

**Luca Bravi, Maria José Casa-Nova,
Maria Alfredo Moreira,
Maria Teresa Tagliaventi (Eds.)**

Leaving a Trace

**Action-research with Roma
and non-Roma young people
between history, memory and present**

Itinerari e dialoghi di Storia dell'educazione



Itinerari e dialoghi di storie dell'educazione

Collana diretta da Gianfranco Bandini, Tiziana Pironi, Gabriella Seveso

La collana si rivolge a un pubblico nazionale e internazionale interessato ai problemi della storia dell'educazione, sia quelli di consolidata tradizione accademica sia quelli più innovativi e di frontiera. Accoglie e riflette le più recenti riflessioni storiografiche, che hanno visto una vera e propria rivoluzione delle metodologie, degli strumenti, delle tematiche oggetto di indagine, anche con una sensibilità cresciuta in senso interdisciplinare: i testi saranno sia di carattere teoretico sia relativi a studi e ricerche nell'ambito della storia dell'educazione, delle istituzioni educative, dell'educazione formale e informale, delle politiche scolastiche ed educative.

I volumi sono disposti lungo un ampio arco cronologico che rende ragione dell'attualità e importanza dell'approccio storico a partire dagli studi di storia antica fino alla storia contemporanea e del tempo presente.

La collana accoglie testi originali, traduzioni e pubblicazioni di fonti. Si rivolge agli specialisti del settore, agli studenti universitari ma anche un più ampio pubblico interessato a approfondire i profondi legami tra il passato e il presente dei processi formativi, nella consapevolezza che la dimensione storica costituisce uno strumento ermeneutico imprescindibile per comprendere e progettare le sfide educative e pedagogiche dell'attualità.

Comitato Scientifico

María Esther Aguirre, UNAM Messico

Anna Ascenzi, Università di Macerata

Annemarie Augscholl, Università di Bolzano

Valter Balducci, École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Normandie

Alberto Barausse, Università del Molise

Carmen Betti, Università di Firenze

Paolo Bianchini, Università di Torino

Francesca Borruso, Università di Roma Tre

Antonella Cagnolati, Università di Foggia

Luciano Caimi, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano

Lorenzo Cantatore, Università di Roma Tre

Carlo Cappa, Università di Roma Tor Vergata



OPEN ACCESS la soluzione FrancoAngeli

Il presente volume è pubblicato in open access, ossia il file dell'intero lavoro è liberamente scaricabile dalla piattaforma **FrancoAngeli Open Access** (<http://bit.ly/francoangeli-oa>).

FrancoAngeli Open Access è la piattaforma per pubblicare articoli e monografie, rispettando gli standard etici e qualitativi e la messa a disposizione dei contenuti ad accesso aperto. Oltre a garantire il deposito nei maggiori archivi e repository internazionali OA, la sua integrazione con tutto il ricco catalogo di riviste e collane FrancoAngeli massimizza la visibilità, favorisce facilità di ricerca per l'utente e possibilità di impatto per l'autore.

Per saperne di più: [Pubblica con noi](#)

I lettori che desiderano informarsi sui libri e le riviste da noi pubblicati possono consultare il nostro sito Internet: www.francoangeli.it e iscriversi nella home page al servizio "[Informatemi](#)" per ricevere via e-mail le segnalazioni delle novità.

**Luca Bravi, Maria José Casa-Nova,
Maria Alfredo Moreira,
Maria Teresa Tagliaventi (Eds.)**

Leaving a Trace

**Action-research with Roma
and non-Roma young people
between history, memory and present**

FrancoAngeli 

The volume *Leaving a Trace. Action-research with Roma and non-Roma young people between history, memory and present* is a publication produced within the Project “Transformative Roma Art and Culture for European Remembrance” (TRACER), funded by Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme of the European Commission.

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

The TRACER project

Partners:

- University of Bologna – Department of Education “Giovanni Maria Bertin”, Italy.
- University of Florence – Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology, Italy.
- C.A.T. – Social Cooperative, Florence, Italy
- Chi Rom e...chi no – Association, Naples, Italy.
- Opengroup – Social Cooperative, Bologna, Italy.
- Stowarzyszenie Romow w Polsce – Association, Oświęcim, Poland.
- Ribaltambição – Associação para a Igualdade de Género nas Comunidades Ciganas, Figueira da Foz, Portugal.
- Alto Comissariado para as Migrações (ACM) / Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo (AIMA), Portugal.
- Research Center on Education (CIEd) – Institute of Education of the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal.
- Organization coordinator: Lisa Cerantola (University of Bologna)

Web: <https://tracproject.eu/it>



Copyright © 2024 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milano, Italy.

This work, and each part thereof, is protected by copyright law and is published in this digital version under the license *Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International* (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

By downloading this work, the User accepts all the conditions of the license agreement for the work as stated and set out on the website

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

Index

Stories, memories and lives. Building a multicultural Public History of Education in an action-research project by <i>Luca Bravi</i> and <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	pag. 7
--	--------

FIRST PART Memory and history for inclusion in the educational context

1. Historical memory, identity and minorities. An action-research project with Roma and Sinti young people by <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	» 15
2. Looking back at history to understand the present by <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 30
3. Breaking the prejudice through places of Memory by <i>Silvia Bencini</i> and <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 38
4. Representation of Roma persecution in school curriculum development in Europe by <i>Ivana Bolognesi</i> , <i>Maria Alfredo Moreira</i> and <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 65

SECOND PART Transforming the present through history and memory

5. Transforming and training through action-research on the history of Sinti and Roma by <i>Maria José Casa-Nova</i> and <i>Daniela Silva</i>	» 85
6. Knowing the history in the educational context by <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 100

7. Visiting history. “Crossing” the camp of Auschwitz by <i>Silvia Bencini</i>	pag.	111
8. Reporting the history and transforming the present by <i>Emma Ferulano</i>	»	121
9. Presenting the history. Building memory through art by <i>Inês Aydin</i> and <i>Liliana Moreira</i>	»	131
10. Leaving a trace in the present by <i>Maria José Casa-Nova</i> , <i>Maria Alfredo Moreira</i> and <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	»	145
Authors’ biographies	»	153
Groups of young leaders involved in the TRACER project	»	156

3. Breaking the prejudice through places of Memory

by *Silvia Bencini** and *Luca Bravi**

1. History walks in the places of the past and present¹

The places are an element from which to start a historical reconstruction of the public policies of Remembrance and the Auschwitz State Museum is one of the sites that was first intended for this objective (at least in the immediate intentions of the survivors), which later became an international symbol, to the point of iconically implying the entire path of persecution and extermination implemented by Nazism and European fascism. Auschwitz, which has become a world symbol, has undergone a crystallization: known on a public level for its past (the events between 1940 and 1945), it sees its post-war period and its present constantly put in the background; it seems to exist only for the historical time of Nazism. A fundamental phase of the TRACER project was the visit to the Auschwitz State Museum as an element of connection between past and present, as a tool for reflection in relation to the discriminatory categories of the past which are still used at a social level in the preservation of stereotypes: the category “gypsies” is one of those that has been most preserved over time, carrying stereotypes about Roma almost unchanged into the present. The proposed contribution aims to reflect on the need to build a passage between the past and the present that is linked to the activation of training and educational processes. But just visiting the Museum is not enough to produce this process; after the visit of the Museum which

* Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology (FOR-LILPSI), University of Florence.

¹ Luca Bravi is author of paragraphs 1; Silvia Bencini is author of paragraphs 2 and 4; Luca Bravi and Silvia Bencini are both authors of paragraph 3.

represents the story of Nazi persecution and extermination, it is necessary to find channels of relationship with people living in the present.

