

## Uncovering Hidden Histories: Bringing Roma and Sinti Voices into Holocaust and Genocide Education

**Time: 1-3 class periods (60-120 minutes)**

**Audience: 9-12 grade (can be adapted for 8th grade students)**

Teachers seeking guidance on adapting the curriculum for different grade levels, classroom settings, or instructional goals are encouraged to schedule a curriculum consultation with the [JFCS Holocaust Center](#).

### Student Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will ...

- Learn about the Roma and Sinti people in Europe and how antigypsyism evolved.
- Understand how the Nazi race laws ultimately led to the murder of 250,000-500,000 Roma and Sinti people.
- Consider why some histories are overlooked or forgotten.

### Aligned Standards

- **CA HSS Standard 10.9-** Students analyze the causes and consequences of major global conflicts and genocides of the 20th century.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 / W.11-12.9** – Draw evidence from texts and media to support analysis and reflection.
- **VA:Re9** – Evaluate visual sources using multiple criteria, including historical significance, perspective, and purpose.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2-** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2-** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9-** Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9-** Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

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**Context:** This lesson examines the often-overlooked genocide of Roma and Sinti people during the Holocaust and World War II. While many students may have heard the terms *Roma* and *Sinti*, they often know little about these communities, their history, the persecution they faced under Nazi rule, or the reasons their experiences have frequently been marginalized in historical narratives. This lesson seeks to address those gaps by exploring the history, experiences, and legacy of Roma and Sinti communities during the Holocaust.

A foundational understanding of the Holocaust will help students better understand the context in which Roma and Sinti people were targeted. For students in grades 9–12 with limited prior knowledge, [this 38-minute video](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides useful background. For middle school students, this [10-minute video](#), *Remember the Children: Daniel's Story*, offers an age-appropriate introduction, though it can also be used effectively with high school audiences.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's [article](#) on Roma and Sinti history offers valuable background information for teachers and students. A glossary of key terms used throughout the lesson and a supplemental resource list are included at the end of the lesson.

#### **Materials:**

- [Google Slides](#)
- [Roma Holocaust Fact Sheet](#) (excellent introductory resource)
- [KWL Graphic Organizer](#)
- [Timeline of the Porajmos](#)
- [Zoni Weisz's remarks at Memorial Opening 10/12/2012](#)

#### Gallery Walk Resources:

- Station #1: [Stripped of Citizenship: The Nuremberg Laws](#)
- Station #2: [Marzahn and the Berlin Olympics](#)
- Station #3: [Identification and "Science"](#)
- Station #4: [Story of Johann Rukeli Trollman](#)
- Station #5: [Auschwitz: "Zigeuner" Camp](#)
- Optional Video: [Wartime- targeting children](#) (3 minutes)

#### Graphic Memoir Readings:

- [Sofia Z-4515 Reading #1](#)
- [Sofia Z-4515 Reading # 2](#)
- [Sofia Z-4515 Reading # 3](#)
- [Graphic Memoir Guided Readings Activity](#)
- A journal, pencils for note taking
- Parking Lot: Create a "Parking Lot" on a whiteboard or large sheet of paper. Provide Post-it notes at each table so students can record questions and place them in the Parking Lot for later discussion.
- Glossary and Suggested Resources

**Differentiation:** This lesson is designed to be accessible to a wide range of learners through its varied modalities — visual, textual, oral, and written.

- This lesson includes a gallery walk with primary sources, including testimony and images
- A Graphic Memoir is used which is an excellent resource for all learners.

### **Content Note**

*Because this lesson addresses themes of genocide, hatred, discrimination, deportation, family separation, and medical experimentation on children, it is recommended that students receive advance notice of the challenging nature of the subject. Frame the lesson as a continuation of the “Overlooked Voices” conversation, and remind students of their options if they need to take a break. The exit ticket is individual and unshared by design. Frame the lesson as a continuing conversation, and remind students of their options if they feel they need to take a break.*

Teachers: Preparing for the lesson:

