## Ari Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), pp. 368.

### On Ash and Blackness: Roma Victims of the Holocaust

by *Marius Turda*

After decades of neglect, the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti peoples—sometimes referred to as the "forgotten Holocaust"—has finally captured the attention of scholars and the general public alike. This year alone, two major studies are made available in English, enriching a growing scholarship that brings forth the long history of prejudice against the Roma peoples in Europe, while at the same time offering fresh perspectives on the genocide perpetrated against them during the Second World War.[1] Outstanding work by Roma activists and organisations from across the world has also profoundly changed the nature of academic research, inducing both international collaboration[2] and the emergence of a scholarship committed to new strategies of interpretation.[3] It is imperative to

[1] Klaus-Michael Bogdal, *Europa erfindet die Zigeuner. Eine Geschichte von Faszination und Verachtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011) translated into English as *Europe and the Roma: A History of Fascination and Fear*, trans. Jefferson Chase (London: Penguin 2024) and María Sierra, *Holocausto gitano. El genocidio romaní bajo el nazismo* (Madrid: Arzalia Ediciones, 2020) translated into English as *The Roma and the Holocaust: The Romani Genocide under Nazism*, trans. Margaret Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

[2] As demonstrated by the ongoing project entitled *The Encyclopaedia of the Nazi Genocide of the Sinti and Roma in Europe* (more details here: https://encyclopaedia-gsr.eu/, accessed June 14, 2024) and the Annual Roma Conference organized by the indefatigable Magda Matache at Harvard University's *François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights*.

[3] For early attempts, see Michael Zimmermann, *Verfolgt, vertrieben, vernichtet: die nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik gegen Sinti und Roma* (Essen: Klartext, 1989); Donald Kenrick, ed., *In the Shadow of the Swastika: The Gypsies during the Second World War* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1999); Viorel Achim and Constantin Iordachi, eds, *România şi Transnistria: Problema Holocaustului. Perspective istorice şi comparative* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2004); János Bársony and Ágnes Daróczi, eds., *Pharrajimos: The Fate of the Roma During the Holocaust* (New York: International Debate Education Association, 2008). See also Anton Weiss-Wendt, ed., *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, *E Rroma Rumuniator: thaj o Holokausto. Historia, teorie, kultura* (Popeşti-Leordeni: Dykta! Publishing House, 2018). For more recent

question the long-accepted marginalisation of the Roma experience of the Holocaust.

Recently, work has been produced exploring the ramifications of race science and eugenics, providing a much-needed amendment to the perception still popular among some historians that the deportations of Roma to concentration and labour camps were not racially and eugenically motivated.[4] This view paralleled earlier interpretations which disputed the use of the term "Holocaust" to describe the Nazi genocide of the Roma.[5] To be sure, the so-called "Gypsy problem" is not commensurate with "the Jewish problem" in terms of its history, but the racial and eugenic policies which were put in place in Nazi Germany and then in a host of countries in East-Central Europe, including Hungary, Romania and the Independent State of Croatia during the late 1930s and early 1940s considered the Roma to be an "inferior," "non-white" and "foreign" race, alongside the Jews. The Roma, too, were purposefully targeted for elimination.[6]

Fortuitously, there are historians who discuss Jewish and Roma experiences of the Holocaust in relation to each other.[7] One such historian is Ari Joskowicz, whose masterful monograph, entitled *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*, was

---

studies see the journal *Critical Romani Studies:* https://crs.ceu.edu/index.php/crs, accessed June 14, 2024.

[4] Guenter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). In Romanian scholarship, this view has been promoted by historian Viorel Achim. See his "Gypsy Research and Gypsy Policy in Romania, 1920–1950," in Michael Zimmermann, ed., *Erziehung und Vernichtung. Zigeunerpolitik und Zigeunerforschung im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2007), 157-174.

[5] Sybil Milton, "Gypsies and the Holocaust," *The History Teacher* 24, no. 4 (1991): 375-387. Milton's claim that if the term Holocaust is used to describe the planned programme of extermination of the Jews, it should be applied to the Roma as well, was rejected by another prominent historian of the Holocaust, Yeduda Bauer. Yehuda Bauer and Sybil Milton, "Correspondence: Gypsies and the Holocaust," *The History Teacher* 25, no. 4 (1992): 513-521.

[6] Marius Turda and Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, "Roma and the Question of Ethnic Origin in Romania during the Holocaust," *Critical Romani Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 8-33.

[7] See, for example, Roni Stauber and Raphael Vago, eds., *The Roma: A Minority in Europe: Historical, Political and Social Perspectives* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2007); Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008); Eliyana R. Adler and Katerina Capková, eds., *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2020), and a more recent study by Hana Kubátová, "Jewish and Romani Encounters under Slovak Persecution," *Shoah: Intervention, Methods, Documentation* 10, no. 1 (2023): 95-111.

published last year.[8] The book, as the author points out in the introduction, explores the entangled ramifications of Jewish-Roma relationships from the perspective of historical memory. The aim here is to highlight the major difference that exists between how the Jews "managed to have their accounts of persecution heard and documented" and how the Roma "struggled to gain recognition of everything they had suffered and lost" (p. 2). What accounts for this discrepancy? How can we reconcile each group's specific narratives about the Holocaust?

The memory of what happened during the Holocaust is perpetually reaffirmed and re-articulated through each new listening to and reading of stories and testimonies. As aptly noted by Joskowicz, an integral part of this historical process of who is remembered as a victim of the Holocaust and how depends fundamentally on the testimonies provided by the Jews and the Roma themselves. How they recount the story of the Holocaust and the order of victimhood differ considerably. Their stories rarely intersect. While only a few Jewish survivors mention the Roma in their testimonies, admitting that they had suffered together at the hands of the Nazis, most Roma survivors describe their experience in concentration camps alongside that of the Jews. Although both groups share the narrative of lives that had been destroyed in the Holocaust, they render their stories in very different ways.

Both groups were targeted by anti-Semitism and racism, but they had different experiences of integration, assimilation and marginalisation. Before anti-Semitic laws stripped them of civil and political rights during the 1930s and turned them into the "enemies of the race," many assimilated Jews in Germany and East-Central Europe enjoyed privileged positions in society, often embracing the dominant narrative of national belonging. By the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish elites were part of the national upper classes; they enjoyed wealth and privilege. These Jews considered themselves to be not only German, Hungarian and Romanian and so on, but also superior, culturally and socially, to the Roma.

[8] Ari Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023). Joskowicz had already published two important articles on the suffering of the Roma during and after WWII in 2016. Ari Joskowicz, "Separate Suffering, Shared Archives: Jewish and Romani Histories of Nazi Persecution," *History & Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 110-140; Joskowicz, "Romani Refugees and the Postwar Order," *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 4 (2016): 760-787.

The latter's assumed "inferiority" was not questioned during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Roma too responded with similar strategies, siding with the majority against the Jews. One example, mentioned by Joskowicz as well, is that of the anti-Semitic National Christian Party in Romania, which, in 1937, attempted to attract Roma voters. There is also the example of various Roma leaders endorsing the radical nationalist programme proposed by the Legionary Movement, also in Romania during the 1930s. To be "a good Romanian" meant, at the time, to be anti-Semitic, and many Roma were hoping to be just that: "good Romanians." But some Roma anti-Semitic feelings lingered on, as mentioned by some Jewish survivors, who recounted after the war seeing German Roma in Auschwitz refusing to be treated by Jewish physicians and even displaying Nazi uniforms (p. 122). From this perspective, the relationship between Jewish and Roma prisoners was unequal and often conflictive.

It is true, however, as pointed out by Joskowicz, that both Jews and Roma were perceived by anti-Semites and racists to be intruders in the national community. The argument rested exclusively on a racial representation of their social, economic and cultural functions in society. Nomadic Roma, in particular, were always portrayed as a socially deviant group, a racial and eugenic threat; they were undesired and unwanted. The Romanian demographer and director of the Central Institute of Statistics in Bucharest, Sabin Manuilă, highlighted this important point in an article he published in 1940. The Jews, he noted, were, "the most important social problem, the most sensitive political problem and most serious economic problem of Romania." But they "[did] not constitute a racial problem as racial mixing between Romanians and Jews occurs very rarely." The Roma, on the other hand, represented "the most important, sensitive and serious racial problem of Romania."[9]

It is therefore important to understand how both groups were perceived by the ethnic majority but also how, in turn, they perceived each other's position in society. This is evident in the interviews collected by sociologist Gabrielle Tyrnauer for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies in 1991. As remarked by Joskowicz, Tyrnauer was perceived by the Roma interlocutors less as

---

[9] Sabin Manuilă, "Problema rassială a României', *România Nouă* 7, no. 41 (1940): 5.

a "fellow outsider" and more "as someone with a fundamentally different role in society—in other words, as a Jew with power" (p. 6). This sense of difference between Jews and Roma is historically created. Throughout the interwar period, ethnic nationalists braided the concepts of race, "blood" and belonging into the political discourse, defining who belonged to the nation and who did not. This biologisation of national belonging also brought with it depictions of the ideal racial community which was considered to be white, European and Christian and whose eugenic health and future were allegedly compromised by the presence of "foreign," "non-white" minorities such as the Jews and the Roma.