The attempt to escape from this crystallization of Auschwitz also means describing the variation of meanings that have been linked to this same place. It is a geographical area that speaks of the past of death and destruction, in such an all-encompassing way that it influences the vision one has of the town of Oświęcim (Auschwitz, in the historical Nazi translation)², even today. Over time, the international public narrative of death has focused on this town, so much so that any sign of life expressed in the present risks appearing out of place and being described as an offense to the memory of those who suffered the fate of death in the *lager* between 1940 and 1945. Yet the activities to build contexts of peace and the fight against racism are active right in the town of Oświęcim, but paradoxically not perceived by those who are visiting the Auschwitz Museum, who leave the city immediately after the visit and return to the main nearby Polish metropolises before going home.

The burning current debate can be summarized in these terms: does Oświęcim remain a place of death, or can it be a symbol of the strength of Memory, from a proactive perspective of the present? And if the invitation of Memory policies is always to translate awareness of the past into present commitment, how to manage the return to life? Is it ethical that life continues to flow around the fence of the Auschwitz camp, or should we leave the entire place, including the town, as a memorial to those fallen under the hand of the Nazi death machine?

The debate is decidedly intricate and presents an innumerable series of problematic issues, but the reflection around these questions is essential precisely when one intends to give full meaning to processes of participation and deconstruction of stereotypes: if the Auschwitz Museum is not made to dialogue with the present, any visit risks

² Under the Nazi occupation, the town of Oświęcim was renamed Auschwitz (name taken from the Habsburg translation). The Polish name of the city will be reported here, whenever the analysis focuses on contexts outside the concentration camp, while "Auschwitz" will be used only when referring to the historical time and the events of the concentration and extermination camp. This distinction is also necessary because the citizens who live in Oświęcim today perceive the full weight of the stigma of history in the German translation. This approach will naturally also open the reflection to the subsequent theme of the removal and/or construction of Memory.

exhausting itself in a sort of excavation into past events which end up being perceived as distant from the current context: the evil of the past in opposition to the present considered immune from similar drifts. Reflecting on the relationship between Auschwitz (symbol of the past and a warning for the democracies of the future) and Oświęcim (the city of the present that works on the fight against racism and xenophobia) is essential when approaching these places and these stories, people belonging to young generations in training who are part of a minority that is still affected by racism throughout Europe. The young Roma and Sinti who come to Oświęcim to learn about the phase of Auschwitz which directly affected them through extermination policies must be able to relate historical notions with the perception of themselves and with a European narrative which continues to perceive them as “different” in the social context.

To build a process that is not ethnicizing and that does not risk proposing historicization paths segmented into a single minority, it is useful to first consider the place of Oświęcim (the present) in its entirety and complexity, in order to perceive how the practices of deconstruction of stereotypes through history do not only concern the specific theme of a minority, but also the global approach to history that finds a form of formative expression in the multicultural present. Here we will attempt to describe Oświęcim proactive face of the present, with its dense network of people and associations who inhabit and experience the town and who connect the commitment to active citizenship with constant reference to the history preserved and narrated by the Museum.

Carrying out this revolution means being aware that Memory is *made* (and not just studied) and that this path can only be accomplished where life exists. Life alongside death, without one prevailing over the other: from death to life, in a reciprocal movement that leads to the preservation of Memory as a training tool in which Roma and Sinti participate together with all the other people who make up the humanity. It is an effort that will also allow us to reflect on the methods of access to certain places, on the role of “memory tourism”, on what is right or wrong to do and on how each of the reflections takes on a different depth when observed as a citizen and not as an impromptu passer-by in these places who then quickly returns to his home.

2. Auschwitz, “dark tourism” and emotions

The town of Oświęcim is now adapting its shape to a continuously growing tourist flow. In 2019, there were 2,320,000 visitors to the Museum, with a physiological decrease during the two years of the Covid-19 pandemic to 502,600 people in 2020 and 563,000 in 2021 (in any case very high numbers, considering the period); in 2023, there were 1,676,000 visitors. To respond to these very high flows, in Oświęcim supermarkets are being built in every corner of the city and a hostel is being built in front of the camp, in which the Museum volunteers will be able to stay. Yet, alongside places to host students and scholars, there exists the problematic reality of Memory tourism, which takes the form of a superficial approach to certain areas linked to the Nazi extermination. “Dark tourism”³, or horror tourism, is a form of macabre tourism that is based on a thanatological⁴ motif, i.e. linked to an interest in death and the biological, anthropological, psychological and philosophical effects connected to it. The places affected by this type of tourism therefore end up being experienced as forms of macabre entertainment and not as an educational tool. For this reason, before any training process aimed at deconstructing stereotypes in the present, it is necessary to create awareness regarding the risks that the approach to similar areas can produce.

³ “Dark tourism” is an expression used for the first time by M. Foley and J.J. Lennon in 1996 (Lennon, Foley, *Dark tourism*). There are five categories of “dark” places that constitute an attraction in dark tourism: places that witness public death (despite public executions nowadays taking place in relatively few countries); places of individual or mass death, covering an enormous variety of locations, from battlefields (e.g. Gallipoli), to extermination camps (e.g. Auschwitz-Birkenau) and genocide sites (e.g. the “Killing Fields” in Cambodia), places where famous people have died (such as the site of the car accident in which James Dean died), places where crimes known to the public have occurred (for example Soham in Great Britain, where they were murdered in 2002 the young Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman) or places where famous murderers lived (for example 25 Cromwell Street, Gloucester in Great Britain, where Fred West and his wife committed serial murder crimes and sexual crimes); burial places or monuments, including cemeteries, cenotaphs, crypts and war monuments; places that are not directly connected to the event but which show evidence of death or its symbolic representations, such as the museums they contain weapons (e.g. the Royal Armouries in Leeds, Great Britain) or exhibitions depicting specific events or activities; places where death is staged or simulated, in the form of theatrical shows or religious-themed parties or re-enactments of famous battles; Stone, “A dark tourism spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions”.

⁴ www.turystykakulturowa.org (Last access: August 2024).

We present here an extreme example of the very problematic reality around this theme: in a kiosk near the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum it is possible to purchase magnets which reproduce in photos various interiors of the former *lager* (the main entrance with the writing “*Arbeit macht frei*”, the blocks of the camp where the deportees lived, the public gallows, the crematorium). Evidently, a thriving market of horror souvenirs is born and is growing, which brings us back to the pressing issue of mass tourism in places of Memory and the meaning that these visits can take on.

The question to ask, in the context of a project that wants to use the past to take action in the present (particularly together with minorities), is the following: where a perception of Auschwitz is growing as an emotional symbol and not as a historical event to be explained and known, is it possible to develop that awareness that can produce multicultural paths of inclusion and participation? The risk is finding ourselves participating in a collective and social process that refers to the emotions that the place arouses, but not to the historicization which would instead be able to explain how stereotypes and hatred have been built and continue to be fueled.

It is that emotional channel that Giovanni De Luna talks about in his volume *La Repubblica del dolore* (“The Republic of Pain”):

And then again, the suffocating presence of emotions: hatred, revenge, forgiveness, pity, compassion. And then finally, the mammoth competition between the various victims, almost as if each of them, in order to have their pain recognised, must surpass that of the others. A competition made deafening by the media coverage attributed to that pain. To excite, move, arouse consensus, suffering must be shouted out; and the louder you shout, the more you break down the audience and listening barriers. Almost as if emotions are goods and almost as if the market imposes its rules, controlling supply and demand⁵.

