

# CHRONICLE

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## THE ROLE OF THE MUSEUM OF ROMA CULTURE IN BRNO

The Museum of Roma Culture in Brno was established in 1991 and since 2005 it has been a contributory organization of the Czech Republic's Ministry of Culture. Since the initial task of building collections that would document the culture and history of the Roma, the museum's activities have expanded to include another agenda aimed at the lay and professional public. The memory institution of the Roma creates a space for cultures to meet, and opens the way to discovering the roots of Roma identity. It manages and makes accessible the history of the Roma as part of world heritage. It contributes to tolerance and mutual understanding between the majority and the minority. In three decades, the scope of the museum has expanded from the city of Brno to the entire territory of the Czech Republic. It manages the Holocaust memorials to the Roma and Sinti in Lety u Písku and Hodonín u Kunštátu and plans to expand its activities to Prague, where it will open the Roma and Sinti Center in 2023.

The topic of the Roma Holocaust is an important agenda of the museum, as evidenced by last year's seminar organized in cooperation with the Israeli memory institution Yad Vashem in Brno for European graduates of the International School for Holocaust Studies in Jerusalem. The participants came from Austria, Germany and Slovakia. The seminar entitled *The Roma Genocide and its Commemoration Mirrored in Brno's Multi-ethnic Society* took place on 25–27 November 2019. The aim was to expand knowledge of the Holocaust on the genocide of Roma and Sinti. The programme of the seminar began in the early evening of the first day with a guided tour of the museum's permanent exhibition. It is presented in six halls and deals with the history of the Roma in their region of ancient India, continuing with their arrival in Europe in the eleventh century until the events of World War II and the present. The introductory exhibition presents the results of research into the early history of the Roma in the linguistic, historical and cultural fields. The continuation of the exhibition in another room provides an overview of the life of the Roma after their arrival in Europe. It pays particular attention to the nomadic crafts and professions that the Roma contributed to in medieval Europe. The next stage of the exhibition focuses on the Czechoslovak context and brings the Roma community closer to our territory from the eighteenth century to 1938. Attention is paid to music and part of the exhibition is a glimpse into a traditional residence and circus tent. The fourth room is dedicated to the Roma Holocaust in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia and Germany. He uses documents, photographs and a screening of a film with testimonies of monuments for the presentation. In the next room, the story of the community in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War unfolds. The exhibition allows you to get acquainted with the works of Romani artists and writers. This room presents the inner life of the community, its transformations until 1989 and the influence of Roma culture on the majority society. The last room creates conditions for the visitor to go through a colorful mosaic of media images showing the mutual relations between the Roma minority and the majority from 1989 to 2005. The central element of the room is a moving circle with newspaper headlines that evoke a constant transformation of current events around us.

On the second day of the seminar, Dušan Slačka, historian and curator of the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno, opened a lecture on Postwar Commemoration of Genocide of the Roma, in which he presented several memorial sites and memorials dedicated to Roma genocide in the Czech Republic. He paid special attention to the foundation of the memorial and the efforts to build a memorial on the site of the camp in Lety u Písku. The second speaker was Moritz Wein from [erinner.at](http://erinner.at), the Institute for Holocaust Education of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) in Austria. Its multilingual form provides information about the Roma and Sinti Holocaust in several European languages, including Slovak. The site provides important material on the fate of European Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust. A separate subpage is dedicated to teachers and contains a methodology manual. These are available on the main page and the handbook provides teachers with excellent advice and procedures on how to work with and communicate the topic to students.

The afternoon was marked by an educational walking tour focused on the Brno Cejl neighborhood – in the footsteps of Jews, Roma people, Czechs and Germans. The several-hour walk ended in

a remarkable synagogue on Skořepka Street in the cadastral area of Trnitá, Brno-střed. It is the only synagogue of the original four in Brno that has survived to the present day. At the same time, it is the only full-fledged synagogue in Moravia and Silesia with a rabbi and an active liturgical program. The synagogue was designed by architect Otto Eisler and built by his family construction company on behalf of the Jewish fraternity Agudas Achim in 1936. The architect was able to combine the requirements of orthodox religious regulations with the austere simplicity of a building designed in a purist architectural style. The synagogue served its purpose until 1941 and then the Nazis looted it and turned it into a warehouse. After the end of the war, it was the only one in Brno that was preserved, and the decimated Jewish community restored it. It began to be used again in the autumn of 1945. During the communist regime, the building fell into disrepair and its comprehensive reconstruction, respecting the original architectural design of Otto Eisler, was not started until 2013–2016.

The final day of the seminar was reopened by the staff of the Museum of Roma Culture, who presented the educational programmes of the museum. This was followed by an expert discussion between the present teachers moderated by Noa McKayton and Miriam Mouryc from Yad Vashem. Before the final evaluation of the seminar, the participants took part in a visit to the memorial commemorating Jewish and Roma victims in Brno. The memorial is dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust among Jews and Roma. It has the form of a black granite cube, after which water flows into a shallow pool with an inscription in Czech, Hebrew and Romani. The edges of the cube are 3.14 m in size, which, according to the author Daniel Václavík, is a clear reference to Ludolf's number, which is supposed to evoke the constantly recurring human suffering in history. The memorial is located at the centre of October 28 Square Park and its official unveiling took place on 17 September 2014. A joint tribute to the victims ended the three-day seminar and after a final evaluation in the museum, the beneficial educational event ended with an exchange of contacts and promises of further cooperation.

The Museum of Roma Culture in Brno fulfilled its role and during the seminar it became a space for cultures to meet and for getting to know a multi-ethnic society in Brno. It provided a high-quality body of knowledge about the history of the Roma and their culture. At the same time, it was a starting point for closer contact with Brno and traces of Jews and Germans in this city. Therefore, it definitely deserves attention, a possible visit and the support of its activities. Detailed information about this memory institution as well as its activities can be found on the official website: <https://www.rommuz.cz/>.

Assoc. Prof. ThDr. Peter Borza, PhD.  
Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice