

УДК 94:341.485(=214.58)(497)"1942/1943"(093.2)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.31212/tokovi.2022.3.ris.13-41>

Оригинални научни рад/Original scientific paper

Примљен/Received: 23. 2. 2022.

Прихваћен/Accepted: 16. 11. 2022.

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## **Karl Blum's long journey through the Balkans, 1942–1943 (A contribution to the history of Pharrajmos)\***

**Abstract:** Several German Roma-Sinti families, members of a caravan of traveling artists, set off from central Germany to Istanbul, passing through the war-torn Balkans during 1942 to the end of January 1943 when they were arrested and transferred to the Red Cross camp in Niš. A few months later they were transferred to the *Anhaltelager Dedinje* in Belgrade (Banjički camp) from where, they were transported to the “Gypsy Camp” of Auschwitz in late June. Following the fate of this group of Roma (i. e. Sinti), the paper also discusses the racist policy of the National Socialist regime towards Roma and Sinti with the final consequence - their mass physical destruction, genocide (Pharrajmos).

**Keywords:** Second World War, Balkans, racism, Roma and Sinti, Banjica, Auschwitz, Pharrajmos.

On an icy winter day of January 19, 1943, wet from the heavy sleet that fell on the town below the Vodno Mountain, the Bulgarian occupation authorities, following the request of the German consulate in Skopje, were asked to arrest the „Performing troupe“ (*Schaustellertruppe*) led by Karl Blum,

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\* *Pharrajmos, Porrajmos, Samudaripen* - these are concepts that in the Romani language have the meaning of disaster, close to the concept of Shoa. They serve to mark the Roma Holocaust. See: *The Roma-A Minority in Europe. Historical, Political and Social Perspectives*, ed. Roni Stauber, Raphael Vago, (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2007), 8; Janos Barsony, Agnesz Daroczi, *Pharrajmos: The Fate of the Roma During the Holocaust*, (New York: International Debate Education Associaton, 2007), IX.

a “half-breed Gypsy”. On the square next to the old stone bridge, they easily caught the eye of the authorities with their cars and music that accompanied their juggling and acrobatic skills, for which they expected some compensation from the few cold and starving curious people. Instead of earning money, the Bulgarian police arrived and immediately handed over the whole group, adults and children, to their German allies, after a perfunctory inspection of their documents. One indication leads to the conclusion that the arrested may have been handed over to representatives of the local branch of the German military intelligence service (Abwehr) and the German Secret Military Police. The very next day, on 20 January, they were transferred from Skopje to the “Red Cross” concentration camp in Niš (“Anhaltelager der Außendienststelle Nisch”). It was the first stop of their forced return from the Balkans to the north into uncertainty, which would last for the next six months. After three months of living in inhumane conditions in the cramped barracks of the Niš camp, the report on the new detainees was received by the head of police of the German occupation machine, the ruthless August Meyszner, senior police leader in Serbia and commander of the Security Police and Security Service in Serbia (SS-Gruppenführer and Generalleutnant, commander of SIPO and SD).<sup>1</sup>

*First stop: Niš and the Red Cross concentration camp*

There were 34 people in this troupe of traveling entertainers: six adult men, twelve women, and sixteen children. These were several families connected by cross family ties through sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. The troupe was led by its oldest member, Karl Blum, born on 10 January 1885 in Dole near Magdeburg. The writer of the first arrest report sent to Meyszner in Belgrade was Erich Wienecke, SS-Obersturmführer, commander of the *Red Cross Camp* (Anhaltelager -Nisch).<sup>2</sup> Unam-

1 Istorijски arhiv Beograda (IAB), BdS, B-1174-1, Unterschrift mit 1 Anlage des Befehlshabers der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD-V-, Belgrad, Nisch, den 29. April. Part of Karl Blum’s file was included in the exhibition „Poslednje odredište Aušvic“, organized by the Belgrade Historical Museum of Serbia in 2015. See also: *Последње одредиште Аушвиц: каталог изложбе*, (Београд: ИМС, 2015), 75.

2 The Red Cross Camp in Niš (Anhaltelager-Nisch) was founded in September 1941 by the German Field Command 809. See more about the camp: Мирослав Миловановић, *Немачки концентрациони логор на Црвеном Крсту у Нишу и стрељања на Бубњу (Concentration Camp at the Crveni Krst in Niš and Executions on Bubanji)*, (Београд: Институт за савремену историју: Народна књига; Ниш: Општински одбор СУБНОР, 1983). On Wienecke, see: Миловановић, *Немачки концентрациони логор...*, 25, 66,

biguously and without delving into their origin or checking the document in more detail, he considered that the most important thing in the report was to point to the fact that this group “without any doubt” was made up of “Gypsies-wanderers”. He found the confirmation of this claim in the fact that all the members were born in different places and parts of Germany, or in one of the neighboring countries.<sup>3</sup> A branch of the Blums, perhaps related, from the town of Ribeland in the Harz, ran a puppet wagon that performed in the inns and municipal halls of small provincial towns. The name of one member of this branch, Willy Blum (born in 1928), was on the list of victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.<sup>4</sup>

Their way of life “and criminal behavior” were, however, detailed in the reports of the German Consulate and members of the German Secret Military Police in Skopje. It was concluded in the reports - a fact that had exceptional importance and consequences - that the behavior of these itinerant artists “damaged the reputation of the Greater German Reich”. That was the reason that required the inevitable involvement of the Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei). Regardless of their gender or age, members of the group were charged with a long list of punishable offences: theft, begging, avoiding military service, violations of passport and border regulations, hiding from police surveillance and - finally - violation of the German national treason law. At a time when the defendant’s life was written off in advance for only one of the listed accusations, one female member of the troupe charged with a particularly serious offence: Karl Blum’s wife, Alma, née Heilig, was accused of unauthorized wearing and misuse of the “German Mother’s Cross of Honor, 1st Order” (“Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter” - also known as the „Mutterkreuz“). The medal was established in December 1938 at Hitler’s suggestion and was awarded to mothers who gave birth to four or more children. The Decoration of the First Order was given to mothers who gave birth to eight or more children and thus made a “contribution to the German people”.<sup>5</sup>

Wienecke justified the temporary detention in Niš by asserting that the investigation should be conducted further by both the authorities of the

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86, 238, 258. After the Second World War, he avoided extradition to the Yugoslav authorities and trial for war crimes; he was a lawyer in Hanover.

3 Dole, Groß Rodensleben, Kupnic in Czechia, Dorfmark, Genthin, Krosen, Hanau, Röhlinghausen, Manheim, Lenzen, Köln, Mühlheim, Duisburg, Podersdorf, etc.

4 See: Annette Leo, *Das Kind auf der Liste. Die Geschichte von Willy Blum und seiner Familie*, (Taschenbuch: Aufbau Taschenbuch, 2018).

5 Ibid.

German Reich and the local authorities of the places where the detainees came from. The attempt to use the adult members of the group for forced labor in the camp did not succeed because, in the meantime, “the Reich introduced changes in the regulations regarding the accommodation of Gypsies, and especially because of the number of small children” in the troupe. In his report to Meyszner, Wienecke emphasized that keeping the arrested in Niš for a long time became “impossible” and “inappropriate” due to the overcrowding of the camp and police-security reasons. These detainees with all their property were to be transferred to Belgrade in a special vehicle and handed over to the immediate authority of the commander of the German Security Service (BdS) in Serbia. The confiscated money, 12.504 dinars, and “other evidence” were supposed to be handed over to the leader of the transport, who, upon arrival at the Belgrade camp, would deliver it to the German police authorities along with the prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

*Second station: The Dedinje Camp (Banjica, Anhaltelager Dedinje)*

The “certificate of receipt” signed by SS-Sturmscharführer Schumann was proof that the transport of detainees and their property, which consisted of three wagons (in the report referred to as *Wagen* or *Wohnwagen* - dwelling wagons), arrived in Belgrade without any problems on 4 May 1943. He stated that he received from SS-Oberscharführer Jericho from the Niš branch of the Security Service (SD) - 34 persons, members of a “Gypsy-style entertaining troupe”, noting that “persons... were transported to a concentration camp” (Camp Dedinje - Anhaltelager Dedinje - “Banjica”). They were placed in the barracks of the German part of the camp (Department V), commanded by SS-Sturmführer Felsmann. Their wagons were left under the guard of a Serbian policeman at the Belgrade railway station, from where they were subsequently towed to Banjica.<sup>7</sup>

On May 18, Felix Benzler, plenipotentiary of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade, sent: Meyszner, with great delay, in response to a letter dated February 4, a confirmation from his ministry that after checking all the collected data it was found out that “undoubtedly, these were artists of Gypsy origin who once appeared in Belgrade and who the Security Service dealt

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6 Ibid.