From commodified emotions to commodified places, a dangerous industry is born, and it seems to forget the fundamental objective of Memory policies: learning from history as an exercise of the present and not only as a burden of the past; the emotional aspect can be analyzed as a tool for building interest in historicization, but never as the

⁵ De Luna, *La Repubblica del dolore*, 34.

final goal of a project. For this reason, what it must be considered in the participation/construction of memory policies, in particular in the contexts of participation of minorities affected by the persecution actions implemented by Nazism and European fascism, is avoiding moving along the path of knowledge only of one's own piece of history, because there is a risk of triggering emotional recriminations that produce competition between categories of victims.

The consequences of "dark tourism" do not only take on commercial characteristics; by analyzing the way in which many visitors "enjoy" certain places, we understand that the approach to them is not only superficial but hides an inability to deeply understand the place. Selfies in front of the entrance to Birkenau, at the sign "*Arbeit macht frei*", or even inside the gas chamber of the Auschwitz I camp, are some examples of the behaviors that occur with worrying frequency. It seems necessary to immortalize one's presence in the places of horror, as if the fulcrum of the visit to the camp coincided with the participation in a particularly "dark" experience of which it is mandatory to produce documentation, completely neglecting the aspect of historical reconstruction and the process that produced the extermination. Even the policies of Remembrance are inserted into the era of consumerism and everything is consumed in that moment of the visit, to then go out and decide to eat an ice cream in front of the entrance to Birkenau, at a recently opened kiosk (built on a private area). Do not forget, however, that the economic activity is not just a matter of private individuals speculating on horror tourists, because for a long time it was possible to consume a meal at the self-service present right inside the former administrative part of the *lager*, in the Museum structure itself, whose windows offered a view of the blocks of Auschwitz I.

Putting a stop to the tourist industry around Auschwitz (and not only) could actually be an ethically proper solution that respects the victims, but would it be enough to change the approach to these places?

Would the practice of taking selfies in front of the camp end? But above all, would it be enough to return home aware that those places were born as the result of mechanisms of hatred still existing in our society? Or perhaps it could make a difference to focus on the ways of *crossing* certain places, experiencing them, reading them with a depth that goes beyond mere emotion, which involves a stay in Oświęcim

and not just in Auschwitz? The type of emotion linked to the vision of the Museum often disappears in a single instant, as soon as one crosses the exit and this delimitation into watertight compartments (first I was in the elapsed time of extermination and now I return to the current reality of democracy) does not connect the past with the present.

The same emotionality that makes one pronounce the formula of “never again, so as not to forget”, risks not allowing reflection on the tools necessary to produce an educational process to be elaborated: this is because the main tool that can produce action is that of historicization (historical knowledge of the road that led to Auschwitz), but it was downgraded in favor of an intoxicating emotional plan that leads to generic ethical statements which are not capable of producing the wealth of knowledge that could determine the basis on which to build individual or collective educational processes. This discrepancy becomes evident in the visit to Auschwitz: crying in front of the photo of the museum tour which portrays four Roma twins subjected to experimentation by the Nazi Josef Mengele, but also being unable to activate a plan of reflection on the stereotypes towards the Roma in the present. Or the emotional simplification according to which we proceed by equating past and present, using “pieces” of history used as stand-alone tiles: the Italian nomadic camps paradoxically become comparable to the extermination camp of Auschwitz, but instead a historicization of the processes of racialization implemented in the concentration camp would allow not to equate, but to understand how the Roma’s distance from the current majority society was constructed and how the latter has found different elements to express itself, so much so as to make them not comparable to Auschwitz, but the product of a consequent differentialist logic that has changed and has therefore been preserved over the centuries.

The emotionality that simplifies declaring the past and the present identical (yet each historical event is always different from another), makes the historical discourse problematic, which would instead allow us to identify the basis for understanding what the inheritance of Auschwitz has become in the modernity; a process that is not produced by equating, but by problematizing historical events and knowing them in their own singular specificities, ultimately through a critical comparison that represents a specific tool of the historian.

But a personal choice is also needed: that of entering the place of Memory and inevitably coming out different. The choice to make the effort to bring the experience we have just lived back into our lives, to give it meaning and make a change. Personal change certainly doesn't happen with a snap of the fingers upon leaving Auschwitz, but *crossing* this place is a step in the educational journey of people who live in the present and who each time have to reorient the gaze with which observing their daily lives.

3. Oświęcim, the relationship with the present

Oświęcim, the town that existed before Auschwitz and which continued to exist after the Nazi occupation phase, if valorized within events and trips of Remembrance, can represent a training tool, precisely because it allows you to relate not only with death, but with life that must take on the symbolism and genocidal practice linked to the past. It is the need not to relegate these places only to mere cemeteries of extermination, but also to places of life and community building, if we do not limit ourselves to flying over them superficially and then returning to the nearby metropolises. This is the reason why the project activities carried out in Poland did not only include a visit to the Auschwitz State Museum, but a stay of several days in Oświęcim, to have the opportunity to understand the place that everyone judges only on the basis of parameters that refer to the theme of death. It was thus possible to perceive and know that in that town, many inhabitants work assiduously precisely to respect Memory, preserve it, but also make it live in the concept of active and participatory Memory. It was possible to take a different point of view from the usual one of the visit to Auschwitz, which allowed us to learn a lesson starting from the idea that the practices of hatred which culminated in the destruction of human beings are fought with the construction of communities for rights, for peace, for democracy. Oświęcim turned out to be a city truly rich in activism, educational projects, educational communication skills.

Oświęcim today is a continuously expanding town and has more than 40.000 inhabitants. The Auschwitz Museum is undoubtedly one of the main sources of work that pushes citizens from other areas of Poland to move to this city. The experience gained in the context of

the TRACER project has shown that these are not citizens who have crystallized an entire municipality around the memorial theme of the Nazi genocide. Oświęcim seems to realize the different role it must play in the present compared to Auschwitz and appears to be involved and active in the current debate on the protection of minorities and in the fight against forms of discrimination that pollute the present. Oświęcim is, as it is described on the city's official website, «a meeting place for people of various nationalities, regardless of religion and belief, a place where new generations want to build a future without wars and violence. [...] an open, multinational and multi-religious center for reflection and dialogue». For this reason, Oświęcim chooses to describe itself as “the City of Peace”. It is important to remember that this message launched by the Oświęcim of the present remains unknown to the majority of visitors of the Auschwitz Museum, who on many occasions find themselves reflecting on these themes hundreds of kilometers away from that place which could offer activation elements directly on site, right next to the museum that tells the story of the extermination.

Walking around the town of Oświęcim is a chance to know it better. Beyond the barbed wire of Auschwitz there is a vital and alive dimension waiting to be discovered. But to truly appreciate it, to immerse yourself in the response of a place that doesn't want to talk only about death, it is perhaps necessary to travel it on foot and simply let yourself be captured by its public narration. The “City of Peace” communicates directly with passers-by through various forms of art which are a fundamental element of collective storytelling. An installation organized by the Institute for Human Rights («Oświęcimski Instytut Praw Człowieka») reminds us that Oświęcim is «*miasto otwarte dla wszystkich*», “a city open to everyone”. You can walk on a colorful floral wreath, which recalls the city's solidarity with the Ukrainian people. The “Mural trail” features a collection of monumental murals, found on buildings in different parts of the city. Each of these works invites us to promote peace, to break cultural barriers and stereotypes, to live with respect for diversity. It has now become a tradition in Oświęcim that an artist can color the city with his work, on the occasion of the Life Festival Oświęcim: a music festival organized by the Peace Festival Foundation, held in June with the aim of building peaceful relations across cultural and national borders and combat

racism and anti-Semitism. Also, particularly relevant on a communicative and educational level are the “Talking heads”, murals that depict well-known and important people alongside one of their famous quotes.

