



Remembering the Roma Holocaust

The obligation is not merely to remember those we lost.

It is to refuse, in our own time, the conditions that place dignity out of anyone's reach.

Roma Holocaust Memorial Service at St Cuthburga's Church, Wimborne-Minster · August 2, 2026

Good afternoon.

It means a great deal to be welcomed here, and to participate among the many gatherings — at Birkenau, across Europe, and here in Dorset — honoring Roma Holocaust Memorial Day.

I want to thank the chair, members, and community of Kushti Bok for the invitation to be with you all — and for ten years of marking this occasion in this county, years in which so much of the world had yet to learn this day exists. Thank you to the dignitaries and clergy present and to all those who blessed this memorial with their wisdom and gifts.

Seven years ago, my father, Reverend Jesse Jackson Sr., stood at Auschwitz-Birkenau among Roma and Sinti survivors of the camp as they commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the night we remember this afternoon. I have no doubt that, were he still with us, he would be joining you in remembrance today. I am honoured to join you in his memory and to continue the witness he bore then.

On the night of August 2, 1944, the remaining prisoners of the so-called Gypsy Family Camp at Birkenau were sent to the gas chambers — thousands, mostly children, the elderly, the sick, and women, because those still strong enough to work had been transported elsewhere some weeks before. Across Europe, historians estimate that somewhere between half to over one million Roma and Sinti were murdered during the Holocaust.

It remains a range rather than a number, and that tells us something about the nature of the crime itself. A great many people were killed whose names we will never know, because no record of them was ever made. No transport list. No register. No file, no grave, no acknowledgement. Genocide is measured in bodies — but it is also measured in futures that never arrived. What memory survived, survived because families carried it — spoken, sung, and handed down across generations, often while governments, institutions, and even historians looked elsewhere.

Among those who carried it was the Austrian Romani writer and artist Ceija Stojka [Chay-ya Stoy-ka], deported to Auschwitz as a child before enduring Ravensbrück and Bergen-Belsen. In later life she painted and wrote so that those who never returned would not disappear into silence. And she left a warning. "I am afraid," she said, "that Europe is forgetting its past. Auschwitz is only sleeping."

She was right to be afraid — because the story she survived did not begin in 1933, and it did not end in 1945.

Long before the Nazi seizure of power, European societies had grown accustomed to treating Roma and Sinti people as outsiders. Across centuries, Roma communities were expelled from towns and territories, subjected to special laws, criminalised for their way of life, and pressured to abandon languages, customs, and identities. In parts of Europe, Roma men, women, and children were held in slavery for generations. The assumption varied in language from country to country and century to century, but it remained remarkably persistent: that there existed a category of people whose place was conditional, whose presence required explanation, and whose belonging could always be called into question.

What made that assumption so powerful was that it eventually ceased to appear as an assumption at all. It came to be treated as common sense. Human beings with different histories, occupations, beliefs, talents, aspirations, and identities were flattened into a type — discussed not as fellow citizens to whom obligations were owed, but as a problem to be managed.

Dignity is seldom removed in a single stroke. It was made conditional — extended or withheld depending on whether a family was seen as settled or wandering, useful or burdensome, familiar or foreign. And by the time laws moved, the deeper exclusion had already happened: these communities were shut out of the moral imagination of their neighbours.

That is what the Nazis inherited. They did not invent the category under which Roma and Sinti people were murdered; they found forms of exclusion older than the regime itself. What they added was intent, and machinery, and the will to carry it to its end. Their responsibility is not lessened by what came before them. And yet, that history leaves us with a harder truth than the one we might prefer. Because it was not only the work of fanatics, but also the work of inherited assumptions, it asks something of every generation: to decide whether dignity is recognised in every person — or quietly made conditional once again.

That decision is before us now.

Across Europe today, millions of Roma continue to live on the margins of the societies to which they have long belonged. Many live in segregated settlements without adequate housing, infrastructure, or access to healthcare. Romani children face segregation in school; families face discrimination in employment, barriers to public services, forced evictions, harassment, and violence. And the consequences can be counted in poorer health and shorter lives. These conditions are not inevitable. They are cumulative.

The question was never whether Roma and Sinti people belong to Europe. They have been here for centuries. The question is why so many European societies have spent centuries acting as though they do not.

And I cannot stand before you and pose that question as though it were not also mine. My own country did not merely ask it of people who look like me — for centuries it answered, in law and in blood, that we did not belong. My father spent his life overturning that answer — and he refused to overturn it for us alone. He carried the argument wherever people had been told they did not belong, which is how, seven years ago, he came to be standing at Birkenau. So I know the assumption I have described holds no single passport. It travels. It makes its home wherever a society permits itself to decide that some of its neighbours are not quite its neighbours.

Those we honour today remind us where the old assumption can lead. And they remind us that dignity is not conferred by governments, nor granted by majorities, nor dependent upon whether a people are understood, admired, or approved of. It lives in human beings themselves. So our obligation is not merely to remember those we lost. It is to refuse, in our own time, to let anyone be required to prove that their humanity entitles them to equal dignity. That is how remembrance becomes responsibility.

To the families, descendants, and communities gathered here today, and to those remembering elsewhere, I send my deepest love and condolences. It is a privilege to join you in this act of remembrance.

Thank you.