7 IAB, BdS, B-1174-5, 4. V 1943.

with earlier". It is the only remaining trace of their short stay in Belgrade, the previous year, on their way to Romania.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the traveling entertainers were transferred to the Banjica camp (Anhaltelager Dedinje) is also confirmed by preserved camp books in which information about the detainees was entered. Their names, dates of birth, occupations, marital status are recorded there, from Alma Blum - registered under number 13250 ("artist, b. residing in the place of birth. In the camp from 3. V 1943. by the Abwehr Command Niš. Taken away on July 7, 1943 by the SS)" - to number 13283 and Franz Karl ("actor; b. 3. IX 1884. Petzendorf, Germany; from Wilhelm and Anna; married, 5 children; living in Zagreb (!). In the camp from 3. V 1943. from A(-bwehr)K(-ommand) Niš, taken on July 7, 1943 by SS").

This inventory reveals that only in the column in which Selma Schmidt was registered ("artist, b. 8. IX 1896, Niederstitter, Germany, from Theodor and Maria Blum; unmarried; residing in Zagreb, Borongajeva... In the camp from 3. V 1943. From AK Niš. Taken away 7. VII 1943 by the SS"), her "guilt", i. e. the reason for her arrest was also stated: "Arrested for insulting Germany's reputation abroad".<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after arriving in Belgrade, it turned out that the names of seven members of this artistic family group were already on the wanted list (*Deutsches Fahndungsbuch*, 6. Jahrgang, Nr. 247) and that a manhunt had been launched for them. They were all members of the Blum and Schmidt families: Karl, Alma, Johanna, Alfred and Siegfried; Schmidt Wilhelm, Wilhelmina (née Bloom) and Selma, as well as Lily Fischer - Schmidt.<sup>10</sup> On June 17, August Meyszner sent to the Reich police headquarters in Berlin a list of arrested "Gypsy-style wandering artists", noting that the names of, not seven but ten adults, were already on the warrant lists and that for further processing local authorities in Germany needed to confirm their nationality.<sup>11</sup>

### *A long history of intolerance. One digression*

The long history of intolerance towards the Roma can be traced back to the earliest days of their appearance on the soil of European countries. The

8 IAB, BdS, B-1174-25, Abschrift der Bevollmächtigten des Auswärtigen Amts beim Militärbefehlshaber in Serbien an den Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei, Belgrad 18 Mai 1943.

9 *Logor Banjica: Logoraši: II tom: Knjige zatočenika koncentracionog logora Beograd-Banjica (1941-1944)*, (Beograd: Istorijski arhiv Beograda, 2009), 90–92.

10 IAB, BdS, B-1174, 15. V 1943.

11 IAB, BdS, B-1174-11, Belgrad, den 17 Juni 1943.

first law charging an entire community with spying, spreading the plague, and betraying Christianity was passed in Germany in 1416; Maximilian I ordered their expulsion from the territory of his state in 1500; Emperor Ferdinand I ordered their violent expulsion in 1566, while Charles VI ordered the extermination of all Roma in 1721. In 1725, Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm ordered the hanging of all Roma over the age of 18.<sup>12</sup> Their “racial-biological categorization” along with the increasingly widespread introduction of police measures of surveillance and repression became a ubiquitous practice in many European countries during the 19th century.<sup>13</sup>

The immigration of Roma from Eastern and Southeastern Europe to Western European countries was encouraged by traditional social marginalization, insecurity due to wars and political crises, as well as liberation from the constraints of slave status in Romania in 1864. This resulted in increased attention from the authorities and an increase in intolerance, along with the adoption of measures to stop further immigration and expel newcomers at the same time. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck called on local authorities to expel Roma immigrants from German soil and oblige native Roma to renounce the nomadic life.<sup>14</sup> On November 18, 1870, he issued an order banning Roma, foreign nationals, from coming to the German Empire, while those who were already there had to be deported to their countries of origin.<sup>15</sup>

In 1885, Bavarian authorities adopted special measures against Gypsies, which included a strict check of their personal documents, as well as the cancellation of permits for traveling merchants and the issuance of new ones. Those with unconfirmed citizenship could be immediately arrested and held in prison until the country they allegedly came from agreed to take them back, in other words, until they were expelled. Clauses added to these regulations in 1889 were aimed at “cleansing” Bavaria of their presence. A similar methodology was applied in France, including expulsion from French territory, as can be seen from a case of Gypsy nomads from Serbia (*čergari*) who were ex-

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12 Ian Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, *Routledge History of the Holocaust*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 377.

13 On their „categorization“ see: Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, 378.

14 David M. Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, (New York: Scribner, 2001), 2, 476, 477.

15 Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, 379.

pelled to Germany around 1910 at the Vic-Arracourt border crossing, which was recorded on a postcard (see below).



« A la frontière franco-allemande, à Vic-Arracourt en Meurthe-et-Moselle, la gendarmerie allemande interdit à une bande de romanichels serbes expulsés de France d'entrer en Allemagne. » Carte postale début xx<sup>e</sup> siècle.

In Germany and some other European countries, there was a long-standing police practice of collecting data on persons of Roma origin and publishing them in special internal publications, such as the German *Zigeunerbuch* (*Gypsy Book*). The first book of this type was published by the Bavarian police in 1905 with the names of 3,350 persons who were classified as: Gypsies, “vagrants in the Gypsy way”, and according to the criminal acts attributed to them (begging, illegal trade, theft).<sup>16</sup> Their photos along with detailed personal description, nicknames, and nationality were also attached. The publisher of this *Zigeunerbuch* was the head of the Munich police, Alfred Dillmann, who founded a special “Gypsy Department” (*Zigeunerzentrale*) in the Bavarian police headquarters in 1899.

16 On the marginalization of Roma in the Ottoman legislation see: Faika Celik, “Exploring Marginality in the Ottoman Empire: Gypsies or the People of Malice (Ehl-i Fesad) as viewed by Ottomans”, *EUI Working Paper RSCAS* 39/2004.

In 1906, the Prussian Minister of the Interior issued an order for the “fight against the Gypsy Problem” (*Bekämpfung des Zigeunerunwesens*). This measure was part of a network of agreements concluded between a number of European governments to prevent the migration of Roma and eradicate the nomadic way of life. In 1911, the Bavarian police organized a conference on the “Gypsy problem” in which delegates from all German provinces took part and enriched Dillmann’s “Gypsy Book” with new data.<sup>17</sup>

Although prejudice against the Roma and anti-Gypsy racism in Europe had long been widespread and rooted, and they had been marginalized and persecuted by the authorities in various ways in the past, their real “racial categorization” as a “foreign racial body” was carried out in the Weimar Republic in 1926. Despite the strong resistance of social democrats and communists, the extremely restrictive “Gypsies and Idlers Act” was passed in Bavaria. Although there was a discrimination against this small minority group in the Weimar Republic, one author who studied this issue concluded that “their physical existence was not questioned”.<sup>18</sup>

In England and France, the term “Gypsy” meant social marginalization, usually arousing the suspicion of the authorities. Although it was not completely devoid of a racial approach, this categorization was primarily motivated by linking them with “socially unacceptable behavior” (nomadic and unconventional lifestyle, suspicion of various criminal activities)<sup>19</sup> that required a political approach, including the action of law enforcement.<sup>20</sup> In his influential book *L'uomo delinquente* (1876), the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso devoted an extensive chapter to the „criminal genetic character“ of the Roma as “a living example of a whole race of criminals”.<sup>21</sup>

All members of this ethnic group in Germany were fingerprinted before 1911, and in 1925 the file contained 14,000 names with other data collected

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17 Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, 477.

