

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

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Every Wednesday through June 11, we hope you'll join us for Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

Chapter Three

MORGAN'S STORY: A ROMA/SINTI (GYPSY) FAMILY FROM THE HOLOCAUST TO THE UNITED STATES

by Morgan Ahern, A Roma/Sinti in Washington state

I was born lucky — the wish of every Romani mother for her child. For seven years I lived with my people in a traditional manner. My mother and grandmother and my aunts told fortunes, so we had a stable family income. We children each had jobs supporting our family business.

In the evenings, my grandmother, Jenneroze, shared family stories with us. They were always in Romanes, our spoken language. My favorites were the ones she told about herself. She was a hero, not only to me, but to all the Sinti. She was a "drabarni," a wise woman, a healer and leader of her large family.

Life has always been hard for Roma/Sinti in Europe. Even today, prejudice and oppression follow us throughout the continent. When the Nazis took power spreading their domination in Europe, Jenneroze began to plan a safety route for her family. No countries were accepting "Gypsy" refugees.

In 1936/37, Jenneroze purchased Italian citizenship for as many family members as she could with pooled family gold. (Gold was the only currency my people used.) Our family entered the United States as refugee "Italians."

One year later, 18 children of my family still in Europe were stolen for Nazi research and put into an orphanage. All the Sinti children, including my cousins, were deported to Auschwitz and murdered in the gas chambers on August 2, 1944. When I was young, stories like these always scared me, but I was miles and years away — these things happened before I was born.

When I was 7, my world changed. Authorities of the State of New York came into my community and removed Gypsy children from their homes. They wanted Gypsy children to assimilate. Similar actions had been taken with Native American children.

I was first taken to a Catholic orphanage where I was forbidden to speak my language, and my name was



PHOTO: MORGAN AHERN.

The Roma/Sinti people, "Gypsies" as they are commonly called, left their native India circa 1000. Since their arrival in Europe in the 1300s, they have faced discrimination and prejudice. In Romanes (the language spoken by Roma) the Holocaust is called Porrajmos, which means the "Great Devouring." Approximately 60% of Europe's Roma/Sinti were murdered under the Third Reich.

changed. Everything was intended to make us forget "Romanipe," our Gypsy life, and become "gaje": non-Roma.

Our people tried many things to get us back. Jenneroze tracked us down several times, only to be arrested and charged with kidnapping. My parents left the community with plans to get jobs and become gaje so that they would be allowed to care for us. Of course nothing worked. My grandmother died of a broken heart. I dreamed many times of returning to my community, but my grandmother was dead and my parents were gone.

I spent the next 11 years as a ward of New York state. I lived in institutions and foster homes, some good, some unbearable. I never heard Romanes. In the beginning, my brother and I would hide and speak to each other in our language, but we were punished severely and eventually we stopped out of fear.

As the years passed and I became an adult, I often looked for my family. I had several tips on my father, sister and mother. One day when I was in my early 40s, I was crossing a street in downtown Denver. At that moment my luck returned. As I passed a woman in the crosswalk I turned to have another look at her and noticed that she had done the same. We both crossed back and she said to me, "Let's go have a cup of coffee. I think I am your mother." She was. That was the happiest day of my life.

In Romanipe, a mother whispers a secret name to her newborn, which is the name for luck to use. No one knows that name except the mother, the child and luck. I heard my lucky name on that day.

I live in the Pacific Northwest and love Seattle. People are supportive and interested in learning about the Roma/Sinti. I have met many Roma who are estranged from their culture either because of programs similar to the one I was subjected to, or because of the racism and prejudice Gypsies experience.

I am a founder of Lolo Diklo/Red Bandanna: Roma Against Racism. We are involved with making people aware of the real lives and history of the Roma/Sinti people. I am proud to be Gypsy.

For more information on this article or others in this series, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center at www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

MORE TO EXPLORE

- ❖ We learn about Morgan's grandmother who was the "matriarch," or female leader of their family. Morgan believed her to be a true hero, a wise woman and a healer. Do you have a matriarch who's a role model in your family, school, church or neighborhood? Discuss the stories with your class, and talk about what makes them so special.
- ❖ In today's newspaper, locate a story about a female leader that you admire. Using details from the article, answer why this specific person stands out to you. What are the life skills and personal characteristics she uses in her life? Do you implement any of the same traits in your daily life? If so, give details in your answer.