- A. This lesson can stand alone or be integrated into a larger lesson on the Holocaust. For high school students who do not have background in the Holocaust, [this video](#) (38 minutes) provides context for the study of how the Roma and Sinti communities were impacted by Nazi ideology although its focus is on Jewish victims. This in and of itself is useful to show how this facet of history has been overlooked. Consider using [this video](#) (Daniel’s Story, 10 minutes) for an overview of the Holocaust, if adapting the lesson for middle school students. Have students complete the first two steps of the [KWL Graphic Organizer](#). Debrief with a discussion of what they learned and whether they have any lingering questions. Please skip to the next step if not utilizing the video.
- B. To provide background on Roma and Sinti, show students excerpts or entire videos on the history of Roma. This short clip is a good introduction and is linked to the Google Slides: (Facing History & Ourselves, “[We Call Ourselves "Roma"”](#)”, video, last updated November 20, 2014.) Also, for a contemporary look at current attitudes to be used as an extension activity: Facing History & Ourselves, “[Tackling Discrimination against Roma in Schools”](#)”, video, last updated November 20, 2014. You can see the trailer here: [A People Uncounted](#), and the full documentary of A People Uncounted is available on [Vimeo](#) for a modest fee.
- C. This [article](#) on the Roma and Sinti from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides excellent background for teachers and high school students.

### **Lesson**

1. Transition to Slide 3 in Google Slides:
  - a. Have students consider what they know about the victims of the Holocaust- who were they? Discuss orally or write on a flip chart. e.g. Jews, (main victims), LGBTQTI+ people, people with disabilities, Jehovah Witnesses, political opponents of Hitler, Roma and Sinti. How did they learn about these victim groups (books, films, class, International Holocaust Remembrance Day, survivor guest speakers, social media, etc.) Have students study the photos: Are they familiar? If so, why? What about other victims?

- b. Ask students if they have heard of Roma and Sinti people. Tell students that between 250,000-500,000 Roma people were murdered during the Holocaust. Many Roma and Sinti refer to this genocide as the “Porajmos” (The Devouring). Explain that the persecution began long before WWII. They will be learning about the experience of this group, about these people’s lives before WWII, when and how they were persecuted, and why their experience has often been overlooked.

Teaching Tip: This discussion may also surface prior knowledge and misconceptions, and signals that the group’s history extends far beyond their status as Holocaust victims — an important framing for everything that follows.

## 2. Transition to Slide 4-5:

- a. Ask the students to describe what they see in the photo. Explain that it is a Sinti family in Germany in the 1930s and that it is always important to learn about a group apart from their identity as victims of genocide. Before the focus shifts to the Nazi period, the class will learn about the history of the Roma and Sinti in Europe - emphasize the diversity (geographic, religious) within the shared common language (Romani- from Sanskrit) and heritage.
- b. Watch film clip. [“We Call Ourselves Roma”](#) (until minute 3:50) Have students record in KWL, debrief. What did they learn? What questions do they have?

## 3. Transition to Slide 5-6:

- a. Slide 5: This is an opportunity to briefly reinforce what the students saw in the film clip and to discuss terminology. Review history, where the group came from, emphasize diversity. Discuss migration on Map. Note that Roma and Sinti settled all over Europe and Scandinavia. Explain that they maintained their own communities but absorbed different aspects of life where they settled, which accounts for differences in the community. Also explain that most Sinti settled in Germany, Austria and other Western Europe countries, while Roma settled in Eastern Europe. Sinti often practiced Catholicism or Protestantism while Roma practiced Islam or Russian Orthodoxy. Scholars generally use the word Roma to include both groups, but emphasize that there is tremendous diversity across the community. Also note that Romani is the main language but most groups have dialects influenced by the language where they settled.

Teaching Tip: This is an opportunity to discuss language and how terminology changes over time. Explain that the group was historically called “Gypsy,” which is now recognized as a pejorative (Europeans mistakenly believed Roma came from Egypt). We use the terms Roma and Sinti today, though you may still occasionally hear “Gypsy” used by some Roma communities themselves. This distinction matters — who gets to name a group is itself a question of power. The word Antigyptism is used to describe racism towards this community.

4. Before you transition to Slide 6:
  - a. Tell the class that Roma were treated differently across Europe. For example, in the 1300s mostly in Moldavia, Roma were forced into slavery primarily by monasteries, and wealthy landowners - only emancipated in 1856 (similar to the United States) with the emergence of an abolitionist movement; [Roma: Who Are We?](#) is a useful article for providing background for this earlier premodern period.
  - b. In some places, they were accepted because they contributed to the economy or offered services like metal working, basketry, horse breeding.
  
