

# Commemorative ceremony marking the 82nd anniversary of the deportation of Roma and Sinti from Prague to Auschwitz II-Birkenau

The Municipal Department of Prague 6 is commemorating the events of March 1943, when hundreds of Roma and Sinti were deported from the provincial forced labor camp in Ruzyně to the Auschwitz II-Birkenau Extermination Camp.

Partners for this event:

The Prague Forum for Romani Histories, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague  
Museum of Romani Culture in Brno, state-subsidised organization

10

March

25



Staré náměstí, Prague 6 - Ruzyně



15:00

# The March 1943 transport of Roma and Sinti from Prague-Ruzyně to Auschwitz II-Birkenau, based on the eyewitness testimony of Karolína Kozáková, née Růžičková

Karolína Kozáková published her memoirs in the year 2000 under the title *Cesta životem v cikánském voze* [My Journey through Life in a Gypsy Wagon]. So far it is the only known eyewitness testimony to the internment of Romani people on the grounds of the forced labor camp in Ruzyně.

When the transport of Roma and Sinti from the Czech lands left Prague-Ruzyně for Auschwitz (to be exact, for Auschwitz II-Birkenau), Karolína Růžičková (whose married surname would later be Kozáková) was not yet 11 years old. In the interwar period, Karolína, her parents and her siblings had made their living traveling to the markets in Bohemian and Moravian towns in the horse-drawn wagon that was their home. Her father, Robert Růžička, traded horses and sharpened knives and scissors, while her mother Jana (née Čermáková), sold sewing supplies door-to-door. For the children, life on the road meant frequently changing schools, among other things. Again and again they attended new schools among new pupils for just a short time, and their parents took great care to make sure they did so. At the beginning of 1940, the Government issued an ordinance “banning nomadism” and forcibly settling Romani people. The Růžičkas then bought a small, single-family house in Zdaboř, near Příbram. That village was also home to relatives of theirs, the Serynek family, who had been expelled there from Příbram, where they preferred to live, by the local police. Mrs. Kozáková mainly remembered her godfather, Jan Serynek, “a very nice, proper person”, who, together with his wife Františka, cared for their adopted, physically disabled son.



Karolína Kozáková-Vdolečková at the age of 17. From the collection of the Museum of Romani Culture, a state-funded organization.

Although the local assembly members initially tried to prevent the Romani families from moving into the village, the Růžičkas and the Seryneks made their new home in Zdaboř. Mrs. Kozáková recalled her childhood there in the Brdy forests as idyllic. She remembered visiting friendly neighbors and making new friends in the school in Březové Hory, to which her family relocated during the Second World War. The Růžičkas settled into their new home and were living peaceful, satisfied lives at this time. For that reason, the

Nazi racial persecution caught them completely unawares and left them in shock. In the summer of 1942, the local gendarmerie sergeant told them that the “gypsy registration” would be starting the next day and urged them to flee to Slovakia. After painful consideration of what to do, the Růžičkas ultimately remained in their home:

*“We were completely beside ourselves all night and all day on Sunday, waiting to see what would happen next, what Monday morning would bring. Father decided we would not go to Slovakia, we didn't have anybody there, they said we would have been like exiles there and who knows how it would have turned out, Father said we would 'leave it up to fate'. [...] He didn't believe it could happen to us. We were very sad, we didn't even want to eat.”*

On Monday, 3 August 1942, gendarmes actually did come to arrest the entire family in the early morning hours. They brought the horrified Růžičkas to Prague, where the Criminal Police were organizing the transport of the Roma from Bohemia to the concentration camp in Lety u Písku.

However, the Růžičkas managed to avoid that transport at the last moment, thanks to their aunt and uncle, the Čermáks, who bribed the police to spare them. Three children from the Růžička family – Anna, Filomena and Barbora – then lived with their aunt temporarily and were later imprisoned in Lety with their aunt's family, but then released through bribery once more. The family's wartime suffering was not over yet, though. Their next arrest was also unexpected and came without any warning whatsoever:

*"What I am about to tell you now will be something horrible, unimaginable. The SS arrived at our home in Zdobov by van during the night [probably the late night of 7 March and the early morning hours of 8 March 1943]. We had to quickly pack just the most necessary things for the trip. Papa told them Mama was in the final stages of pregnancy – the poor man thought that meant they wouldn't take us. However, they insisted that we go with them, that we say goodbye to her, and claimed that once Mama had given birth, they would bring her to us. My God, if you could have seen us saying goodbye to Mama! We knew we would never, ever see her again. My father wanted to kill himself - well, it was awful. We could not tear ourselves away from Mama, we clung to her like ticks, and our dear Mama collapsed, she fainted. It seemed like the end of the world to me. They brought us from the police station to Ruzyně, I don't know for sure, but it was probably a prison. Our father and our brother Jenda were separated from us and from each other and we girls were separated, too. We were very sad, we didn't know what awaited us, and we were without our Mama."*

From March 1943 to the spring of 1944, the Nazis deported more than 23,000 Roma and Sinti to the Auschwitz II-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp, especially those from Germany itself and from Nazi-occupied territory in Austria, Poland and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. This genocide also involved the building of the forced labor camp in Ruzyně (on the grounds of what is the prison there today) where in early March 1943, Karolína, her father, and her siblings were also imprisoned. The Nazis set up what was called a collection point there, where entire families of Roma waited in undignified conditions to be assigned to a transport. The list of people to be transported was compiled by Czech police officers under the control of the German security forces. That made it possible for the Růžičkas' aunt and uncle, the Čermáks, to intervene on the family's behalf once more. We do not know how much money they had to pay, but Karolína and her family returned home thanks to them.

Other Roma and Sinti had no such luck. In addition to the people arrested by the police right in their own homes, Romani prisoners from the forced labor camps in Pardubice and Ruzyně were assigned to transports, as were the inmates of educational institutions. At least 642 Roma and Sinti from the territory of Bohemia were deported in cattle cars to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. The transport reached Auschwitz II-Birkenau on 11 March 1943. The vast majority of the children, men and women on board were murdered there. Among the murdered were the wife of Jan Serynek (the godfather of Karolína Kozáková) and their adopted son.

Romani people were imprisoned on the grounds of the forced labor camp in Ruzyně until the end of the war as part of what was called “preventive police custody” and then transported to the concentration camps in smaller groups. Karolína’s parents, Jana Růžičková and Robert Růžička, were imprisoned in Ruzyně again in May 1943, right before the next mass transport to Auschwitz II-Birkenau of the prisoners from the concentration camp in Lety u Písku. However, they were released once more and managed to survive until the end of the war. Karolína Kozáková stressed in her memoirs that of her father’s 60 living relatives, only his niece, Marie Růžičková, returned from the concentration camps. Everybody else died in the concentration camps during the war.

At least 4,500 Roma and Sinti from Bohemia and Moravia went through the hell of the Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Entire extended families were reduced to a handful of people. In a postwar society that refused to recognize and compensate Romani suffering, these survivors had no opportunity to publicly speak about their experiences. The history of the Roma and Sinti was then long neglected by the majority society.

Prepared for the Prague Forum for Romani Histories by:

Mgr. Jiří Smlsal, Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic

Mgr. Lada Víková, Ph.D., Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Pardubice University

More about the wartime experiences of Karolína Kozáková and 200 other Romani survivors can be found in the constantly-expanding, unique online Database of Roma and Sinti Testimonies run by the Prague Forum for Romani Histories (now part of the Faculty of Arts, Charles University as of January 2025):

[www.romatestimonies.com](http://www.romatestimonies.com)



The Second World War through the Eyes of Roma and Sinti

## Testimonies of Roma and Sinti

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