18 Jennifer Illuzzi, *Gypsies in Germany and Italy 1861-1914. Lives outside the Law*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2014), 20-22.

19 In some European countries, the aversion to the wandering lifestyle of part of the Roma population, from the Middle Ages to modern times, has been incorporated into a racist stereotype, which can be compared to that segment of the anti-Semitic stereotype symbolized by the mythical figure of Ahasuerus, the “Wandering Jew”. V.: Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Imagining the Wandering Jew in Modernity. Exegesis and Ethnography in Leon Feuchtwanger’s *Jud Süß*”, *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, ed. Gabriella Safran, Andreas Kilcher, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016). Project MUSE, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

20 Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, 447, 448.

21 Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, 37-380.



throughout Germany.<sup>22</sup> The Research Institute for Racial Hygiene and Population Biology (Rassenhygienische und bevölkerungsbiologische Forschungsstelle) came out with the data that 90% of the 28,000 German Sinti and Roma belonged to the category of “Mischlinge” (mixed race), and as “non-Aryans” and “anti-social” people they were considered a “danger to public health”.<sup>23</sup>

When the National Socialists came to power in Germany, this minority numbered only about 26,000 members. Thus, it was outside the special interest of the authorities, which were more focused on the central issue in the ideological, political, propaganda and economic sense - the “Jewish question”. The initial indifference gradually changed, so that the increasingly dark shadow of racist politics stretched over this small minority, branding them as a “foreign body” within the German “national community”. Racial legislation from 1935 (Nuremberg Race Laws) also applied to them. Two years later, the regime launched an effort to “suppress the Gypsy Plague”, specifically targeting “Gypsy half-breeds” (Zigeunermischlinge). The racist “argument” when categorizing people as “Gypsies” was mixed with the attitude that they also belong to people who are not actually Gypsies by their racial origin, but rather live in their nomadic way, including the so-called “white Gypsies” of the Yenish people (Jenische).<sup>24</sup>

The implementation of the forced “preventive sterilization” of the Roma was already foreseen in the Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases (Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken : Nachwuchses) signed by Hitler on July 14, 1933. In November of that year, the Law against dangerous incorrigible criminals (Gesetz gegen gefährliche Gewohnheitsverbrecher und über Maßregeln der Sicherung und Besserung) was passed, on the basis of which the imprisonment of Roma in camps began. By order of the Minister of the Interior, the first few hundred were sent to the Dachau concentration camp in the summer of 1936. When considering how to treat them, the issue of “the final solution of the Gypsy question” was raised for the first time in the Reich Ministry of the Interior in March 1936. By the end of 1937, the Buch-

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22 Guinter Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5–7.

23 It was headed by Robert Ritter, see in: Mathias Winter, “Kontinuitäten in der deutschen Zigeunerforschung und Zigeunerpolitik”, *Feinderklärung und Prävention. (Beiträge zur nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik)*, (Westberlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1988), 135–152.

24 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 14–16. There were about 10.000 members of this nomadic clan; Jack R. Fischel, *Historical Dictionary of the Holocaust*, Second edition, (Lanham-Toronto-Plymouth UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 174.

enwald camp had a special section for imprisoned Roma. Werner Best, head of the Nazi security service, proposed in 1938 to start talks on the „final solution of the Gypsy question“ from a “racial point of view”. This was also when the first official act of the National Socialist Party on this issue was published under the title *Endgültige Lösung der Zigeunerfrage* (The Final Solution of the Gypsy Question), and signed by Reichsführer SS Himmler.<sup>25</sup>

In the summer of 1938, a “Gypsy Cleansing Week” was declared, when Roma and Sinti throughout Germany and the “Eastern March” (Austria) were arrested, beaten and sent to camps.<sup>26</sup> According to Heinrich Himmler’s decree of August 12, 1938, an order was issued on March 1 on its implementation by the Reich Criminal Police Department for the registration of all persons in Germany who were considered Roma. The beginning of the war opened a new phase in the realization of the “final solution of the Gypsy question”: their physical extermination. In January and February 1940, 250 Roma children were killed during the testing of Zyklon-B gas. The first transports of German Roma were sent to the territory of the General Governorate for the Occupied Polish Region in May 1940. With several more transports that followed, they became an integral part of the Porrajmos genocide.<sup>27</sup>

### *The first victims*

The stay of “Blum’s group” in the camp at Banjica took its first victims: on the last day of May 1943, Paulina Schmidt, the six-month-old baby of Wilhelm and Wilhelmina, died in the camp infirmary. There was a routine note next to her name in the camp book: “unmarried, living in Salzburg!”<sup>28</sup> Another report stated that “a Gypsy child, a prisoner”, had died in a camp barrack from “heart failure and general exhaustion”.<sup>29</sup> Little Paulina was born in Skopje, as stated in another, short death note, which contains information on Rudolf (Axel) Kler.<sup>30</sup> This information points to the time the group spent in

25 Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, 379. On the role of W. Best, see: Ulrich Herbert, *Werner Best-Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft 1903–1989*, (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1996).

26 Fischel, *Historical Dictionary of the Holocaust*, 106.

27 Hancock, “The Neglected Memory of the Romanies In The Holocaust/Porrajmos”, 401.

28 *Logor Banjica*, II, br. 13278, 91.

29 IAB, BdS, B-1174-6, IV C2 Anhaltelager, Abschrift, Abteilung V, Meldung über verstorbenen Häftling, Belgrad, 17. Juni 1943. This report was sent 18 days after the child’s death.

30 IAB, BdS, B-1174-6, Belgrad, 1. VI 1943.

Skopje - the beginning of winter or the end of 1942 – until their arrest in late January 1943.

Six days later, Wilhelm (registered as Viljem) Schmidt, “artist, born March 2, 1913, Reginkrenz, Germany, to mother Selma Schmidt” also died. “Married, four children; residing in Heinen, Germany”.<sup>31</sup> The next victim, one-year-old Rudolf, was born in Zagreb on May 30, 1942, the child of Elfrieda and Siegfried, and died on June 5. In a brief note by SS-Hauptscharführer Friedrich, it was stated that the death occurred in the camp barracks and that “the imprisoned one-year-old Gypsy child Claire Rudolph died... of general weakness”.<sup>32</sup> However, in the book of prisoners of the Banjica concentration camp, it was recorded - wrongly - that the child was “taken away on July 7, 1943 by the SS”. This mistake of the prison scribe was correct in its perverted way: the lives of little Rudolph and two of his relatives were indeed “taken away by the SS”. The first losses were an ominous portent of what could befall the entire troop in the near future.

#### *Families, relatives, the troupe*

Pursuing an obsessive demand for racist categorization, the German camp authorities (the camp had a “parallel administration”: the Serbian collaborationist Special Police and the Gestapo, but the German command had the decisive word),<sup>33</sup> tried to untangle the complicated family relationships and bonds of this group of inmates. However, as it turned out, it was quite a complex task. Thus, on June 15, a list was drawn up in which the inmates were classified into eight “family groups”. Bearing in mind that the children were mostly born out of wedlock (which did not diminish the family cohesion and kinship of the group - the clan in which the Schmidt, Blum and Fischer families were members), for the German camp authorities this type of community was certainly another chaotic “evidence of racial inferiority”. The list also included four persons with the surname Larze: Franciska (b. 1918) and her three children. As she stated during the interrogation in the camp, she joined the Blum family, because the old Blum’s son, Alfred, “has been with me for ten years in a relationship similar to marriage” from which they had three children.<sup>34</sup> For Anna Schmidt, born in 1929 in Stude, Germany, it is written that her father “must be the artist Franz Fischer-Schmidt”.