5. Transition to Slide 6:
  - a. This is an important discussion for the class. Note that creating the “Other” is an important step for what will ultimately happen to the Roma. Ask students how a group of people become “the Other”?
  - b. Look at the 3 points in bold on Slide 6. Do these factors always have dire consequences? Have they observed these patterns elsewhere? Examples?
  - c. Explain that in the 1800s many Romani people led a seminomadic life because of job opportunities and their skills. Because of this, they usually lived within their own communities. Note that Romani people originally were welcomed in some places (particularly Russia) because of their needed skills.
  - d. Some of these economic factors contributed, however, to their stigmatization. (local population viewed them as competition especially during times of economic instability). Discuss economic factors contributing to “othering.”

Teaching Tip: As you move through the lesson (Slides 7- 11), continue to refer to the KWL chart, and pause at key intervals to have students record what they are learning.

6. Transition to Slide 7:
  - a. Explain that even though Roma and Sinti were citizens and largely settled, some moving into the middle class, stereotypes persisted. Have students analyze stereotypical images (from postcards and children’s books, and a deck of cards that stereotype and romanticize "Gypsy" life). In the bottom middle is a postcard of Roma with an abducted child, an especially pernicious stereotype. Include the importance of where these images were visible.
  - b. Record what they see, where the images are seen, and how they might further stereotypes and antigypsyism which is defined (see in glossary) as a specific form of racism directed at Roma and Sinti people, characterized by negative stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Recognized by the Council of Europe as a distinct form of racism with deep historical roots in Europe.

Teaching Tip: Encourage students to use their journal throughout this workshop to take notes on what they are learning as well as feelings and thoughts they have throughout. Encourage them to write down any questions they have in the parking lot or in their journals.

If students are learning about anti-Judaism/antisemitism, they might discuss how stereotypes are similar especially vis-à-vis The Blood Libel and the accusation of Jews kidnapping Christian children and why these myths take root.

7. Transition to Slide 8:

- a. Have students study images and record what they see.
- b. Explain that although over 90% no longer lived in caravans and were citizens, business people, artists – misconceptions persisted.
- c. Ask students for their thoughts on why myths persisted.

8. Transition to Slide 9:

- a. In 1899, many Romani people immigrated from Romania and Hungary to Germany for a better life.
- b. This ignited renewed prejudice. Combined with new ideas on the pseudoscience of [eugenics](#), Germany began to target this group leading to creation of the “Gypsy Information Service.”
- c. In 1905, Bavarian police created The Zigeuner-Buch. Have students discuss their reactions to these measures, noting when they were enacted.

9. Transition to Slide 10:

- a. Have students read this slide silently and write their reactions to what they observe.
- b. The Weimar Republic (1918-1933) enacted “Law for the Combating of Gypsies, Vagabonds and the Work-Shy” (1926- note language) requiring Roma and Sinti to carry identity papers. These racial laws identified, marginalized, and laid groundwork for Nazi persecution.

10. Transition to Slide 11.

- a. Have students study map showing the pre-WWII Romani communities.
- b. What do they notice? Discuss where the largest communities are as well as the numerous locations. Any other observations? Note that there are no firm statistics for these populations. Roma people do not have a written tradition thus records are limited.
- c. Emphasize that groups in different countries had unique qualities in their communities. Also, there is not a strong written tradition in Roma and Sinti cultures resulting in little documentation.

11. Debrief students’ learning and observations about this community and prewar life.

- a. What surprised you most about Roma and Sinti history before WWII?
- b. Why is it important to study everyday life before studying persecution?
- c. What questions do they still have?

12. Transition to Slide 12:

- a. The class is now shifting its focus to the Nazi era. Once the Nazis came to power, they solidified their war on the Roma. Sometimes this was in tandem with measures against the Jews and sometimes separately.
- b. Have students study the Map noting that it highlights the reach of the Nazi persecution. Note that the Nazis used the same infrastructure created for Jews in targeting Roma and Sinti. Both persecuted groups were sent to transit camps, ghettos and concentration camps. They were also subjected to execution style killings by murder squads.

