to prison. After refusing military service (eligible because his father was German) and refusing to sign a denouncement of his faith, the German deported Victor in December to Auschwitz. He worked in various labour details in the camp. Victor was death marched with other Auschwitz prisoners in January 1945 to Germany. He went from Gross Rosen to Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp, and then to other areas in Germany, until the war ended on May 7. Victor returned home to Poland, where he helped free his father from prison after being imprisoned based on false stories that he was Nazi. Victor married his wife, Mary Barschowsky, around 1950. Shortly after they were arrested by the communist authorities for preaching as Jehovah's Witnesses. After two years in prison, they were reunited and released. The couple emigrated to the United States. Victor eventually became a preacher in Cary, North Carolina for over 25 years until he passed away in June 2005.