Thus, walking through Oświęcim, it is possible to come across the words of the physicist, chemist and mathematician Maria Skłodowska-Curie (a figure valued precisely in the context of the European Union), who reminds us that «in life there is nothing to fear, only to understand». Understanding the lesson that comes from the history of a place like the town of Oświęcim and remembering it in everyday life; process which brings to mind the Stumbling Stones, *Stolpersteine* in German, an initiative spread internationally by the artist Gunter Demnig as a reaction to every form of denialism and oblivion, in order to remember all the victims of National-Socialism who for whatever reason were persecuted: religion, race, political ideas, sexual orientation.

And again, walking through Oświęcim, the visitor comes across Martin Luther King's message, «In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends». Likewise, the reproduced figure of Mahatma Gandhi seems to appeal to passers-by with his famous exhortation «Be the change you want to see in the world» and the politician Vaclav Havel who states: «Decent people cannot stand by and watch». These images aim to promote, especially among younger generations, values such as tolerance, human rights, peace, democracy and civil society.

In the “City of Peace” two parallel realities coexist, which have been carrying out for a long time the fight against prejudices and mechanisms of hatred, activating educational processes: Cafe Bergson and the Roma Association in Poland.

3.1 Cafe Bergson, walking between yesterday and today

Cafe Bergson is today one of the main centers committed to the guarantee of every minority civil rights. It was born in 2014 thanks to

the American Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation (AJCF)⁶ in the building where the last Jewish citizen of Oświęcim Shimson Kleuger lived, and right next to the only synagogue survived the Second World War. The position is not accidental, Cafe Bergson is in fact engaged in education on the *Shoah*, in a continuous project of memory preservation through educational activities involving various age groups. To understand the importance of this commitment, it is necessary to explain the social context that pushed the Foundation to create this cultural, educational and recreational center in Oświęcim. Before the Second World War, the Jewish community was very large and diverse in Oświęcim: about 58% of the inhabitants were Jewish, more than twenty synagogues stood in Oświęcim and there was peaceful coexistence between the Jewish and Christian communities.

Even today it is possible to appreciate how close the Great Synagogue⁷ of Oświęcim, destroyed by the Nazis on the night of November 29, 1939, and the Church of Saint Mary Help of Christians, still functioning as a place of worship, were.

After the war, 186 Jews returned to Oświęcim (there were approximately more than 7.000 before the extermination). The majority were killed in their own town, inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, after having been transported to the ghettos of other cities. Upon the survivors' return, the only synagogue not completely demolished was restored and remained in use during the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, due to growing anti-Semitic policies, the Jewish community decided to emigrate from Poland; the synagogue was closed and used by the city in a secular manner (for a period it even housed a carpet shop). Only in the 1990s, with the birth of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation, was the synagogue renovated again and made available

⁶ The Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation (AJCF) is a non-governmental organization founded in 1995 by Fred Schwartz with the aim of building a cultural, spiritual and educational center for the Jewish community. To date, the foundation takes care of the maintenance of the Oshpitzin Jewish Museum, the Synagogue, the Jewish cemetery, and the memorial that stands on the ruins of the Great Synagogue which was destroyed during the Nazi occupation. Furthermore, it financed the reconstruction of the building in which Cafe Bergson is located.

⁷ The demolition was completed in the summer of 1941, when a detachment composed mainly of Polish Auschwitz prisoners was sent to clear the ruins of the Great Synagogue. This historic site where a special memorial stands today is managed by the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation and the artefacts found in the 2004 excavations are part of the collection present at the Jewish Museum in Oświęcim.

for a small group of Jews who remained in the town. It currently plays a dual role: it hosts the Jewish Museum, which deals with the preservation of the memory of the Shoah through the collection of photos, objects and artefacts connected to history, and it is occasionally used as a place of worship. Since there is no longer a Jewish community in the city of Oświęcim, the synagogue is open to groups of visitors from the Jewish Museum and the Auschwitz State Museum. In the year 2000, the building next to the synagogue was acquired by the Foundation, because the owner died. The structural conditions were precarious, so the foundation organized a fundraising campaign to renovate the premises and give birth, in 2014, to a new place that could host not only visitors or groups of tourists, but also and above all the local community.

Cafe Bergson marked a real turning point for attendance at the Jewish Museum. Before its opening, the population of Oświęcim had not shown great interest in the themes covered by the museum: a story, that of the Shoah, now distant in time and which no longer represented the citizens from a religious point of view.

After its opening, citizens began to frequent the Cafe and its surroundings, including the restored synagogue, despite some initial reticence. There were those who did not understand whether or not it was a place reserved only for Jews or for groups visiting the museum, but over time the Cafe has gained a rather large number of regular visitors and is currently one of the most popular places in the town of Oświęcim, thanks to a philosophy of great openness on the social issues of the present. Cafe Bergson is a significant example of proactive commitment for the present, because it is not limited only to the creation of training processes aimed at knowledge and preservation of the memory of the Nazi extermination, but it updates the mechanisms of hatred and discrimination that led to the reality of places like Auschwitz: it effectively implements a process of historicization, of knowledge that dialogues through places, between past and present. The Cafe organizes workshops calibrated to the age of the participants: the “Elder Brothers in Faith” project, an artistic workshop in which children learn the basic terms of the Jewish religion and the synagogue, through the use of games and colours; the “Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows” program, for university students involved in historical studies on the Shoah or similar topics. An advanced study trip lasting

three and a half weeks to the most important cities in Poland related to the study program (Krakow, Warsaw, Łódź, Treblinka and Oświęcim). In Oświęcim, fellows participate in an intensive program at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, where they visit the camps, study the history of inmates, and take part in workshops with staff from the Museum's collections and education departments.

Teachers are a particularly important category for the centre. The “Anti-discrimination Education Academy” is a long-term program on which the foundation focuses most, and it is aimed at teachers of Polish or other humanities subjects in primary and secondary schools in the Polish regions of Małopolska and Górny Śląsk. The program provides specific training against stereotypes and prejudices, and uses the so-called VICE model (Visibility, Inclusion, Collaboration, Empowerment), which encourages the construction and maintenance of safe communities, because they are free from discrimination and violence. The effectiveness of certain educational processes in deconstructing stereotypes rooted in the present is based on the ability to consider the history of all the victims of the Nazi genocide. In fact, Cafe Bergson is not limited to ethical declarations but is built and proposed as a “neutral environment”: it is frequented by anyone, even by people not really interested in history who, by participating in the various public events, have the opportunity to read something about it even just in the posters that crowd the walls of the building. The Cafe itself is an indirect educational tool, as it is a place of informal training. Lively, effective and accurate communication intrigues the online community but also passers-by. It is in fact very easy to notice the building, thanks to its colored ribbons: a rainbow of colors, a banner, symbolizing that, at Cafe Bergson, everyone is welcomed with open arms, regardless of origin, gender, sexuality, physical and neurological condition, age: “Here you can be whoever you want, you can come and feel comfortable and safe”⁸.