13. Transition to Slide 13:

- a. Tell students that they'll now learn more about the evolution of the Porajmos through a Gallery Walk. Pass out the [Timeline of the Porajmos](#). Suggest to students that they should refer to it to anchor their readings in the overarching chronology.

14. Gallery Walk:

Each Station has one reading with an image and prompts. Depending on how much time you want to devote to this activity, you can structure the class in different ways. See Teaching Tip below.

Station #1: [Stripped of Citizenship: The Nuremberg Laws](#)

Station #2: [Marzahn and the Berlin Olympics](#)

Station #3: [Identification and "Science"](#)

Station #4: [Story of Johann Rukeli Trollman](#)

Station #5: [Auschwitz: "Zigeuner" Camp](#)

Optional Video: [Wartime- targeting children](#) (3 minutes)

Follow with free writing in Journal.

Teaching Tip: Depending on how much time you want to devote to this activity, you can structure the class in different ways. One approach is to have students move through the five stations with prompts, then debrief as a class. Another is to discuss in small groups then have a spokesperson share responses to large group. Also possible is to do this as a jigsaw, and have each group become an expert on the reading and then teach the class about their reading.

Remember that this is emotionally charged material. Leave time to process in journals and remind students that they can take a break if necessary.

15. Debrief Gallery Walk:

- a. Bring the class together after the gallery walk. (This debrief will bridge the historical evidence students have just examined to Sofia's personal testimony in *Sofia Z-4515*.)
- b. Ask students to write one word in their journals that describes what they are carrying from the gallery walk.
- c. Invite students 3 - 4 students to respond to the following questions:

Across all five stations — what is one thing that surprised you, and one thing that connected to something you already knew?"

What do you still not know — about these people, about what they experienced?

What can't a policy decree or a statistic tell you?"

16. Before distributing the excerpts, tell the class that they will now be taking the background readings they've analyzed and apply them to a survivor's story.

Teaching Tip: You may want to take a short break here before beginning the graphic memoir or begin it at the next class. You could also assign the readings as homework and debrief in class before continuing with the final debrief.

17. Transition to Slide 15:

- a. Look at the image of the cover and first page. What questions does it raise for them? Establish that this is a graphic memoir and is different than a graphic novel because it is based on Sofia's real life experiences. Point out that the readings will give a personal voice to what they have learned so far.
- b. Distribute copies of Sofia Z-4515 or printed excerpts and [Graphic Memoir Guided Readings Activity](#). Instruct class to read these items in order, pausing to discuss before moving on to the next reading.

18. Class Debrief of Memoir

Ask students to share one insight and one unanswered question from their readings

- What is the memoir's relationship to hope?
- Is a graphic memoir a useful way of communicating this history? Why/why not?
- How does reading Sofia's story change — or complicate — the historical context you learned about at the beginning of this lesson.
- The book spans from 1938 to Sofia's life as a grandmother. Why does it matter that it doesn't end in 1945?
- Return to the KWL chart: have students complete the "What I Learned" column. Any remaining questions should be added to the Parking Lot.

19. Final Debrief:

- The class has now studied the prewar and wartime experience of Roma and Sinti people in Europe. Ask if this has helped illuminate the original question: why are some histories overlooked?
- Why *do* they think this has been overlooked?
- Scholars give these reasons:
  - a. **Persistent anti-Roma prejudice after 1945**—the discrimination that existed before the war continued afterward, making recognition difficult.
  - b. **Delayed legal recognition**—West Germany did not fully recognize that Roma and Sinti had been persecuted on racial grounds until decades after the war, limiting compensation and public awareness.
  - c. **Lack of political representation and institutions**—Roma communities generally had fewer organizations, archives, and research centers devoted to preserving their history.
  - d. **Limited documentation and survivor testimony in public forums**—fewer written memoirs, fewer witnesses at postwar trials, and less scholarly attention contributed to historical neglect.
  - e. **Competition within public memory**—Holocaust narratives often centered on Jewish experiences, while the persecution of Roma and Sinti remained peripheral despite its genocidal nature.

Discuss which reasons students feel are the most significant. Are reasons satisfactory? Why/why not?

20. Transition to Slide 16:

- a. Begin with a general discussion of memorials, having students name memorials they've visited. What are they commemorating? Is it effective? Does it have a bias?
- b. Study the image. Read the poem by Italian Sinti survivor. Discuss the date of the Berlin Memorial opening October 24, 2012
- c. Read [Zoni Weisz's remarks at Memorial Opening 10/12/2012](#). Ask what line resonates? Do a Last Word read.