31 *Logor Banjica*, II, br. 13281, 92.

32 IAB, BdS, B-1174-5, Abschrift, SS-Hauptscharführer Friederich, Belgrad, den 17. Juni 1943.

33 See.: *Banjica Concentration Camp. Introduction to the Books of Evidence of Detainees*, (Belgrade: Historical Archive of Belgrade, 2014), 19–23.

34 IAB, BdS, B-1174-16, Belgrad, den 18. Juni 1943. “..weil der Sohn des Karl Blum, Alfred Blum, seit 10 Jahren mit mir in einem eheähnlichen Verhältnis lebt”.

In addition to the names of Adolf Schmidt (b. 1937), Elisabeth Blum (b. 1936) and Berta Richter (b. 1932), it is stated that they were all born out of wedlock (“außerehelich”) and that their “alleged parents” (“angebliche Eltern”) were Franz Robert and Maria Blum, i. e. Adolf Richter and Adelheid, née Blum. The origin of the other children was questioned and relativized in the same manner.<sup>35</sup>

Avoiding the legalization of these family ties can be partly explained by the marriage customs of this minority group that were practiced before the Nazis came to power. However, behind it stood the coercion of the Nazi state and increasingly restrictive laws, as a tool of racial engineering, including the strictest ban on marriage and intimate relations between “pure Aryans” and “racially foreign elements” or “mixed-races”, which, in addition to Jews, included both Roma and Sinti.<sup>36</sup> After the enactment of the Nuremberg Race Laws in 1935, the German authorities initially showed no particular interest in controlling marriages between Roma and Sinti partners; their monitoring was to prevent violations of the ban on “mixing of blood” which was most severely sanctioned as “Rassenschande” (“desecration of the race”). These marriages were later banned... In 1941, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued an order to registrars to pay special attention at checking spouses in order to avoid „Gypsy blood”. The previously allowed possibility of a marriage between a partner of „German blood” and a partner having a quarter or less „foreign blood“ was annulled. Violation of these regulations was followed by imprisonment in concentration camps, while the term „Gypsy marriage” entered the police vocabulary.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Itinerary of the journey through the war*

On April 24, 1943, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the German diplomatic missions in Budapest, Bucharest, Zagreb, Bratislava, Sofia and Belgrade about the reports from Istanbul that on November 5, 1942, members “of a group of seventeen entertainers and artists who arrived from Ro-

35 IAB, BdS, B-1174-8, 9. Belgrad, den 15 Juni 1943.

36 The Sinti are the majority members of the traditional Romani (“Gypsy”) community in Germany, while the name Roma is used for its other part, whose members are originally from Eastern and Southeastern Europe, immigrated during the 19th and 20th centuries; Gilad Margalit, *Germany and its Gypsies. A Post-Auschwitz Ordeal*, (Madison, Wisconsin-UK: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 22.

37 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 110, 111.

mania, mainly Bulgaria, intending to put on puppet wagons shows (Wohnwagen) had arrived".<sup>38</sup>

According to information sent from Istanbul, Karl Franz had a German passport with a one-year validity, which he received in Bucharest on September 23, 1942. His wife Hedwiga and daughter Elizabeth had passports issued on July 5, 1940 at the German consulate in Florence, valid for five years. Two other daughters, Margareta and Lina, received their passports at the German consulate in Zagreb on May 8, 1942.<sup>39</sup> All adult members of the Schmidt family were issued valid passports at the German embassy in Bucharest. There was no record of travel documents for two children, granddaughters of Karl Franz, - Juliana Elizabeth Franz, who was five at the time of deportation to the Banjica camp, and Adelheide Blum, born in October 1941 in Campo Formido near Udine. The only documents that were submitted for inspection were birth certificates, with information about the parents, which the German authorities called into question.

Instead of an answer, the question arises - what made this group of people, who lived under the strict supervision of the authorities, embark on a risky adventure during wartime? There is another question without a clear answer - what did they have in mind when they decided, prepared and finally set out on the unknown roads and paths to cover their tracks, leaving their homeland, which rejected them more and more clearly and ominously. The very decision to leave their places of residence in Germany meant an extremely serious violation of the ban issued on October 17, 1939 by the decree of the Main Security Office of the Third Reich and Reichssicherheitshauptamt Reinhard Heydrich (Festsetzungserlass). That act ordered that Gypsies and "mixed Gypsies" (Zigeunermischlinge) should not leave their place of residence. It also instructed local and police authorities to enumerate them and determine their residential and employment status, as well as whether they happened to be married to an „Aryan“. After the data was collected and analyzed, their classification was carried out on the basis of which further measures were taken, including arrest and detention in special concentration camps - until their "final removal". Violation of the ban on leaving the place of residence was punished by being sent to a concentration camp, which was a preparation for deportation to the territories of occupied Poland. Any departure from the place

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38 IAB, BdS, B-1174-26, Auswärtiges Amt, R 83553, Betreffend; Artistengruppe Franz/Fischer, Berlin 29. 4. 1943.

39 Ibid.

of residence had to be approved under special conditions by the local police authorities (visiting sick relatives, attending funerals, etc.).<sup>40</sup>

All those who could not prove that they had German citizenship were expelled from Germany in 1934. The following year, the political rights of the German Roma were taken away and a ban was passed to spare them from active military service. In the same year, the concentration camp Marzahn was opened. A series of restrictive acts continued in the following years: in 1938, they were all declared “anti-social” by a decree, while many were sentenced to forced labor and imprisonment in labor camps. The “National Center for the Fight against the Gypsy Plague” was established and an order was passed to fight the “Gypsy Plague”. In 1939, the deportation of 30.000 Roma and Sinti was planned and a decree was passed that prohibited their further movement throughout Germany. In the “Eastern March”, as Austria was renamed after the *Anschluss*, a camp for their internment was established near Salzburg in 1940, as was common in other parts of this “new province of the Reich”.

When Blum and his relatives made the decision to break these prohibitions and embark on a journey into uncertainty, they were probably motivated by the fear spread by the Nazi authorities, as well as by the anxiety of alienation and the poor living conditions that the war further exacerbated. At the same time, the “epidemic” of passing racial laws, regulations and ordinances according to the German model had already spread throughout Europe. The racist “classification” of persons of Roma origin was accepted by Italy, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, NDH, and Slovakia.<sup>41</sup> After the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, where their arrest and internment began, the occupation and collaborationist authorities in France opened similar camps for “nomads”. In 1940, Heinrich Himmler, the “first policeman of the Reich”, issued an order for the forced relocation of Roma from the annexed areas of western Poland to the east. In the occupied Baltic countries, the social position of Roma and Jews was equalized. The occupying authorities carried out the same practice in Serbia, while in the territories of “New

40 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 68, 69.

41 The German “Racial Classification” had seven categories: Z („Pure-blood Gypsies or pure Gypsies“), ZM (“Gypsies mixed with a part of Gypsy and mixed German blood”); ZM(+) („Gypsy, mixed with most of Gypsy blood“); ZM 1. Class U (“One parent is pure Gypsy, the other is of German blood”); ZM2. Classes (“One parent is ZM1 and the other is of German blood”); ZM-, ZM(-) (“Gypsy mixtures with a large part of German blood“); NZ (“non-Gypsies-nomads without Roma or Sinti blood”).

