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Erika Thurner. *National Socialism and Gypsies in Austria.* Translated by Gilya Gerda Schmidt. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. xx + 218 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8173-5329-2.

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Measuring Suffering: Concentration Camps, "Gypsy Camps," and the Ethics of Holocaust Memory

Early in her book,[1] Erika Thurner refers briefly to a suit brought by a Romani, or Gypsy, family in 1953 seeking acknowledgment from the West German government that the two camps in which they had been incarcerated during the Second World War were equivalent to concentration camps, and therefore qualified them for reparations as Holocaust victims.[2] Although Thurner doesn't tell us so directly, the claim was evidently denied, for three years later a lower court was requesting a review of the upper court's position that the camps had not been "concentration camp-like institutions" (p. 22), and today neither of the two camps in question (Lackenbach and Salzburg-Maxglan/Leopoldskron) appears on the Bundesminsterium der Justiz's official list of 1,634 recognized Nazi concentration camps.[3]

This incident is revealing–both of the plight of Europe's Romani population during the Holocaust and since, and also of the weakness and potential strength of the book itself. The history Thurner reveals here is occasionally shocking, though not so much because of the accounts of the Nazis' brutal treatment of the Romani, which, in spite of the revelatory tone of the book, is now generally well recognized within academia. More surprising and potentially much more important are her scattered references to the continuing discrimination against this minority after the end of the war, including the efforts by state organs and scholars alike to deny that what the Romani experienced, lamentable though it may be, should be considered part of or equivalent to the Holocaust.

A study of that post-Holocaust Romani experience would have been an important and provocative contribution to the field. The University of Alabama Press's decision to bring out this translation, fifteen years after the original German publication, and then reissue it another eight years after that, with minimal revisions and little acknowledgment of the more recent progress of the scholarly discussion is, however, rather odd. Reading this book now is a little like using a DOS computer today: while one can appreciate the boldness of its pioneering research and still use it profitably despite its sometimes clunky style, it is for the most part overshadowed by the transformations in the business of the past few decades.

At the time Thurner's book was first published in 1983, the Romani experience at the hands of the National Socialist regime was in fact a badly neglected subject, almost entirely unknown within the public memory, and, as she complains in her introduction, "an insignificant, marginal theme" and a "particularly taboo" subject even in the academic literature (p. xv). Thurner, a historian and political scientist at the Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck and a forceful advocate for Romani rights in Austria, seeks to fill the void on the fate of Austria's Romani population under the Nazi regime, focusing particularly on the histories of the "Gypsy camps" at Salzburg-Maxglan/Leopoldskron and Lackenbach, which operated from 1939-43 and 1940-45, respectively. The largest portion of the book is devoted to a meticulous reconstruction of the everyday functioning of *Zigeunerlager* Lackenbach, in Burgenland, on the basis of a trove of documents which she personally rescued from an abandoned, soon-to-be-demolished administration building.

But what Thurner aims to document goes beyond the simple acknowledgment that the Romani too were victims of Nazi policy, repeatedly putting forward assertions of the essential equivalence of their persecution with that of the Jews. Recognizing that the Gypsy camps were administered separately from those holding Jews (by the *Kriminalpolizei* rather than the SS), and responding to the courts' and many scholars' rebuff of victims' claims that Gypsy camps were equivalent to concentration camps,

she declares straightforwardly that "the theme of this study will be the reality behind the benign-sounding designation 'camp"' (p. xx).

At the end of her painstaking examination of Camp Lackenbach, Thurner acknowledges that "several criteria that are typical signposts of concentration camps were not applicable" (p. 100). She describes, for example, how in the Gypsy camps families were generally kept together, babies were born, normal civilian clothes were worn, and prisoners could be granted permission to leave for "short vacations," though, she maintains, only "infrequently" and "mostly to regulate family affairs" (pp. 91-92). But if many of the conditions might appear to have been milder than the popular image of the "normal" Nazi concentration camp, Thurner hastens to point out that policies in other categories of camp were also more subject to inconsistencies and exceptions than popular memory imagines, though the only example she offers is the temporary policy in 1943, due to a shortage of supplies, allowing some non-Romani inmates of Auschwitz to wear civilian clothing. She reminds the reader too, referring to those inmates of Lackenbach who were permitted to live and work with their employers outside the camp, that "these 'privileged individuals' also had to remember constantly that their life was forcibly regulated and that they themselves could not make any independent decisions" (p. 80).