The commitment continued in relation to the nearby war context in Ukraine with the #bergson4ukraine project, activated immediately after the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Thanks to

⁸ The motto “Here you can be whoever you want, you can come and feel comfortable and safe” was pronounced by Karolina Turza, manager and educator of Cafe Bergson, during an interview conducted in Oświęcim on 17th August 2023.

cooperation with the “European Solidarity Corpse” project, every year the Foundation hosts young volunteers from various countries (in particular now Ukraine), who have the opportunity to participate in the various activities offered: leading groups in the museum, working in the Cafe, taking care of the Jewish cemetery and the Memorial. The Cafe has become a place of welcome and redemption for Ukrainian refugees where, in addition to accommodation and employment, activities such as Polish lessons for foreigners, workshops and trips are offered. Finally, Cafe Bergson has been committed to the fight against discrimination towards the LGBTQAI+ community for six years now. This can be appreciated from the rainbow flags at its entrance, but also from having chosen to spread the slogan “*Nikt nie jest nielegalny*” (“No one is illegal”) through its business. This motto is inspired by the recent denial of civil rights in some regions of Poland towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community. In fact, there are (even if today only symbolically) LGBT-free zones, i.e. areas of Poland declared “free from homosexuals”. Oświęcim is not one of them, but the Cafe has nevertheless decided to act as a megaphone for any action against hatred and discrimination.

3.2. The Roma. From Oświęcim to the European gaze on the present

Along the same road that leads to Cafe Bergson, the same road that reaches, on the opposite side, the Catholic church and passes next to the monument that recalls the ancient Great Synagogue which was destroyed by the Nazis, you will find the headquarters of the Association *Stowarzyszenie Romów w Polsce* (“Roma in Poland”), a key partner of the TRACER project, which works against anti-gypsyism at local, national and international levels. The Association was founded at the beginning of 1992, with the main objective of creating the conditions for the full participation of Roma in the life of the country. The reflection on places in relation to the construction of awareness of the history of the Roma and Sinti as a central element of European history finds in this context a natural constructive relationship between past and present. One of the main purposes of the Association is to remember and commemorate the Nazi persecution and extermination of Roma and

Sinti and its location in the city of the Auschwitz State Museum makes the concrete meaning of this objective immediate with respect to the past; in this case, the reflection on the present adds elements that make a concrete example of the possibility of managing educational actions, through a constant reminder that finds its fulcrum in historicization, but to make it the basis of appropriate and solid current training. The permanent exhibition entitled «Romowie Historia Kultura» («Roma History and Culture»), which can be visited at the Association's headquarters, is constructed as a narrative of the Roma history, starting from the movements of this community around the world (in Europe in particular), and makes immediately visible the stereotypes more rooted in the collective thought regarding this population, the same ones that formed the basis for the Nazi extermination and which remain in the present. There are paintings of women presented through the art produced by the majority culture in which "gypsies" become attractive, bewitching subjects, with mystical seductive powers and accused of being enchantresses and deceivers; the images of the men oscillate between the vision of extreme freedom (which however also constructs the figure of the "rootless and non-citizen gypsy"), up to that of the carefree musician, circus artist and therefore "obviously" nomadic and contextually described as a thief.

The European imagination has always been fascinated by the exoticism of these people, but at the same time annoyed by their presence which has been depicted as a cumbersome and dangerous diversity. The exhibition retraces the steps which, from this imaginary, led to the Nazi persecution, deportation and extermination of around 500,000 Roma and Sinti, of which around 23,000 in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. From eugenic tests, to forced sterilizations, to the extermination in the *Zigeunerlager* of Birkenau (camp of the Birkenau gypsy families, officially indicated as the BIIE sector of the *lager*), which took place on 2nd August 1944, we are faced with a page of history that has almost never been told in school-books.

From the imagery of the negative narrative of the Roma in the majority culture, the historical phase of Auschwitz is addressed in the exhibition, through archival documentation, in order to historicize an event of the past which has long been denied in its character of extermination for racial reasons (the commitment of Professor Ian

Hancock⁹, a Roma researcher at the University of Austin in Texas, was necessary to achieve adequate knowledge of the persecution process implemented by the Nazis against Sinti and Roma and to achieve recognition of their extermination, which occurred as a final act linked to the definition of racial inferiority applied to the category “gypsies”).

The exhibition of the Polish association is a narrative journey that does not finish with the end of Auschwitz but continues with a story that once again becomes the story of Oświęcim, but above all the description of the relationship between the cultural majority and Roma minority in the post-war period. The events of the Roma thus leave the direct reference to Auschwitz and the passage to the personal and family history of Roman Kwiatkowski allow us to concretely consider the effects of a denied memory, as was that of the Roma at least until the 1980s. The Kwiatkowskis are a family of Roma who, as happened with the entire group of Polish Roma, arrived in Poland at least as early as the 16th century, due to pogroms against the “gypsies” carried out in Russian territories. Each family suffered Nazi persecution which resulted in the extermination and death of members of the community. The generations following that of the direct witnesses of the persecution returned to live on Polish territory alongside the majority community. In the 1980s, during the changes that led to the end of the Cold War, the Polish economic situation had worsened considerably and the need to identify those responsible for the general malaise caused new pogroms against the Roma who were used as scapegoats. In 1981, conflicts specifically targeted against the Roma population occurred. The first of these events took place on 9th and 10th September 1981 in Konin, where 70 Roma lived, while the second took place on 21st and 22nd October of the same year in Oświęcim, where 137 Roma were registered, including Roman Kwiatkowski with his family. A futile argument between a Roma and a non-Roma over a place in a queue sparked the conflict. Speculation about the financial situation of the Roma and the cultural resort to theft began to be widespread again. It was also said that Roma from nearby towns - Kęty, Chrzanów and Andrychów - would be resettled in Auschwitz blocks to keep them under control. Local committees were formed to expel the “gypsies” from the cities and actual agreements were stipulated with the

⁹ Hancock, *The pariah syndrome*.

authorities of the Bielsko voivodeship (region) to remove them. Meanwhile, the demonstrators destroyed the property of the Oświęcim Roma and set fire to their cars and threw them into the Soła river. Roman Kwiatkowski's family, together with the other Roma in the Polish town, was forced to leave and move away from the city where they had always lived, to move abroad. The return occurred only two years later and on that occasion it was Roman Kwiatkowski himself who perceived the urgency and need to work on a cultural level for the participation of Roma in the social context at a local, national and international level: the idea of give life to the association *Stowarzyszenie Romów w Polsce* in that context and from 1992 significantly established its official headquarters in Oświęcim, where the Roma, including the Kwiatkowski family, returned to live.

In 2023, the association achieved government-level recognition; Therefore, it is recognized and supported as the official representative of Roma in Poland. It was during the period of building the association's activity that Roman Kwiatkowski established relationships with Romani Rose, one of the most well-known German Sinti activists and director of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma (born 1982). The Rose family was hit hard by the Nazi extermination: 13 of Romani Rose's relatives were murdered in the concentration camps, including his grandfather Anton who died in Auschwitz and his grandmother Lisetta who died during transport to Ravensbrück. The sons Oskar (who had managed to escape deportation right from the start) and Vinzenz (who survived Auschwitz) were saved; the two brothers continued to fight for the affirmation of the civil rights of Sinti and Roma in the post-World War II period in Germany. At an international level they worked assiduously for the recognition of the extermination of the Roma and Sinti as an element linked to racial persecution, and at a national level (until the 1980s the deportation and persecution of men, women and children which took place under the label "Gypsies" had been declassified as a social control action by the Third Reich, denying the specificity of persecution for reasons of race). Oskar Rose died in 1968, after the birth of his son Romani. Vinzenz Rose, who remained alive until 1996, wanted to build the first monument dedicated to the memory of Sinti and Roma within the section of Birkenau reserved for "gypsy" prisoners. He managed to follow up this project in 1974, paying with his own money for the construction of the monument which

still stands in the BIIe sector of Birkenau and which reproduces the wall of one of the barracks in which Sinti and Roma lived, imprisoned between 1943 and 1944 Auschwitz II. Romani, son of Oskar and nephew of Vinzenz, organized and took part in the public demonstrations that were carried out by the German Sinti for the institutional recognition of their own extermination, in order to be able to officially declare, starting from 1980, that it had been a policy of racial persecution: among the best-known demonstrations, the one that took place on Good Friday 1980, when twelve Sinti began a hunger strike at the memorial site of the former Dachau concentration camp (the Dachau concentration camp, the first to be built in 1933 in Nazi Germany, it was immediately a place of imprisonment of the German Sinti - the Sinti immediately lost the German citizenship with the promulgation of the Nuremberg laws), as they were considered dangerous asocials to be kept under control (the specific theories of racial inferiority on the category “gypsies” were developed in 1936).