The insidious primitivizing and orientalising of the Jews and the Roma were intertwined with fantasies of miscegenation which would inform programmes of ethnic cleansing during the early 1940s across Nazi-occupied Europe. At the time, many anti-Semitic and anti-Roma caricatures depicted the Jews and the Roma as "Black." These descriptions were never only about the colour of the skin. The repeated reference to contrasting skin tones between Jews, Roma and the rest of the population was also meant to signify the ontological limitations of ethnic assimilation and to highlight the overwhelming force of whiteness as the dominant ideological underpinning of European ethno-nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism. Blackness was not simply a racial descriptor of physical difference, for it was seen by European as a way of asserting their superiority over the "darker races," both outside and within their societies. Many assimilated Jews and Roma, however, were undistinguishable from the other members of the population, lacking any visible signs of "Blackness." Yet, their racial difference was not difficult to convey as it relied on long-established racial traditions of describing different groups of people according to their religious beliefs, cultural achievements, political acumen and moral character. Within this hierarchical system, the Jews, notes Joskowicz, "viewed themselves as people who occupied a fundamentally different place in society than did the Sinti and Roma in their environment" (p. 25). Such attitudes explain perhaps why no attempt to build a platform of solidarity between the Jews and Roma emerged before and during the Holocaust. Forms of persecution against German Roma and Sinti were already introduced in the 1930s. Prior to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, authorities in Cologne "began moving Roma to camps" (p. 25), soon followed by other cities in Germany including Frankfurt am Main, Essen and Dortmund. Yet, German Jews, "likely

perceived [these measures] as other Europeans did, as extensions of long-standing policies toward unwanted populations by welfare authorities, municipalities, and state security forces" (p. 25). At the time, the Jews projected the German majority's fears of "unwanted populations" onto the Roma, associating themselves with the official response to the perceived threat of "inferior others." This attitude, which implicitly privileged the Jews, also provided the normative frame through which their encounters with Roma peoples in concentration camps were explained later.

One of the greatest merits of Joskowicz's book is to provide examples of what can only be described as "antigypsyism." This form of anti-Roma racism worked at a discursive level, as a trope and as symbol of mistreatment. Simon Dubnow, a Jewish-Russian historian and writer, used the expression "behandelt wie a zigeiner" (treated like a Gypsy), when referring to anti-Semitic abuse. It also worked as a form of cultural appropriation of the Roma style of clothing, as in the "Gypsy dress" mentioned in her letters by the Dutch survivor Etty Hillesum. Again, Joskowicz explains that for "a middle-class Dutch Jewish woman, the daughter of a classical philologist, 'Gypsies' were a figure of spee.ch, a metonym for deprivation, squalor, or, at times, romanticized exoticism" (p. 31).

But other Jews described the Roma's "real" presence, albeit not necessarily in the most favourable light. The Hamburg lawyer and businessman Edgar Behr, for example, who spent seven months in a slave labour battalion in 1944, found working "with Gypsies particularly discriminating" (p. 5); others, such as Aaron Bejlin, a Jewish physician from Poland, who worked in the so-called "Gypsy camp" in Auschwitz, used an openly "racialised language" (p. 120) to describe the Jews as "whites" and the Roma as not, although he noted that among them "there were also blond types with blue eyes." For Bejlin, these were "offspring of mixed marriages [...], or they were the second generation" (p. 120). Once again, we can see how the category of whiteness remained the ultimate reference for a sense of belonging, but also for creating a sense of distinction between the Jews and the Roma. Such essentialised images of the Roma borrowed heavily from versions of "antigypsyism" which were already prevalent in East-Central Europe before the Holocaust.[10] This can be clearly seen in another example provided by Joskowicz;

[10] Marius Turda, *În căutarea românului perfect. Specific național, degenerare rasială și selecție socială în România modernă* (Bucharest: Polirom, 2024).