Peppering her descriptions with phrases like "misery and filth" (p. 43), "conditions unfit for human beings" (p. 59), "horrors" (p. 95), and "reign of terror" (p. 100), Thurner seems sometimes rather too intent on making sure that we understand that the Gypsy camps were not nice places and that the Romani were indeed victims of Nazi racism. She assures us, for example, that in those cases of "voluntary requests for admission" to Lackenbach, "[t]he assumption that these people were not offered an alternative surely must be considered" (p. 59). And in the chapter on the sterilization of and medical experimentation on Romani at Dachau and Auschwitz, she spends a good deal of space rather oddly trying to prove that these were indeed forced, not voluntary. It is hard to imagine anyone today supposing that the authorities in any type of Nazi camp were simply supplying requested services, rather than imposing their will on a cowed population. Still, her sensitivity is no doubt due, at least in part, to the unwillingness of so many to see the Romani other than as being themselves somehow to blame for their plight.

While some of the specific details of the conditions and functioning of the Gypsy camps were different from the typical concentration camp, in the final analysis, Thurner argues, they fulfilled the same function for the Nazi regime, and had the same effect on the victim population. It is not merely how bad the camps were, she maintains, whether they were run by the SS or the *Kripo*, or whether the victims were gassed or merely worked to death, starved, or subject to intentional epidemics, but rather why a given population was incarcerated and how the group's removal from society fit into the Nazis' larger worldview that is most significant. Among the grounds for differentiating between Romani and Jewish victimization presented by the German courts, and also many scholars, is the argument that while the Jews were the victims of a racist hallucination that saw them as biologically dangerous, the Romani were the objects of a stereotype that saw them as "asocial," targeted thus for a putative behavior whereas the Jews were targeted simply "because they existed."[4] While it may be similarly reprehensible, the logic of the argument goes, the Nazis' purpose in deporting and killing the Romani was not to eliminate them as such, but rather to solve the problem to society that they were believed to represent. But Thurner rejects such an either-or line of reasoning, arguing compellingly that the racial and behavioral stereotypes were in fact inextricably intertwined. "The incarceration was first justified on the basis of the Gypsies' asocial character, and they were stamped as asocial on the basis of their race" (p. 43).

Urging us to look beyond appearances to the larger picture, Thurner argues, somewhat less persuasively, that the Nazi leadership had a longer-term plan which foresaw the complete extermination of the Romani. It may be true, for example, that for the Romani the Nazis' hierarchy of racial value worked almost exactly opposite to the way it did for the Jews (it was the Romani *Mischlinge* who were considered the greater biological and social danger, while "pure Gypsies" were deemed less of a threat, and even, by virtue of their "Aryan" origins, potentially valuable). And it is similarly true that until at least late 1942, SS chief Heinrich Himmler maintained the fantasy of preserving a number of "racially pure Gypsies" on large reservations and allowing them "to roam … [and] live according to their customs and traditions" (according to the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* decree, cited by Thurner, p. 15). But while these kinds of facts are made much of by proponents of the Jewish uniqueness argument like Guenter Lewy and Steven Katz, Thurner, writing before both of them, dismisses the logic of their argument.[5] She points out that Nazi policy even towards the Jews was not always as unsparing as the letter of the law would suggest; and indeed there is ample record of Jews

who survived the Holocaust because of exceptions and/or inconsistencies in the Nazis' execution of their policies. In just the same way, she argues, Himmler's delusional passion for "pure Gypsies" was an exception, at odds with the rest of the regime's leadership–indeed "only a farce" (p. 15)–and should not distract us from the cumulative end result of the state's policies towards Romani, the central goal of which "was not only the racial segregation of the Gypsies but also their complete annihilation" (p. 16).

