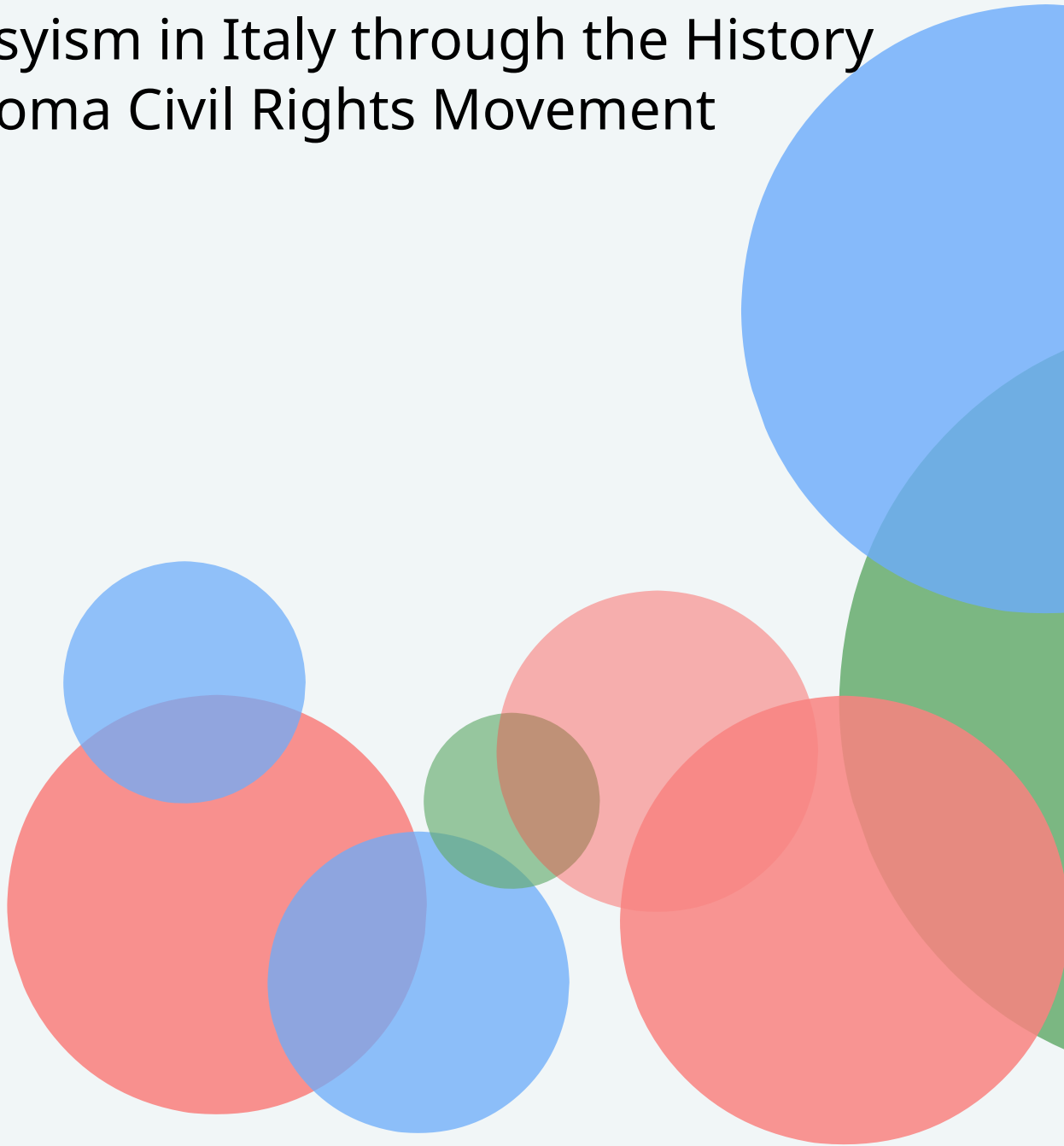


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# Antigypsyism in Italy through the History of the Roma Civil Rights Movement



Federica Scrimieri

2025

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European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC)

**ERAC**  
EUROPEAN ROMA  
INSTITUTE FOR ARTS  
AND CULTURE



**JEKHIPE**  
RECLAIMING OUR PAST, REBUILDING OUR FUTURE:  
NEW APPROACHES TO FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

## The JEKHIPE Project

The JEKHIPE project *Reclaiming our past, rebuilding our future: new approaches to fighting antigypsyism against Roma* is a CERV-funded project aimed at improving the lives of Roma by addressing systemic and institutional antigypsyism, promoting transitional justice, fostering knowledge-building and awareness, and strengthening Roma identity and participation.

It is a follow-up to *CHACHIPEN*, an earlier CERV project, officially titled *Paving the way for a Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe. Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building*. Concluded in 2023, CHACHIPEN introduced an innovative transitional justice-based approach to raising awareness of systemic injustice and ongoing antigypsyism in policymaking, while advocating for a comprehensive truth and reconciliation strategy.