Europe” they started mass killings (in Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, other parts of the occupied Soviet territory).<sup>42</sup>

D. Crowe believes that the “Gypsy question” was not fully legally regulated under the racist-ideological constraints of the National Socialist state until late 1941, because some Austrian Roma (Sinti and members of the Laleri Roma group) were conscripted for military service, while their children continued to attend school. In addition, the question of the status of mixed marriages remained unresolved. The German penetration into the European East in 1941 and the occupation of large parts of the territory of the Soviet Union were the beginning of a comprehensive initiative for the “final solution of the Jewish question”. This also influenced the radicalization of the “Gypsy issue”. By the end of 1942, Heinrich Himmler decided that the Roma population of Germany, Austria, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the annexed territories of western Poland would be deported to Auschwitz. On the other hand, his obsession with the racial question influenced his position that the smaller group of Sinti and Laleri should be spared as “pure Aryans”, which Hitler’s secretary Martin Bormann resisted.<sup>43</sup>

When Karl Blum and his troupe arrived in Zagreb, the city had already been the capital of the Ustasha Independent State of Croatia for a year. Racial laws (“Laws on the Protection of the Croatian People”) had been in force since the first weeks after the Ustasha came to power, which, in addition to Serbs and Jews, also affected Roma. While Blum’s troupe was in Zagreb, where one of their children was born, the mass extermination center of the Jasenovac concentration camp was operating at full steam. Its mostly anonymous victims were also Roma, who were usually killed on the scaffold and thrown into the Sava River.<sup>44</sup>

While the artists of Blum’s caravan were passing through Belgrade on their way to the Romanian border, most of the Roma in German-occupied Serbia had already perished. Following the order of the Chief of Administrative

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42 Donald Kernick, *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)*, second edition, (Lanham, Maryland-Toronto-Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), XXVI, XXVII.

43 Himmler’s position was accepted by Hitler, so a small number of German Sinti classified as Aryans survived: Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, 454.

44 On Ustasha anti-Roma legislation and genocide against Roma in the NDH, see: Ivo Goldstein, *Jasenovac*, (Novi Sad: Akademska knjiga, 2019), 48, 50; 523–536. Goldstein states that in the system of the Jasenovac death camp “almost all Roma from the NDH area died” – 16.173 of them were enumerated, of which 5.688 were men, 4.877 were women and 5.608 were children under the age of 14<sup>4</sup>: Ibid, 536.

Staff, Harald Turner, the German and Serbian collaborationist police arrested the remaining Jews and Roma in Belgrade and its surroundings in late October 1941. They were imprisoned in the improvised camp of *Topovske šupe*, from where they were taken and shot in groups in the village of Jabuka near Pančevo, and in other places in Banat. Women and children were detained in the camp at *Sajmište* (fairground, *Judenlager Semlin*). While Jewish women and children were suffocated in agony in gas vans, mobile gas chambers, which passed through the streets of Belgrade heading towards Avala and Jajinci, where the victims were buried in mass graves, Roma prisoners died in the camp from hunger and disease. Those survivors who could get the proof of permanent residence (since 1850), employment and the confirmation that they did not belong to the “nomads” (*čergari*) who were shot with the Jews by German soldiers, were released from the camp. Thus, Harold Turner reported with undisguised satisfaction to Berlin in the spring of 1942 that, in addition to the “Jewish question”, the “Gypsy question had also been resolved”.<sup>45</sup>

Considering their route through Romania (where the Roma were freed from slavery only in 1864)<sup>46</sup> it can be speculated whether Karl Blum and his companions knew that during the summer and autumn, when they were going through the Wallachian plain towards Bucharest and further south and towards the Danube, that the numerous Roma minority of about a quarter of a million was already under attack from the Romanian authorities. Over 25.000 Romanian Roma were interned and transported to the east, to Transnistria, and further to Ukraine,<sup>47</sup> where they died en masse from hunger, typhus and the brutality of the Romanian military and police authorities. At the same time, Romani recruits were dying on the Eastern Front wearing the uniforms of the Romanian army.<sup>48</sup>

At the beginning of 1941, Bulgaria adopted its Law on the Protection of the People, based on the “German model”, which did not directly mention the Roma, but served to introduce a discriminatory policy towards them. Al-

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45 See: Milovan Pisari, *Stradanje Roma u Srbiji za vreme Holokausta*, (Beograd: Forum za primenjenu istoriju, 2014).

46 Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, 119, 120.

47 Ioanid Radu, *The Holocaust in Romania. The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*. With Foreword by Elie Wiesel, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000), 226, 227.

48 *Ibid*; Crowe, “Roma: The Gypsies”, 134, 135. It is estimated that around 35.000 Romanian Roma were killed by Marshal Antonescu’s regime. For Hungary’s policy towards the Roma in WWII see: *Pharrajmos. The fate of the Roma during the Holocaust*, ed. Janos Barsony, Agnes Daroczi, (New York: Idebate Press Books, 2007).



though they were conscripted into the Bulgarian army, they were still subject to restrictive regulations such as the decree of May 1942 on mandatory forced labor, while they were deported from the cities to the interior. Mixed marriages concluded between persons of Bulgarian and Roma origin were outlawed by the decree of August 26, 1942. Some of these measures were gradually eased after the Battle of Stalingrad, when the German Allies' chances of victory dwindled to a trickle.<sup>49</sup>

In a report dated April 24, 1943, Karl Franz and Franz Fischer were listed as "troupe spokesmen". They claimed at the hearing that they intended to register the two children (born during the trip), who were handed over to them at the Bulgarian-Turkish border, in the passports of Karl and his daughter Lina. This was not possible due to the lack of necessary documents and "inconsistency of the applicants' statements". The Turkish police threatened to arrest the responsible members of the troupe if they did not show proper German identification. The report emphasized that "it was absolutely necessary that the troupe should be returned and prevented to perform in the interest of Germany's reputation in Turkey".

The report from Istanbul was sent to the head of the Security Police and Security Service for his opinion. The answer was that "the persons listed in the report of the German Consulate General in Istanbul... are Gypsies of mixed race, some of whom also have Jewish blood. Most of the persons were also ordered not to leave their place of residence without police permission", while the rest knew how to avoid police surveillance and escape abroad.<sup>50</sup>

Heinrich Fischer, a member of the troupe, born in 1923 in Horn, Germany, was sent by the German embassy in Sofia to the command of the military district in Berlin. According to the racist categorization, he was a "Gypsy mix with predominant non-Gypsy blood with Jewish influence". Based on a telephone conversation with the military district command, Fischer was called up to serve in the German armed forces (Wehrmacht) in December 1942. Since the High Command of the German Army (OKW) issued an order on July 10, 1942, according to which "Gypsy mixed-races do not belong to the Wehrmacht", Fischer was released from military duty upon the intervention of the head of the SD.<sup>51</sup>

49 Crowe, "Roma: The Gypsies", 18, 19.

50 IAB, BdS, B-1174, Auswärtiges Amt R 83553. Betr.: Artistengruppe Franz/Fischer, Berlin W 8, den 29.4.1943.

51 Ibid. This is the OKW order of 10 July 1942 No. 7985 / 42.AHA Ag / N (Ia), published in the official army newspaper *Allgemeine Heeresmitteilungen* 17, issue of 21 July 1942.

The process of excluding Roma and “Gypsy mixed race” from the “German national organism” as a “foreign body” included the prohibition of their further recruitment into the Wehrmacht. In November 1937, a secret decree was passed on their transfer to the reserve, but it was avoided in various ways. In February 1941, both the German High Command (OKW) and the leadership of the Nazi Party demanded strict adherence to this decree. All those classified as “Gypsies” or “mixed” were dismissed from the army; in February 1942, the commander of the German Air Force, Hermann Göring, issued an order that members of these groups were prohibited from being recruited into the auxiliary services of the Air Force (Luftwaffe). The “racial character” was also the reason for their exclusion from the German Labor Service (Arbeitskorps) in 1942, when further restrictions on serving in the army were imposed.<sup>52</sup>

In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Reich, it was concluded that, “given the fact that the performances and the movement of (this) group of artists are causing damage to Germany in the Balkans, it is requested that it be indicated that the organized return of this group of artists is necessary”. It was necessary to inform the Ministry about the time of their arrival at the border and a certain border crossing, so that the competent authorities of the border police could be informed. It was requested that the competent authorities give appropriate instructions to the German consulates in the Balkans.<sup>53</sup>

The information on their travel documents mentioned in this report, obtained from the German consulates, does not provide an explanation on the basis of which they were issued in the first place, nor with what other documents the artists traveled to Florence, Bucharest or Zagreb. It was only their testimony at the hearing in the Banjica camp that showed the somewhat confusing determination, courage or recklessness of this artistic caravan of adults and children, moving across several borders without the necessary or appropriate papers.

### *Hearing*

The adult members of the troop were interviewed in the camp on June 18 by SS-Sturmscharführer Schumann. Their statements provide a rough itinerary of the journey made in the midst of the chaos of the world war.

52 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 96, 97. The author also cites examples when exceptions were made, such as when it came to veterans of the First World War, or soldiers who violated the protection of their superiors, etc.

53 This document bears the signature of MFA official Rödiger, and was certified by the secretary of the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bergen. IAB, BdS, B-1174-26, Auswärtiges Amt, R 83553, Betreffend; Artistengruppe Franz/Fischer, Berlin 29. 4. 1943.

The leader, Karl Blum, was the first to be investigated and his statement was the most comprehensive. He stated that his last address was in the town of Weiden in the province of Upper Palatinate (Rheinland-Pfalz), where he had a house. In 1942, the police authorities in Weiden forbade him to leave his place of residence, although he later obtained a three-month permit so that he could pursue his business within the borders of the province. He used the opportunity to flee south with his family. In the spring of 1942, he crossed the (new) Reich border near Marburg (Maribor). He stated that his "Inlandpass" (passport for moving around Germany) was extended (in Maribor?) for the territory of Italy as well. However, he did not go to Italy with his family and relatives, but moved on to Croatia, from where they crossed into Romania via Serbia and continued further to Bulgaria. In his statement at the hearing, Karl did not mention that he had reached Turkey with the troupe, which the Gestapo already knew. They were arrested in Skopje, the center of the "new Bulgarian territories".

In his statement, he did not state how much time he spent with his family at these stops, only mentioning that they made a living from „artistic performances“. Hoping that perhaps his odyssey would be forgiven somehow, he asked to be „returned to Germany“ and that he - in case he was deported - would be "allowed to take his car/vagon with him". He signed the statement with an uncertain hand, illegible.<sup>54</sup>

His namesake Karl Franz, born in 1884, married to Hedviga Schmidt, stated at the hearing that he left Germany with his family in January 1940. They headed to Italy, where they stayed for a year. Then they continued their journey across the entire Balkans to reach Turkey, from where they were returned "to Bulgaria" and arrested in Skopje. His "chronology" was not precise and did not match the statements of the other detainees, who claimed that they left Germany in the spring of 1942.<sup>55</sup> Franz Fischer (- Schmidt, b. 1899), stated that he left Germany with his family in May 1942, and that he crossed the border near Maribor with his wife Selma Schmidt and Wilhelm Schmidt's family. It can only be assumed that a part of this artistic troupe went on their war tour earlier, in order to join another group in Zagreb in the spring - as indicated only by this inconsistency in Karl Franz's statement.

In several remaining records in the BdS Registry in Belgrade, the address at which Willy Blum was registered is listed as: Zagreb, Borongeist (-Borongaj) 56. Zagreb as a place of residence is also listed in the record of Eliz-

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54 IAB, BdS, B-1174-13, Belgrad, 18 Juni 1943.

55 IAB, BdS, B-1174-12, Belgrad 18 Juni 1943.

abeth Schmidt. The records also list the charges against the arrested: Willy Blum, Selma and Karl Schmidt were guilty of “damaging Germany’s reputation abroad”, while Elizabeth Schmidt was suspected of forging passports. In the file of Willy Schmidt, it is recorded that “from 12.7. (19-)42 he was on the run”.<sup>56</sup>

Karl Blum’s daughter, Johanna (b. 1922), and his wife, Alma, gave short, almost identical statements.<sup>57</sup> His son Tony stated that he was an “artist and musician” in an extramarital relationship with Franciska Larze and that his children bear their mother’s surname.<sup>58</sup> Elfriede Klehr, the mother of little Rudolf who died in the camp two weeks before giving her statement, said she did not remember whether she had a valid passport, while she received a new one in Bucharest (Auslandspass).<sup>59</sup> Siegfried, Karl and Alma’s second son, Elfriede’s husband, also stated in his statement that he was a musician.<sup>60</sup>

Their son-in-law Wilhelm Schmidt confirmed that he had seven children from his marriage with Wilhelmina Blum, three of whom were alive, and that their daughter Paulina, born in Skopje on December 11, 1942, died in the Dedinje camp. He admitted that he traveled with his wife and children without a valid passport, while Wilhelmina gave the same statement.<sup>61</sup>

Selma Schmidt (b. 1896), stated that she had been living for twenty years in a union “similar to marriage” with Franz Fischer (Schmidt), with whom she has three children. Her son Adolf Schmidt (1936), born from her previous relationship with artist and former circus owner August Schmidt (“residence unknown”), also traveled with her.<sup>62</sup> Her husband, Franz, tried to explain at the hearing that his real surname is actually Schmidt and not Fischer. He claimed that he had only one valid pass (“Durchlaßschein”) for himself and his family members. He was forbidden by the police in Cologne in 1941 to leave his place of residence without permission. He asked “to be sent back to Germany”.<sup>63</sup> Lili Fischer, Franz Fischer’s daughter, said that she did not know that her father’s last name was actually Schmidt. Although she was also

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56 IAB, BdS, Kartoteka, Akte Karl Blum.

57 IAB, BdS, B-1174-14, 15, Belgrad 18. Juni 1943. Alma stated in her statement the names of her children, who traveled with her and her husband: Johanna, Alfred, Siegfried and grandchildren, Herte Richter (1932), daughter of her son Adolf and Adelheid Blum (Ibid).

58 IAB, BdS, B-1174-17, Belgrad 18. Juni 1943.

59 IAB, BdS, B-1174-18, Belgrad 18. Juni 1943

60 IAB, BdS, B-1174-19, Belgrad, 18. Juni 1943.

61 IAB, BdS, B-1174-20; 21, Belgrad, 18. Juni 1943.

62 IAB, BdS, B-1174-22, Belgrad, 18. Juni 1943.

63 IAB, BdS, B-1174-23, Belgrad, 18. Juni 1943. G. Lewy discusses the problems of the police in the 19th century and later difficulties in uncovering the true identity, including the names of the Roma who, in addition to their names in the Romani language, had other

banned from leaving her place of residence by the police in Cologne in 1941, she left Germany with only one document, which she described as a Postausweis (“postal identity card”), because she “wanted (to go) to her groom” with whom she had two children!<sup>64</sup>

### *Decisions and consequences*

On May 28, 1943, commander of the military-occupation administration in Belgrade, Paul Bader<sup>65</sup> gave the commander of the Security Police (SIPO) and SD Meyszner a new document with information about Karl Franz that summarized all the serious charges: damage to the reputation of the Reich, theft, alienation of property, violation of passport regulations. Felix Benzler, the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Reich in Belgrade, also asked for information about Franz.<sup>66</sup>

The “disentanglement” of the data and identity of the members of this artistic troupe was still relevant after their transfer to Belgrade and interrogation. This is evidenced by a note from SS-Untersturmführer Zappe, which adds new confusion to the case. On June 11, 1943, Zappe wrote that “The group ,artist Karl Franz‘, mentioned in the letter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is not identical to the ,group artist Blum‘, on whose case (department) IV E 1 he worked. The persons mentioned in the letter from (number) 1 to 16 were evacuated to the Dedinje camp on May 3, 1943,” while the process against them was under the jurisdiction of the V Department of the SD.<sup>67</sup> After consultation with the official in charge Sturmscharführer Felsmann, it was requested that the case should be handed over to the V Department under his responsibility.<sup>68</sup>

On June 17, Meyszner’s headquarters requested an instruction from the Office of the Criminal Police of the Reich in Berlin - where and to which domestic authority in Germany the case should be referred for further pro-

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names which were given to the authorities, in order to defend themselves from repression and conscription. Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 24.

64 IAB, BdS, B-1174-B-24, Belgrad, 18. Juni 1943.

65 On June 11, 1941, he replaced General Franz Friedrich Böhme in this position. In the summer of 1943, he was appointed commander of the army corps with command in Kosovska Mitrovica.

66 IAB, BdS, B-1174-30, Abschrift. Kdr. General und Bfh. In Serbien-Militärverwaltung- an den Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Belgrad, den 28. 5. 1943.

67 Divisions IV and V were parts of the structure of the German Security Police in Serbia (BdS). Department IV E was part of the Gestapo and dealt with sabotage and various types of operational checks, while Section V focused on issues of criminality.

68 IAB, BdS, B-1174-31, Abschrift. IV E1, Belgrad, den 11. 6. 1943, gez. Zappe.

cessing. This entire correspondence led to a single outcome, which is known from a dispatch sent to the SIPO Commander and SD Meyszner on June 22, 1943, from the headquarters of the Reich Criminal Police in Berlin. Sturmbannführer Böhlhoff of the Reich Criminal Police, stating the main charge (inflicting “serious damage to Germany’s reputation abroad”) demanded that Karl Blum’s group, consisting of thirty-four people, should “be sent straight to the concentration camp (Zigeunerlager - Gypsy camp) Auschwitz, near Katowice”. Documents about the prisoners and their detention should also be sent to the commandant of the Auschwitz camp. It was requested that “precautionary measures must be taken to prevent the escape of the named persons”.<sup>69</sup>

The deterioration of the position of the German Roma and Sinti came as a result of the change in Himmler’s attitudes and criminal policy during 1942. Himmler abandoned his position that there were “racially valuable elements” among the “pure Gypsies” and that they should be spared repressive measures, and preferred Bormann’s radical approach.<sup>70</sup> According to Himmler’s instructions, plans for their “relocation” initiated mass deportations during February and March 1943 to a special part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp system (“Gypsy Family Camp”), where 13.000 prisoners from Germany and Austria were interned in the “first wave”.<sup>71</sup> Already on March 23, 1700 men, women and children from the vicinity of Bialystok were executed in the gas chamber.<sup>72</sup> In May 1943, SS-Sturmführer Josef Mengele was appointed as the chief camp doctor of the “Gypsy Family Camp”, and he began his medical “experiments” on the prisoners.<sup>73</sup> About 2.000 of those who were not deported were forcibly sterilized.<sup>74</sup> A year later, in May 1944, the camp was emptied of the few survivors to make room for the new transports of Hungarian Jews who were brought in large numbers and gassed.<sup>75</sup>

On June 25, Meyszner’s headquarters sent a document to General Bader, the military commander of Serbia, informing him about a conversation with Rutkowsky, Benzler’s subordinate, who asked to be informed about “the

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69 IAB, BdS, B-1174-32, Sturmbf. Böhlhoff, Reichskriminalpolizeiamt, Berlin- an den Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Belgrad, 22. 6. 1943, Betrifft: Festgenommene Zigeuner.

70 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 148.

71 *Ibid*, 100, 101. The first mass transport arrived at the camp on February 26. *Ibid*, 165.

72 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 175.

73 *Ibid*, 171.

74 Magalit, *Germany and its Gypsies*, 57.

75 In the first wave, in May 1944, around 100.000 Hungarian Jews were killed. Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 177.

final destination of the arrested Gypsies - that is, the artistic family Blum". He was told that Berlin's response was that "all arrested persons should be sent without delay to the Auschwitz concentration camp near Katowice ("sämtliche Festgenommenen unmittelbar in das KL (Zigeunerlager) Auschwitz bei Kattowitz einzuweisen sind").<sup>76</sup>

It was confirmed on June 26 that the order would be carried out "immediately": the families of Franz, Blum, Fischer, Larze, Schmidt and Klehr, would be transferred to Auschwitz, to its "Gypsy camp". In the act of the SIPO and the V Department of the SD, it was stated that their documents will be sent along with the prisoners in a special shipment and "in addition to the documents with the list and - 12,504 dinars that belong to the persons who are being sent". One open van should also transport three cars that belonged to the arrested.<sup>77</sup>

On June 26, 1943, SS-Sturmscharführer Schumann made a note about delivering the original documents on the investigative process against the troupe of artists to Benzler and Bader.<sup>78</sup> Department IV C2 (which had a central record of detainees and was in charge of camps and prisons) reiterated on June 30 that it would act on the request that 32 "Gypsy artists" must be sent to the "Gypsy camp" in Auschwitz, with a shipment of personal documents, in the amount of 12.504 dinars.<sup>79</sup>

In that bureaucratic, impersonal way, the Belgrade file of the troupe of traveling artists Blum was closed. They shared the fate with millions who were branded as "racially unsuitable" and "dangerous to the purity of German blood", and thus killed in one of the several hundred mass death camps or execution grounds throughout Europe.

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The last traces of several members of the Blum and Schmidt families are found in the Auschwitz camp records. Karl received the camp number 74253 and was registered under the code AsoZ (asocial, Gypsy). Alfred Blum got a number tattooed on the back of his hand 123674, Siegfried 74249. In Johanna Blum's file there was a note: Ravensbrück, which indicates that after the clos-

76 IAB, BdS, B-1174-35, Der Höhere SS-u. Polizeiführer in Serbien, der Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in Belgrad an den Kdr. General und Befehlshaber in Serbien-Militärverwaltung, Beleška, Belgrad, den 25. juni 1943.

77 IAB, BdS, B-1174-34, Abteilung V, Belgrad, den 26. juli 1943, unsigned.

78 Ibid, beleška, SS-Sturmscharführer Schumann, Belgrad den 26. Juli 1943.

79 IAB, BdS, B-1174-34, Beleška, SS-Sturmscharführer Karch, Belgrad, 30. 6. 1943.

ing of the “Gypsy Camp” in Auschwitz, she was transferred to this women’s concentration camp. Wilhelm Schmidt’s card, which received the camp number 74444, offers information about his profession (“chauffeur”), education (ten grades of primary and vocational school), that he is married to Wilhelmina, née Blum, who also “lives in A(-uschwitz) k . (-concentracion) l.(-camp), personal descriptive details, and that he was arrested „in Skopje, Bulgaria“. In the column about his parents, it is stated that his father was “unknown” and that his mother, Selma, died in 1944 in the camp. According to the record, Wilhelm was “deported a second time” to the camp (2. Mal eingeliefert) on August 3, 1944.<sup>80</sup> That date marks the moment when the “Gypsy Camp” was closed, while the remaining survivors were mostly transferred to other camps or to some of the other segments of the Auschwitz system.<sup>81</sup>

Their journey from Germany to Turkey during the war years of 1942 and 1943 was an unusual and risky adventure. It was interrupted by the arrest in Skopje, transfer to Niš, then to Belgrade Dedinje (Banjica) camp. From there to their final destination, Auschwitz, they were the subject of investigation and correspondence of various segments of the German occupation system in the Balkans, Serbia, as well as those in Berlin. The bureaucratic-police machinery of the Nazi state tried to discover not only their true identity, but also the ways in which they bypassed obstacles and violated strict prohibitions, in order to cross the German border without proper documents. Along the way, they managed to get German documents (passports) in the consulates in Italy and Romania, which “raised border ramps” for them in the Balkans. It can only be assumed that even their documents - the various passes that they mentioned in the investigation - at the borders of the German Balkan vassals, with their stamps and language, had an almost magical power for the border police and customs officers who did not dare to doubt their validity of any German document, despite the dubious impression that the artists caravan could leave during the war years.

The question remains open about the motives for their decision to violate the draconian regulations of the Nazi state on the treatment of this small, socially marginalized group, additionally exposed to racist prohibitions and punishment? The fear for their lives was stronger than the threat of punishment, the need to escape the omnipresent police surveillance was strong-

80 <https://arolsen-archives.org/suchen-erkunden>.

81 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 164, 165. The number of 200.000 Roma victims of the National Socialist regime, according to Robert S. C. Gordon in the encyclopedic unit “Race”, on p. 313, published in: *Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, 2009.



er than the awareness that it would be only a matter of time before they're arrested and deported. However, it is possible that their long journey with many stopovers was nothing more than a desperate attempt by these few families to reach safety in the territory of neutral Turkey. The arrest in Skopje in January and the extradition to the German police was the sinking of their hope that they would find a way to escape from the terror and horror with which the Nazi authorities (both in Germany and throughout occupied Europe) paved the way to their death with many legal acts, prohibitions, racial classifications, decrees, orders and dispatches. Thus, in the summer, members of this group of artists and their families joined tens of thousands of detainees in the "Gypsy Camp", a branch of Auschwitz. By March 1944, most of the approximately 30.000 Roma, Sinti and "Gypsy mixed-races" had perished there.<sup>82</sup>

For Karl Blum and the members of his family troupe, relatives, sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren, entering the camp gates of Auschwitz in the summer of 1943 was the closing of the circle of war travel in the Balkans, but also the beginning of their new odyssey through the system of Nazi death camps. The available documentation allows us to follow their further movement in a "parallel world" of suffering and dying. Karl, categorized in the camp documentation as "Zg. (-euner) Mischling", then Alfred and Siegfried Blum and Wilhelm Schmidt were transferred on August 3, 1944 from Auschwitz to the Buchenwald concentration camp, i. e., its „expository“ Mittelbau-Dora. It was part of the process of liquidation of the Gypsy family camp (Zigeuner-Familienlager) in Auschwitz-Birkenau and evacuation due to the advance of the Red Army. His wife Alma was transferred to Ravensbrück on August 3, 1944, as well as daughter Johanna, granddaughter of Hertha Richter and Elisabeth Franz, while Hedviga Franz was transferred to Buchenwald on September 1, 1944.<sup>83</sup>

### Summary

Violating the strict prohibitions of the Nazi authorities, the troupe composed of several families (with a total of 34 members, adult men, wom-

82 Lewy, *The Nazi Persecution of the Gypsies*, 105.

83 Data taken from <https://arolsen-archives.org/en/> and <https://arolsen-archives.org/en/search-explore/search-online-archive/>. The author would like to thank his colleague Dr. Olga Manojlović-Pintar for pointing out these sources. Following the subsequent fate of Karl Blum's family and troupe would require a much broader and more demanding research. In the digitized Totenbuch KZ Mittelbau-Dora (Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp's Book of the Dead), there is no mention of any of Karl Blum's family members. <https://www.buchenwald.de/de/103/>.

en and children), connected by family ties and led by its oldest member Karl Blum, set out from Germany in the spring of 1942 to journey through northern Italy to the Balkans (Zagreb, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia). Two children were also born on that journey. In early 1943, the troop arrived in Turkey, but the refusal of the Turkish authorities to allow them to stay on their territory due to suspicious documents drew the attention of the German representatives in Istanbul. Blum and his troop were returned to Bulgarian territory, and at the end of January 1943, they were arrested by the Bulgarian police in the occupied Skopje and handed over to the German police. They were transferred to the German Red Cross camp in Niš, and after a few months, they were transported to Anhaltelager Dedinje (Banjica) in Belgrade. In late July 1943, they were sent to their final destination, the “Gypsy Camp” – part of the Auschwitz camp complex, where they were killed. By following the fate of these few families of German Roma (Sinti), recorded in the documents of the German occupation authorities in Belgrade, the article also discusses a somewhat broader context – the racist policy of the National Socialist regime towards this minority. In addition, this paper analyzes the widespread, traditional anti-Roma discourse in European countries, which provided a suitable environment for the implementation of the genocide against the Roma and Sinti (Pharrajmos), both in the Nazi death camps and in the execution grounds throughout Europe during the Second World War. The journey of Karl Blum and his troops through Southeast Europe in 1942–1943. and their tragic end can also be seen as an example of all the failed escapes from the genocidal practice of the National Socialist regime and its allies during the Second World War.

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## Резиме

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### ДУГО ПУТОВАЊЕ КАРЛА БЛУМА КРОЗ БАЛКАН 1942–1943. ГОДИНЕ. ПРИЛОГ ЗА ИСТОРИЈУ ПОРАЈМОСА

**Апстракт:** Неколико немачких ромских-синтских породица, чланова каравана путујућих артиста, кренуло је из средње Немачке у пролеће 1942. и стигло до Истанбула у јануару 1943. прошавши кроз ратом захваћен Балкан. Крајем јануара 1943. су ухапшени и из Истанбула пребачени у логор на Црвеном крсту у Нишу, да би неколико месеци касније били пребачени у Бањички логор (Anhaltelager Dedinje) у Београду, одакле су крајем јуна одведени у „цигански логор“, део Аушвица. Кроз судбину ове групе Рома разматра се и расистичка политика националсоцијалистичког режима према Ромима и Синтима са коначном консеквенцом – њиховим масовним физичким уништењем, геноцидом (Порајмос).

**Кључне речи:** Други светски рат, Балкан, расизам, Роми и Синти, Бањица, Аушвиц, Pharraimos.

Трупа састављена од неколико породица (са укупно 34 члана – мушкараца, жена и деце) повезаних рођачким везама, коју је предводио најстарији члан Карл Блум, кренула је из Немачке у пролеће 1942. године на путовање преко северне Италије и Балкана (Загреб, Београд, Букурешт, Софија), кршећи строге забране нацистичких власти. На путу је било рођено и двоје деце. Почетком 1943. трупа је стигла у Турску, али су турске власти због сумњивих докумената одбиле да им дозволе боравак на својој територији, што је скренуло пажњу немачких представника у Истанбулу. Блум и његова трупа враћени су на бугарску територију, да би их крајем јануара 1943. у окупираном Скопљу ухапсила бугарска полиција и предала немачкој полицији. Пребачени су у немачки логор на Црвеном крсту у Нишу, одакле су после неколико месеци били транспортовани у Бањички логор (Anhaltelager Dedinje) у Београду. Крајем јула 1943. упућени су на последње одредиште, у „цигански логор“ – део логорског комплекса Аушвиц, где су страдали.

Кроз судбину ових неколико породица немачких Рома (Синти), забележену у документима немачких окупационих власти у Београду, у

чланку се разматра и шири контекст – расистичка политика национал-социјалистичког режима према овом мањинском народу, али и раширени традиционални антиромски дискурс у европским земљама, услед чега је током Другог светског рата створено окружење које је довело до геноцида (Порајмос) над Ромима и Синтима, како у нацистичким логорима смрти, тако и на стратиштима и логорима широм Европе. Путовање Карла Блума и његове трупе кроз Југоисточну Европу 1942–1943, са трагичним крајем, може се посматрати и као парадигма свих неуспелих бекстава од геноцидне праксе националсоцијалистичког и њему савезничких режима током Другог светског рата.