Acknowledging that the Romani were perceived as a lesser danger to the *Volk* than were the Jews, she nevertheless declares that as a social and racial "outsider group," they, like the Jews and the incurably disabled, were "included under the category 'life unworthy of living' from the beginning" (p. 8). While at times she seems to suggest that it was more the exigencies of war that caused the alignment of Jewish and Romani policies, her main line of argumentation is that it was the Nazis' underlying racialist worldview and goals that led them inexorably to rescind any initial exemptions and increasingly include Romani in the deportations, internments, and murders. Although she never makes clear whether the phrase is to be found in the original German documents, she refers repeatedly to the Nazis' planned "final solution" for the Romani. The "long-term solution to the Gypsy question," she declares, required both practical and ideological preparation, calling for cautious and deceptive measures, which nevertheless "can be seen as steps to the realization of the planned general solution" (p. 13). Whatever the ideological differences in their early racial valuation, she argues, by the spring of 1942, the Romani "were legally completely equal to the Jews" (p. 17).

Presented by Thurner as a self-evident proposition, the notion of the equivalence of Romani and Jewish treatment during the Holocaust is today the subject of a passionate, and sometimes rancorous, debate, dividing even those specialists, like Michael Zimmermann and Guenter Lewy, who have done so much since Thurner's book to establish the complete record of Romani persecution by the Third Reich.[6] Thurner wrote the book well before the outbreak of the *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s which touched off the debates, and it is clear by the way she approaches the issue that she could not even imagine that it would ever be seriously debated by scholars (as opposed to jurists attempting to escape reparations payments). Yet, as unobjectionable as that may have been in 1983, it makes the book problematic today, and even in 1998 when the translation was first published. The issue that is the primary focus of Thurner's strident and sometimes purplish argumentation–that the Romani were in fact also victims of the Nazis–has since the first publication of her book been presented more thoroughly and in a more graceful style by scholars like Zimmermann and Lewy. And at the same time, the issue that now dominates discussion of the Romani in the Holocaust is quickly, almost offhandedly asserted, without much in the way of support. It belongs among the oddities of this book that in the otherwise flattering foreword by Michael Berenbaum, (director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's Holocaust Research Institute), he flatly rejects this central piece of her argument, suggesting that there may be "indications of parallels … but Thurner does not demonstrate a consistency of policy and fanatical determination in the anti-Gypsy policy that characterized German efforts against the Jews" (pp. ix-x).

All of this makes for some distinctly odd and unsatisfying reading, and it points up again the strangeness of Alabama's publication of this translation after so much time. Although the translator, Gilya Gerda Schmidt, assures in her introduction that the book and its bibliography have been "expanded and updated" (p. xii), the book remains silent on the current issues and debates, and the bibliography includes only a few works published after the early 1980s. The one obvious revision takes the form of a rather perplexing addendum tacked onto the end of chapter 3 on the Gypsy camp in Salzburg, which, on the basis of new sources and additional interviews, offers "a somewhat different picture of the Salzburg camp(s)" from that which has just been presented (p. 28).

Still, despite these deficiencies, and a particularly inelegant translation, Thurner's effort merits respect as a pioneering work, anticipating and setting the stage for later work by other scholars. And even if that later work provides a more complete picture of the Nazi regime's treatment of the Romani, Thurner's description of that history in Austria does occasionally offer some interesting and eye-opening details. Unfortunately, the most eye-opening are the details not followed up on: most particularly the scattered references to the continuing discrimination faced by Romani since the end of the war. Those references, pursued and developed, could add a great deal to the current debate about the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust. Indeed, they could fundamentally change it, pointing up how deeply misguided most of the argumentation is.

Proponents of the uniqueness argument typically respond to charges that they are minimizing the suffering of the Nazis' other victims by maintaining that the issue

is not the degree of suffering of the victims or the degree of the immorality of the perpetrators' actions: "At stake, rather, is the accuracy of the historical record." "What makes the murder of the Jews unique," insists Guenter Lewy, "is not the numbers but the intent of the murderers. Only in the case of the Jews did the Nazis seek to annihilate physically every man, woman and child".[7]

Lewy, Katz, Berenbaum and other defenders of this position won't find very persuasive Thurner's suggestion that, whatever differences there may have been in the Nazis' delusions about the Jewish vs. Romani "threat," both groups were intended in the long run for a "final solution" of complete obliteration as ethnic groups. The catalogue of policy differences that they can cite might well seem to overwhelm her blithe assertions of long-term intent. But while those policy differences can be cited as facts in the defense of "historical accuracy," the question of the equivalence or non-equivalence of Jewish and Romani experience in the Holocaust is not an issue of fact, but rather one of interpretation, which cannot be decided "objectively," by the discovery of facts alone.