JEKHIPE focuses on multiple levels of policy-making, including research, monitoring, advocacy, networking, alliances building, awareness raising, capacity building, and empowerment. It aims to engage with national and European institutions, academia, politicians, justice mechanisms, state authorities, civil society, and Roma communities themselves to challenge the status quo on approaching Roma issues, particularly antigypsyism, and propose mechanisms for increased accountability by national governments.

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## Part One

### 1. Theoretical and methodological framework

This research is being carried out in Italy as part of the JEKHIPE project – Recovering our past, rebuilding our future: new approaches to combating antigypsyism. The project is funded by the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program. The JEKHIPE consortium includes ERIAC, ERGO Network, the Center for European Policy Studies, and eight Romani civil society organizations from Sweden, Germany, Spain, the Czech Republic, Romania, and Italy.

The aim of the research is to provide an overview of historical and current manifestations of antigypsyism, including systemic, institutional, and structural forms such as state and non-state violence, persecution, and systemic discrimination against Roma and Sinti communities in the Italian context. It also aims to highlight documented and underrepresented cases of Roma resistance, solidarity, and resilience against antigypsyism, with a particular focus on individual and collective forms of mobilization and the emergence of civil rights movements for Roma and Sinti. Finally, it aims to analyze the history of Roma communities, with a focus on the local context and the contributions of Roma arts and culture to identity, memory, and political struggle, in order to demonstrate how Roma artistic and cultural production has served as a means of resisting antigypsyism and promoting positive narratives.

The analysis has been divided into two parts. In the first part of the research, the first chapter describes the methodology and research tools, clarifying the concept of antigypsyism through definitions from international Roma and non-Roma institutions, as well as the words of Italian activists and scholars who have addressed the phenomenon over time. In the following three chapters, the study analyzes, from a diachronic and historical perspective, the events that best represent the practices and acts of antigypsyism that have occurred in the country, as well as the historical and cultural contexts that produced them, from the 1920s to the present day. The analysis will attempt to outline the theories and motivations behind acts and practices of hatred and discrimination against Roma and Sinti communities, describing the characteristics they have taken on in the Italian context.

The second part of the research report will reconstruct the history of the Roma civil rights movement in Italy through the memories, testimonies, and reflections of its protagonists. In addition, an overview of the current situation and the dynamics and demands that characterize the movement today will be provided. In this part of the discussion, the reconstruction of the history of the Roma and Sinti civil rights movement

takes on a specific meaning in light of the historical insights provided in the previous section: reconstructing the responses of the Roma and Sinti communities during decades of negotiations and conflicts with the majority community around pillars that have been reinforced and monitored over time: housing, education, access to work, and public health services. Inevitably, therefore, is reconstructed the policies of public institutions and, therefore, of an entire society towards its minority. To date, it is possible to distinguish two generations corresponding to two phases within the movement, which will be analyzed as follows: an old guard of “pioneers” with their organizations, some linked to international organizations, others to academia, and still others to Catholic or Evangelical religious organizations with a history of local and political struggles. Around them are families, volunteers, collaborators, and supporters who are Roma and Sinti, but also non-Roma and non-Sinti. The second generation is a new wave of activism led by ‘Artivists’ and *influencers* trained by European and international organizations, but well rooted in the local social fabric in which it was formed, which creates petitions and social campaigns, expresses itself mainly through web platforms and finds its adherence to the movement also in artistic expression. The research also provides a selection of the most significant examples of responses to antigypsyism through various art forms, from music to visual and performing arts, from theatre to literature, which can be found in the Italian context.

From a methodological point of view, the research was carried out from June 2025 to September 2025. It involved a diachronic bibliographic survey of the contemporary history of Roma and Sinti groups in Italy from the twenty years of Fascism to the present day, with a focus on the acts of antigypsyism that have had the greatest impact on communities, through quantitative and qualitative research reports, texts by leaders of Roma and Sinti organizations involved in the civil rights movement, and anthropological studies of Roma groups in the Italian context.

In addition, ethnographic interviews with leaders and activists from past and present associations, and the analysis of the material produced over time by these associations, have enabled the reconstruction of the history of the Roma civil rights movement in Italy.

Finally, through participant observation of events and demonstrations that occurred prior to the period covered by the research, the dynamics that currently shape activism in its current forms and the relationship between the Roma and Sinti communities and institutions were outlined both, revealing the characteristics of contemporary “antigypsyism.”

This research does not aim to be exhaustive or comprehensive; the selection was made

on the basis of the reflections of the Roma and Sinti interlocutors involved and the most influential contributions from social science. Instead, it aims to present an illustrative overview that can serve as a starting point for further study and to identify guidelines for future reflection.

## 1.1 Defining antigypsyism

In the Italian legal and regulatory context, antigypsyism is not considered a specific form of discrimination, despite having been recently identified in public debate thanks to pressure from European institutions.

Briefly, to contextualize future references, it will be noted that, in terms of racism and discrimination in general, Italian legislation refers to Law No. 654 of October 13, 1975, which ratifies and implements the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of March 1966. The law introduces the crime of propaganda and incitement to commit crimes on grounds of racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination and is the comprehensive law against racism in Italy. It was amended by Law No. 205 of June 25, 1993<sup>1</sup>, also known as the Mancino Law, named after the then Minister of the Interior Nicola Mancino who presented it to parliament, which contains “urgent measures on racial, ethnic, and religious discrimination.” Law 205/93 introduced the crime of discrimination, hatred, or violence on racial, ethnic, national, or religious grounds, as well as the crime of condoning crimes against humanity and Holocaust denial and other Nazi-Fascist crimes, and certain specific penalties.