The strike turned into a key event for the Sinti and Roma civil rights movement in Germany. The public protest action received particular weight thanks to the participation of concentration camp survivors Jakob Bamberger, Hans Braun and Franz Wirbel. Romani Rose intervened with a speech projected onto the present, recalling the past of death in the very place where the Memorial reconstructed by Vinzenz inside Birkenau is located. It is in memory of that speech held in 1980 that on Good Friday of each year, in a place that was the site of extermination, what the Sinti and Roma call a “hymn to life and peace in the present” is celebrated. Please note that the “*Landfahrerordnung*”¹⁰ (Nomads Ordinance) remained valid in Bavaria until 1970; this had limited the fundamental rights of Sinti and Roma for decades in terms of housing policies, education and participation in public life. The Bavarian criminal police had continued to record the names, fingerprints and personal data of Roma and Sinti from all over Germany during the post-war period. This information was in some cases added to files already created during the Nazi period on each Sinti or Roma individual present in the area and the information contained therein was often used to deny compensation to Sinti and Roma survivors of the

¹⁰ https://www.ifz-muenchen.de/heftarchiv/1997_4_3_margalis.pdf (Last access: August, 2024)

concentration camps who officially requested it. The strikers also tried to find out where these files were located. Their protest triggered a widespread wave of public solidarity and marked a turning point in the public perception of the minority.

About one hundred domestic and foreign media reported the events in Dachau. Eventually, the regional government publicly admitted that it was facing discrimination against Sinti and Roma. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Interior stated that the individual files of the Bavarian criminal police had been destroyed at the very beginning of the 1970s. It is on the basis of the results progressively obtained from this process of building rights and participation underway in the thirty years following the end of the Second World War in Germany, that the subsequent international relationships were born between Roman Kwiatkowski and Romani Rose who found themselves in collaborate in the annual celebrations in memory of the extermination of Sinti and Roma, but which have had the ability to project a concrete commitment to the construction and defense of civil rights in the present. It is through these reference figures present within the Roma communities and who belong to the generation of the children of the deportees, that the need to link the past of Auschwitz to the present of Oświęcim is clearly expressed, as well as the history of persecution that characterized Dachau, with the most recent events that made it a place for claiming rights in the present.

Through places and their complete historicization (between present and past) the valorization of the historical narrative can also be resumed through the narrative links between different generations: in the case of Sinti and Roma, this process has stopped, because (we will see it in some passages of this book) there are Sinti and Roma communities in Europe who, placed in conditions of extreme denial of rights and marginalization, have not been able to perceive themselves as a fundamental mechanism of community memory: some young people who took part in the TRACER project did not know anything about Auschwitz in relation to its own people nor the subsequent struggles for recognition that characterized the Roma of Europe. It is naturally not a personal responsibility of the younger generations, but the effect of the marginalization and centuries-old keeping at a distance that these people have suffered. In the meantime, the majority culture has not perceived the history of Sinti and Roma as an element of a common

history to be recovered, defended, preserved and made to germinate. The objective of reversing this process implies a necessary historicization of historical events, so that attention and interest can be reactivated for a historical narrative that had been destroyed by the conditions of extreme marginalization and keeping at a distance suffered by communities.

4. Objects as witnesses between past and present

In the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, the Collections Department has at its disposal a tool capable of speaking, alongside witnesses, with an equally “audible” voice: the objects.

The idea that a complex of assets, as evidence of the history of a place and material repository of the memories of a past shared by those who inhabit it, is the object of a public interest directed at its identification, conservation and transmission to future generations, it has progressively established itself in Europe in the modern era¹¹.

To deal with the memory of the Nazi and fascist genocide, however, it is necessary to go beyond the simple definition of cultural heritage, since this very particular heritage is made up of goods which, studied as a whole, give life to the concept of *mass objects* for the first time. This conception is in fact exclusively attributable to the objects found in the warehouses of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp after its liberation and was born precisely in this historical moment. These are objects that can be divided into categories (shoes, suitcases, pots...) found in large quantities, recorded as a whole and measured in cubic meters or by weight, and therefore not as individual pieces.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was designed by the former deportees themselves to respond to the need to exhibit their personal possessions as they were found, piled one on top of the other, like a large shapeless body that simultaneously speaks of mass extermination and of every single life lost. The quantity of certain objects tells the extermination of the millions¹², their quality and variety bring to light the

¹¹ Satta, *Patrimonio Culturale*.

¹² Historians estimate that, in Auschwitz alone, approximately 1.1 million people died during less than five years of the camp's existence. The majority, about 1 million people, were

social, economic, cultural and religious differences of the prisoners, in a narrative which, thanks to the indispensable conservation work of the Museum, is destined to never become extinct. The advantage of making memory through objects lies not only in the possibility of amplifying and making tangible the precious voice of those who have suffered the deprivation of those same goods, as the first inevitable stage of a process of dehumanization that led to death; through objects, it will be possible to continue the story even when the “era of the witness”¹³ comes to an end, and we will need to search for humanity in the thread of a story that needs practical tools to be remembered. The «traces of life and murder, of humanity and dehumanization»¹⁴ will thus be made indelible, towards a memory that does not remain “just a line in schoolbooks”, a fear that the former Auschwitz prisoner, nowadays Italian senator for life, Liliana Segre often expresses in her public speeches¹⁵.

The Auschwitz camp became the place where a real large-scale plundering of property was conducted. Before the deportation, the prisoners (mostly Jews, in this case) were usually informed that they would reach a new place of settlement and were allowed to carry luggage containing clothes, personal effects, objects of daily use, materials and specialist tools. After arriving at the camp, they had to leave their luggage on the ramp (*Judenrampe*¹⁶); and their clothes, immediately before entering the gas chamber.

Jews. The second largest group, 70 to 75,000, were Poles; and the third largest, around 20,000, Roma and Sinti. About 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war and 10 to 15,000 prisoners of other ethnicities (including Czechs, Belarusians, Yugoslavians, French, Germans and Austrians) also died there. (Data from the *The number of victims* section of the website www.auschwitz.org, last access: July 2024).

¹³ Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin*.

¹⁴ Cywiński, introduction.