that of Judith Sternberg, a Jewish woman survivor from Hungary. In her memoir, published in the late 1950s, she describes the arrival in Auschwitz of "the dark-skinned gypsies" from Hungary, resembling "the Negroes" (p. 121).
Joskowicz does an exemplary job of analysing and contextualising these examples. He is particularly attentive to the way in which such recollections were then used during the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, at which Bejlin was one of the Jewish victims to take the stand (pp. 124-125), and at the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, "the largest German postwar trial to deal with Nazi atrocities" (p. 127), which took place between 1963 and 1965. On this occasion, prosecutors declared that the Jews and the Roma were the main groups the Nazis had classified as "inferior races" and that "the largest part of imprisoned Gypsies died in the camps by the end of the war, especially in Auschwitz-Bierkenau" (p. 127). Yet the few Roma witnesses who appeared in the indictment were used, according to Joskowicz, to condemn individual Nazi perpetrators for their crimes but not to "explain the broader context of Nazi genocidal policies" (p. 128).
Joskowicz then turns to the role played by Jewish institutions in the rise of the scholarship on Roma genocide, fittingly noting how valuable the acknowledgement of the Nazi crimes would have been to articulate a strong platform for Roma rights organisations. In addition to being very familiar with the German context, Joskowicz distils a great deal of information about Roma organisations in Western Europe, particularly France, and the USA. One cannot help but wonder about the impact of such knowledge on the lives and civic emancipation of the Roma peoples in other countries in East-Central Europe, such as Romania, which, after 1945, conveniently forgot that they had also pursued their own policies of ethnic purification regarding the Roma.
*The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies* was published in 1972, co-written by a Jewish linguist, Donald Kendrick, and Grattan Puxon, a Roma writer and political activist, who was largely responsible for organising the first World Roma Congress in 1971. This is considered the first comprehensive account of the Roma genocide. These two authors would also publish *Gypsies under the Swastika* in 1995. These are books that brought to a general audience in the West the story of the Nazi persecution of the Roma, contextualising it within the long history of abuse, marginalisation and mistreatment of the Roma in European societies. Since the 1970s, and especially since visits to the city of Oświęcim began to be organised by

Roma survivors of the "Gypsy" camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau every year on 2 August, the commemoration of the Roma Holocaust has achieved its own identifiable form, related to, but yet distinct from its Jewish counterpart. But, as rightly remarked by Joskowicz, the impression that "the murder of Roma assumed a strange liminal position in mainstream descriptions of the Jewish Holocaust as a kindred and related event that was nevertheless subordinate to the larger story of Jewish persecution" (p. 171) has not disappeared, either from national historiographies or from the public perception of the Holocaust, notwithstanding the solidarity shown by some Jewish survivors, including Elie Wiesel.

The fears, as Joskowicz admits, of Jewish leaders and organisations were that "the gravity of the Holocaust as the defining event in German history could be diminished by conflating the experiences of different victims" and that "adding the Romani genocide was an act of relativizing, and thereby trivializing, the Holocaust" (p. 195). Similar fears are seen in other countries in East-Central Europe which are slow in acknowledging that the Roma were subjected to humiliating racial and eugenic research to evidence their assumed "inferiority;" and that they were seen as representing different, and less able, human beings. Before, during and after the Holocaust, the Roma were often described as a "burden" on the resources of the state and societies, and they were repeatedly de-humanized in order to justify their exclusion from the normal rhythm of society, and their institutionalisation in normalizing establishments such as special schools and work colonies. The Roma people continue to be "the other victims" of the Holocaust even if some agreement has now been reached between historians and Roma rights activists regarding the nature of the plan of elimination, which, as in the case of the Jews, was also motivated by racism and eugenics.

Joskowicz's work is one of intense commitment to both historical scholarship and the ideals of human equality and dignity. It is engagingly written and a most welcome addition to the growing field of critical Romani studies. He is not a passive observer of historical events but an engaged voice, expressing universal human concerns about stigma, marginalisation and resistance. By speaking words of encouragement, affirmation, and support, Jewish historians of the Holocaust can inspire others, helping them to overcome shortcomings and biases. It is exactly for the memory of those hundreds of thousands of Roma victims of the Holocaust

whose deaths have been for so long invisible to historians that Ari Joskowicz has written this very timely book.

*Marius Turda, Oxford Brookes University*

**How to quote this article:**
Marius Turda, discussion of *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust,* by Ari Joskowicz, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 25, no. 1 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/14967