John Roth, who declares himself persuaded by the argument of the historical uniqueness of the Nazis' persecution of the Jews, has nevertheless argued eloquently that, "[a]ny debate about the Holocaust's uniqueness or about the relation of the Holocaust to other genocides is worthwhile just to the extent that it never loses sight of the fact that *ethical reasons* are the most important ones for studying these dark chapters in human history." Reminding us that "historical understanding is scarcely an end in itself," and invoking comments by survivors Elie Wiesel and Charlotte Delbo, Roth trenchantly observes that "we remember not only for the dead but perhaps even more for the living."[8] What is most significant, in other words, is not simply whether or not the past has been "accurately" recorded, but what it is that we do with our knowledge of that past and how it impacts us today.

It is precisely on that score that Thurner's references to the Romani's postwar ordeal could have been a useful contribution to the discussion. For the simple truth is that while the memory of the Holocaust has resulted, quite rightly, in a dramatic reduction in at least open hatred of and discrimination against Jews in Europe and North America, the same cannot be said for the Romani. The Nazis' "solution to the Gypsy question," Thurner argues in the conclusion to her book, was in fact wildly successful. While large numbers of Romani did survive the Holocaust, just as large numbers of Jews did, she declares that the Nazis' Romani policies actually achieved what centuries of European persecution had not: the destruction of their group structure and core values, making any resurgence of healthy social forms and identities after the war difficult, if not impossible. And the continued social hatred and institutional discrimination against the Romani have only increased those difficulties.

Although Thurner does not make the point explicitly, it perhaps ought to be made that here is actually the one aspect where the Romani experience is not remotely equivalent to that of the Jews. While the survivors of Europe's devastated Jewish population have been able to claim reparations from Germany and see the memory of their persecution become the centerpiece of a new anti-genocide consciousness, and *de rigeur* in school curricula all across Europe and North America, the surviving Romani have instead been denied reparations, seen their status as victims of the Holocaust largely ignored or disputed, and been subject to continuing social harassment, discrimination, and violence. The slogans that can still be seen scrawled on walls, for example in Prague–*Cikáni do plynu* (Gypsies to the gas)–is chilling testimony to the isolation and hatred still faced by the Romani, over sixty years after the Holocaust.

Notes

[1]. The English version of the book under review was originally published in 1998, and reissued in 2006. The German version came out in 1983.

[2]. Today in most of the Central European region it is common, at least in academic and political circles, to refer to this population as "Roma and Sinti," the term "Gypsy" being seen by most advocates as pejorative. Since the phrase "Roma and Sinti" technically refers to only two of the largest "tribes" in that part of Europe, however, many activists prefer the more inclusive and generic term "Romani." Thurner chooses, with appropriate caveat, to use the term "Gypsy" in order to avoid confusing and/or betraying the historical record, seeing in the use of terms of more recent political correctness a danger that "the connection to the predecessors, who were persecuted as Gypsies, will be lost" (p. xix).

[3]. This list can be viewed at http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/begdv_6/anlage_6.html#Seitenanfang.

[4]. Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 225.

[5]. See also Steven T. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context, vol. 1: The Holocaust and Mass Death Before the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[6]. Zimmermann and Lewy are the authors of the two most complete and authoritative accounts of the Romani's Holocaust, even as Zimmermann asserts the historical equivalence of their fate with that of the Jews, while Lewy explicitly denies it. Zimmermann, *Rassenutopie und Genozid: Die nationalsozialistische 'Lösung der Zigeunerfrage'* (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1996), and also *Verfolgt, vertrieben, vernichtet: Die nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik gegen Sinti und Roma* (Essen: Klartext, 1989); Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies.*

[7]. Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies,* 226.

[8]. John K. Roth, "The Ethics of Uniqueness," in *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, 2nd ed., ed. Alan S. Rosenbaum (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 21-32; here 22-23, emphasis in original.

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