¹⁵ Senator Liliana Segre has repeatedly expressed in her speeches the fear that the Memory of the Nazi and Fascist genocide will be destined to oblivion after the death of the witnesses: «In the next fifty years, maybe a hundred, when we are all dead, there will be just one line in a history book and it will be because our children will still talk. Then not even that», see Erica Manna, *Liliana Segre, the bitter warning about the Shoah: "In a hundred years there won't even be a line in the history books"* available online at: https://genova.repubblica.it/cronaca/2023/11/24/news/liliana_segre_lamaro_monito_sulla_shoah_tra_centanni_sui_libri_di_storia_non_ci_sara_neppure_una_riga-421118323/ (last access: July 2024).

¹⁶ The *Judenrampe* (“Jewish Ramp”) was a railway branch that stopped about 1 km away from the entrance to Auschwitz Birkenau. Active between the spring of 1942 and mid-May

The confiscated belongings in good conditions or of high quality were then transported to the warehouses called Canada¹⁷, waiting to be sent to Germany and destined for the civilian population or for German institutions and organizations¹⁸.

The confiscation of assets is, in fact, part of the conception of the “Holocaust”¹⁹ as the fruit of modernity²⁰: a modern society that loses control over the mechanisms of industrialization, which made it so powerful and admirable. The Holocaust bears witness to an «advancement of civilization»²¹ in a double sense: with the “final solution” (*Endlösung*), the industrial potential and technological competence enhanced by our civilization reached new heights in successfully coping with a task of unprecedented; furthermore, always with the “final solution”, our society revealed to us a previously unexpected capacity, so much so that we had to admit that we had seriously underestimated the true potential of the material progress produced²².

[Auschwitz] was also an extension of the modern factory system. Instead of producing goods, it used human beings as raw material and churned out death as the final product, with the daily quantities carefully reported on the managers’ reports. The chimneys, the very symbol of the modern factory system,

1944, it was then replaced by the new railway ramp, which led directly into the camp. It was called this way because from 1942 the 90% of the prisoners who reached Birkenau were Jews, even though the ramp was used for all categories destined for Auschwitz II.

¹⁷ The name of the Canada warehouses recalls an idea of wealth, in reference to a country considered rich in public opinion; unlike the warehouses in Mexico (considered a poor country), in which low-value goods were temporarily stored and then disposed of. Clothes, for example, were burned to minimize the risk of the possible spread of typhoid or other epidemic diseases.

¹⁸ Lachendro, *Auschwitz after the liberation*.

¹⁹ Here the term “Holocaust” is inserted to faithfully report the translation contained in Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. The historian Giovanni Gozzini (Gozzini, *La strada per Auschwitz*) underlines that the term is used improperly to talk about Nazi extermination. On page 4, he recalls that “holocaust” indicates «the widespread practice among pastoral peoples of antiquity of offering a sacrificial victim to the deity by burning it completely in the fire as a sign of thanks or reconciliation. The problem is that this sacralizing meaning, increasingly massively used since the end of the 1950s to indicate the extermination carried out by Nazi Germany, is in reality completely absent in the Hebrew term of which it should be the translation: *Shoah*, “destruction”. It is therefore an improper and not insignificant terminological deviation, which tends to relegate the extermination to the realm of the inexplicable».

²⁰ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

²¹ Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History*.

²² Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

spewed out the acrid smoke produced by the combustion of human flesh. The perfectly organized railway network of modern Europe transported a new kind of raw material to the factories, as it did other materials. In the gas chambers the victims breathed toxic vapors generated by prussic acid tablets, produced by the advanced German chemical industry. Engineers designed the crematoria, administrators created a bureaucratic system that functioned with a fervor and efficiency that more backward nations would have envied. Even the overall project itself was a reflection of the modern scientific spirit gone astray. What we witnessed was nothing less than a massive social engineering project²³.

The history of Auschwitz is certainly not only the fruit of the fit of unstable and cruel minds, but rather - as Helen Fein²⁴ reflects - the unique but fully determined product of a particular concatenation of social and psychological factors, which led to a temporary disappearance of grip normally exercised by the civilization of human behavior²⁵.

And in this plan, it is not difficult to understand why everything was functional to the Nazi (death) industry, even the possessions of that “human material”.

When analyzing shoes, for example, it is rare to find some that still have the sole: wood was one of the most requested materials by German industry, so the shoes found in warehouses were generally without them.

Although much material was reused to support the Nazi industrialization process, or confiscated by the Red Army after the liberation of the camp (the creation of the Museum was not thought of immediately), the numbers of objects found are in any case very high and, as the director of the Collections Department Elżbieta Cajzer says, «they reflect the dimensions of the tragedy»²⁶: approximately 95.000 individual objects / 80 cubic meters / 2.550 kg.

Going more specifically:

²³ Feingold, *How Unique is the Holocaust?*

²⁴ Fein, *Accounting for Genocide*.

²⁵ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*.

²⁶ Cajzer, *Museum Collections*.

c. 40 cubic meters of shoes; c. 3,800 suitcases, of which 2,100 with individual labels, names, surnames, dates of birth, addresses of the owners; more than 12,000 kitchen utensils (bowls, cups, pots); 470 prostheses and orthoses; 397 prisoner uniforms (now associated with the deprivation of humanity in the reality of the camp); 246 *talled*; c. 4,100 works of art (of which 2,000 created in the camp during its operation), as well as many other objects related to both the deportations and camp life. [...] The catalog of collections is not closed; still, even after several decades after the liberation, we have new acquisitions, donations from descendants of the victims, objects found in the areas of the former camps. The history of the place is still alive and every object, even the smallest, consists of an inseparable part²⁷.

The director explains that families prefer to donate the few remaining possessions of their loved ones to the Museum out of «the desire to provide them (family heirlooms) with adequate care», with the awareness that certain objects have a particular need to be preserved in an appropriate manner and, above all, that such small objects only at the Museum «have the opportunity to speak about the tragedy of the victims with a clear, audible and solid voice»²⁸.

Together with the documents, the objects found in the camp after the liberation served the National Special Commission of the Soviet Union (in charge of investigating the facts committed by the Nazi invaders) as evidence of the crime. Their voice then began to have resonance with the opening of the Museum. The exhibition immediately traced the way in which these objects were found in the various warehouses (in the attic of the *Aufnahmegebäude*, the building where prisoners were received as soon as they arrived at the Auschwitz I camp, located a few tens of meters to the right of the main gate with the writing “*Arbeit macht frei*”; or in the blocks of the so-called *Lagererweiterung*, the extension of the camp, a few hundred meters north of Auschwitz I)²⁹.

It is no coincidence that the Museum still chooses to use the same “mass” exhibition today: the objects speak and tell collective but also very singular stories; however, the choice of how to make them speak is in the hands of the institutions. From the extermination of the Polish

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Lachendro, *Auschwitz after the liberation*.

population to the emphasis on the *Shoah*, to the attention, today, for all categories of victims without distinction: the narrative through objects has been carefully selected depending on the historical eras, but the concept of “mass objects” has always remained in all the variations that the Museum has foreseen. Whatever the motivation (as a reminder of the quantity of victims, to be faithful to how the belongings were discovered), displaying the objects in this way means making them “shout”, with a direct, shocking and effective communication.

Alongside the voice, there are also silences. Certain categories of objects were not found inside the camp warehouses, and this inevitably affected the narrative of a long-forgotten part of history. The typical objects of the tradition of the Roma and Sinti people have never been found. Yet there was even a camp created specifically to host them, the *Zigeunerfamilienlager*³⁰, in which Roma and Sinti families lived together, not separated by gender or age. SS doctor Josef Mengele had his laboratory on the grounds of the *Zigeunerlager*. He carried out medical experiments on twins, people with dwarfism, irises of different colors or skin tumors (so-called *gamz*); but he was also particularly interested in attesting the “racial physical characteristics” of Roma and Sinti, to note their inferiority compared to the Aryan race, and the variation in the color of their skin according to their different origins, so much so that he commissioned the painter Dinah Babbit to portray them in color (black and white photography was not useful for his purposes).