Extension/Assessment:

1. Explore how the Roma community has fought for recognition: [Holocaust Memorial Day Trust | The Roma community's long battle for public recognition](#)
2. Have students choose a topic from :
  - A. [After the Genocide: Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition](#)
  - B. [Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe murdered under National Socialism](#)
3. Listen to the testimony of a Sinti survivor and compare it to Sophia Z-4515's graphic memoir: [USC Shoah Foundation: "Fate of the Roma" Survivor Testimony Clip](#)

## Supplemental Resources

- [Romarchive.eu](http://Romarchive.eu) — Primary sources created by Roma artists, writers, and scholars. An essential resource for centering Roma voices
- [USHMM: Roma \(Gypsies\) in Prewar Europe](#) — Comprehensive encyclopedia entry with photographs
- [National WWII Museum: The Genocide of the Roma](#) — Accessible secondary source on the Porajmos
- [Facing History & Ourselves: “We Call Ourselves Roma”](#) — Short film clip (to minute 3:50) suitable for classroom introduction
- [Facing History & Ourselves: “Tackling Discrimination against Roma in Schools”](#) — Contemporary look at ongoing antigypsyism
- [A People Uncounted](#) — Trailer; full documentary (available on Vimeo for a modest fee).
- [Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum: Roma Children](#) — Detailed account of the Zigeunerlager and medical experiments
- [USC Shoah Foundation: “Fate of the Roma” Survivor Testimony Clip](#)
- [Romasinti.eu exhibition](#) — Online exhibition on Roma and Sinti history and culture
- [Roma and Sinti Genocide resource pack \(PDF\)](#) — Classroom resource from Traveller Movement

## References

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [“Roma \(Gypsies\) in Prewar Europe.”](#) Holocaust Encyclopedia.

USC Shoah Foundation. [“Fate of the Roma Sinti and the Holocaust.”](#) YouTube.

## Glossary

**Antigypsyism:** A specific form of racism directed at Roma and Sinti people, characterized by negative stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Recognized by the Council of Europe as a distinct form of racism with deep historical roots in Europe.

**Deportation:** The forced removal of people from their homes or country, typically to a camp or another territory. Under the Nazis, deportation was a step in the process of genocide.

**Ghetto:** A section of a city where Jews or other persecuted groups were forced to live, under overcrowded and deprived conditions, often as a step before deportation to death camps.

**Graphic memoir:** A nonfiction narrative told in the format of a graphic novel — combining images and text. The visual form allows for the representation of memory, trauma, and testimony in ways that prose alone may not achieve.

**Nuremberg Laws:** Antisemitic and racial legislation enacted by the Nazi government in 1935. The laws applied not only to Jews but also to Roma and Sinti, stripping them of citizenship and prohibiting marriage with non-Roma Germans.

**Porajmos:** A Romani-language word meaning “the devouring” or “the destruction.” Used to refer to the genocide of between 250,000 - 500,000 Roma and Sinti people by the Nazis during World War II.

**Romani:** The language spoken by Roma and Sinti people, derived from Sanskrit, the classical language of northern India. The shared language reflects the common origin of Roma and Sinti groups.

**Roma / Sinti:** Distinct but related ethnic groups with shared origins in northern India who migrated to Europe between the 11th and 14th centuries and are often grouped together as “Roma and Sinti” or Roma. Both groups were targets of Nazi genocide. Most Sinti settled in Germany, Austria and other Western Europe countries, while Roma settled in Eastern Europe.

**Testimony:** A firsthand account of events, often used in historical and legal contexts to mean a survivor’s witness statement. *Sofia Z-4515* is a form of testimony delivered through the graphic memoir form.

**Zigeuner:** The German word for “Gypsy,” now recognized as a pejorative. It derives from a German word meaning “untouchable.” The letter “Z” in Sofia Taikon’s prisoner number Z-4515 stands for this word.

**Zigeunerlager:** German for “Gypsy camp.” Refers specifically to the Roma and Sinti Family Camp (Section BIle) at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which held approximately 23,000 people. The camp was liquidated on the night of August 2, 1944.