«I remember very well the gypsy in the portrait *Zigeuner Mischling aus Frankreich* [*French mixed-race gypsy*] (left half profile of a gypsy with a blue kerchief on her head, inventory no. PMO-I-1-111). She was discouraged because her two-month-old baby had died in the camp. She suffered from stomach problems and the bread from the camp was bad for her. I managed to get additional rations of white bread»³¹.

³⁰Opened in February 1943, Roma and Sinti families from many countries were imprisoned in the *Zigeunerfamilienlager* (“Gypsy” families camp), in particular from the territories of Germany and Austria, from the Protectorates of Bohemia and Moravia and from occupied Poland. The camp was overcrowded and hunger and poor hygienic conditions prevailed. On August 2nd, 1944, the camp was liquidated and approximately four thousand people died in the gas chambers.

³¹ Testimony by Dinah Babbit, contained in Kapralski, Martyniak and Talewicz-Kwiatkowska, *Voices of Memory*, 44-45.

Babbit's paintings are the only tangible evidence (besides the documentation that sees them registered as *Zigeuner* – “gypsies”) of the presence of this population in the camp. Having a typical Sinti scarf, a colorful Roma skirt, would probably have meant talking about the Roma and Sinti genocide long before the 1980s. And this silence has consequences in today's society, in which knowledge about the persecution and extermination of this population still struggles to reach the majority of people and, consequently, the processes of hatred towards them are slow to be deconstructed.

A “silence imposed”³² by the “condition of failure to de-fascistize” post-war Italy, but also by a certain absence of practical references, such as objects, which were able to give voice to the memory of a forgotten people, who instead was the protagonist of important forms of resistance, both partisan and internal to the concentration and extermination camps³³. The history of places becomes a useful training tool for direct participation in multicultural contexts.

Bibliography

- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford: John Wiley and Sons, 1991.
- Bravi, Luca. *Preface*. In Nencioni, Chiara. *A forza di essere vento. La persecuzione di rom e sinti nell'Italia fascista*, Pisa: ETS, 2024.
- Cajzer, Elżbieta. *Museum Collections*. In Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Ed.). *Zachować autentyczność (To preserve authenticity). The Conservation of Museum Collections and Archival Materials*, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim: Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, 2021.
- Cywiński, Piotr M. A. “introduction by the director of the Auschwitz Birkenau Museum”. In Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Ed.). *Zachować autentyczność (To preserve authenticity). The Conservation of Museum Collections and Archival Materials*, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim: Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, 2021.
- D. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, Holt, New York, 1990.

³² Bravi, *Preface*.

³³ On 16 May 1944, the Sinti and Roma of the *Zigeunerlager* of Birkenau organized a real revolt against the guards, responsible for liquidating that specific sector of the camp. See the description of the events of May 16, 1944 in D. Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*.

- Feingold, Henry L. *How Unique is the Holocaust?*. In Grobman, Alex and Landes David. *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust*. Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Centre, 1983, 399-400.
- Gozzini, Giovanni. *La strada per Auschwitz. Documenti e interpretazioni sullo sterminio nazista*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2004.
- Hancock, Ian. *The pariah Syndrome. An account of gypsy slavery and persecution*. Ann Arbor: Karoma publisher, 1987.
- Kapralski, Sławomir, Maria Martyniak and Joanna Talewicz-Kwiatkowska. *Voices of Memory. Roma in Auschwitz, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum*. Oświęcim: Auschwitz Birkenau State Museum, 2011.
- Lachendro, Jacek. *Auschwitz after the liberation*. Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2018.
- Lennon, John J. and Malcolm Foley. *Dark tourism. The attraction of death and disasters*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Rubenstein, Richard L. *The Cunning of History*. New York: Harper, 1978.
- Satta, G. *Patrimonio Culturale*. Bologna: il Mulino, 2013.
- Stone, Philip R. "A Dark Tourism Spectrum: Towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions". In *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal* 54 (2006), n. 2: 145-160.
- Wiewiorka, Annette. *L'Ère du témoin*. Paris: Plon, 1998.

Itinerari e dialoghi di storie dell'educazione
Diretta da G. Bandini, G. Seveso, C. Sindoni - Open Access

Ultimi volumi pubblicati:

TIZIANA PIRONI (a cura di), *Maria Montessori tra passato e presente*. La diffusione della sua pedagogia in Italia e all'estero (E-book).

Questo 
LIBRO

 ti è piaciuto?

Comunicaci il tuo giudizio su:
www.francoangeli.it/opinione



VUOI RICEVERE GLI AGGIORNAMENTI
SULLE NOSTRE NOVITÀ
NELLE AREE CHE TI INTERESSANO?



ISCRIVITI ALLE NOSTRE NEWSLETTER

SEGUICI SU:



FrancoAngeli

La passione per le conoscenze

Copyright © 2024 by FrancoAngeli s.r.l., Milano, Italy. ISBN 9788835168393

FrancoAngeli

a strong international commitment

Our rich catalogue of publications includes hundreds of English-language monographs, as well as many journals that are published, partially or in whole, in English.

The **FrancoAngeli**, **FrancoAngeli Journals** and **FrancoAngeli Series** websites now offer a completely dual language interface, in Italian and English.

Since 2006, we have been making our content available in digital format, as one of the first partners and contributors to the **Torrossa** platform for the distribution of digital content to Italian and foreign academic institutions. **Torrossa** is a pan-European platform which currently provides access to nearly 400,000 e-books and more than 1,000 e-journals in many languages from academic publishers in Italy and Spain, and, more recently, French, German, Swiss, Belgian, Dutch, and English publishers. It regularly serves more than 3,000 libraries worldwide.

Ensuring international visibility and discoverability for our authors is of crucial importance to us.

FrancoAngeli



torrossa
Online Digital Library

This book seeks to reflect theoretically and empirically on the process and results of the European project TRACER (Transformative Roma Art and Culture for European Remembrance), financed by CERV (Citizen, Equality, Rights and Value) Eu programme. The main protagonists have been young people, mainly Roma and Sinti, living in different places and countries of Europe, with their own history that anchors them to different communities, but joined by belonging to discriminated minorities and to a transnational people who recognise themselves as a community characterised by diaspora. The project's goal has combined historical knowledge of the genocide that occurred during World War II with an analysis of the construction of prejudice and the role that racism has had on the collective consciousness of a modern society. The methodology used is participatory action-research in public history educational context, a process able to make the protagonists aware of a path of knowledge, promoting training actions towards other people and leaving traces of memory in the present through artistic events.

The volume presents the theoretical foundations and practical activities that refer to the public history as a tool for inclusion, participation and social recognition of European communities representing minorities in their countries: a multidisciplinary and participatory action-research aimed at building active citizenship in formal and informal educational contexts.

Luca Bravi is researcher at the Department of Educational Sciences, Languages, Interculturality, Literature and Psychology of the University of Florence. He teaches History of Educational Processes and History of Communication.

Maria José Casa-Nova is professor and researcher in the area of Sociology of Inequalities, Department of Social Sciences of Education, Institute of Education, University of Minho.

Maria Alfredo Moreira is professor and researcher in the area of Didactics and Teacher Education, at the Institute of Education, University of Minho.

Maria Teresa Tagliaventi is a researcher at the Department of Education Studies of University of Bologna, where she teaches Sociology of education, Welfare state and Social policy.