In 1999, the Italian legal system regulated the general concept of minority, linking it to linguistic peculiarities as a constitutional principle (Art. 6 of the Constitution: “The Republic protects linguistic minorities with specific regulations”) through Law No. 482 of December 15, 1999<sup>2</sup> containing “Regulations on the protection of linguistic-historical minorities,” which recognizes and protects twelve linguistic minorities: Albanian, Catalan, Germanic, Greek, Slovenian, Croatian, French, Franco-Provençal, Friulian, Ladin, Occitan, and Sardinian, taking into account linguistic and historical criteria, but above all the criterion of territoriality/permanence, i.e., the location in a given territory. As It will see in detail in the course of this discussion, the prevalence of the principle of “territoriality” effectively excludes the Roma and Sinti minorities from the provisions of the law, as they are a “diffuse minority,” i.e., without a recognizable territorial concentration.

The last of these regulations that is presented, designed to regulate the constitutional principle of ‘equal social dignity’ and equality before the law, without distinction of sex,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1993;205>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:1999;482>

race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions', is Legislative Decree No. 215 of July 9, 2003,<sup>3</sup> which implements Directive 2000/43/EC on equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin.

The aforementioned decree contains a terminological categorization, which has not yet been amended, that does not explicitly include the Roma and Sinti communities, defines various forms of discrimination, and helps us to narrow down the debate in the Italian context. The guiding criteria of the decree outline forms of: direct discrimination "when an individual or group of people is treated less favourably [...] because of their ethnic, racial, national, religious, political, and cultural background or sexual orientation" (Art. 29 Legislative Decree 215/2003); indirect discrimination "when an apparently neutral provision, criterion, behaviour, practice, or agreement may, intentionally or unintentionally, place persons of a particular 'race' or ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, etc. at a particular disadvantage" (Legislative Decree 215/2003); institutional discrimination, which "takes the form of practices and/or procedures that, while not explicitly intended to discriminate, in practice do so systematically, excluding certain groups from certain opportunities"; multiple discrimination, "when the same person is discriminated against on several grounds and in relation to several characteristics" with a "cumulative effect of discrimination"; also included are incitement to hatred as "the dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority and hatred" and harassment as "unwanted behaviour based on race, ethnic origin, religion, personal beliefs, sexual orientation, etc., with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of the person and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment." (Legislative Decree 215/2003).

The decree also establishes, within the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Office for the Promotion of Equal Treatment and the Removal of Discrimination based on Race or Ethnic Origin, known as UNAR (National Office against Racial Discrimination), with the function of guaranteeing and monitoring equal treatment and the effectiveness of instruments for the protection against discrimination based on race or ethnic origin. From now on, UNAR will be the main interlocutor and intermediary for institutions. In 2012 it will be designated as the national contact point for the implementation of the Roma Inclusion Strategy, Sinti and Caminanti 2012-2020,<sup>4</sup> created to follow up on Communication No. 173 of 2011 of the European Commission in the "EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020."

It is clear from the above that the Roma and Sinti communities have entered the Italian

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legislativo:2003;215>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unar.it/portale/strategia-rsc>

institutional framework thanks to external pressure and that, despite the fact that UNAR has had a specific division focusing on discrimination against Roma and Sinti since its establishment, this has not been translated into national legislation.

The need for a national strategy arises in a context of failure of institutional measures and constitutes a first attempt at cooperation for comprehensive interventions aimed at Roma and Sinti communities. However, in the implementation of the first strategy, it appears that antigypsyism has had a negative impact on the achievement of the objectives, to the extent that the actors involved have identified antigypsyism as one of the axes of the 2021-2030 National Strategy, which is still in force.

The National Strategy for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation of Roma and Sinti 2021-2030, implementing the Recommendation of the Council of the European Union of March 12, 2021 (2021/C 93/01) adopts the definition of antigypsyism by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), which describes it as:

A particularly persistent, violent, recurrent, and common form of racism, linked to an ideology based on racial superiority, it is a form of dehumanization and institutional racism fuelled by historical discrimination, which is expressed, among other things, through violence, hate speech, exploitation, stigmatization, and the most overt forms of discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

The definition of antigypsyism commonly shared in international debate was adopted in October 2020 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which codifies it as:

A manifestation of individual expressions and acts, as well as institutional policies and practices of marginalization, exclusion, physical violence, devaluation of Roma cultures and lifestyles, and incitement to hatred directed at Roma and other individuals and groups perceived, stigmatized, or persecuted during the Nazi era and still today as “gypsies.” This leads to treating Roma as a supposedly alien group and associates them with a series of pejorative stereotypes and distorted images that represent a specific form of racism.<sup>6</sup>

The two definitions agree in addressing antigypsyism as a specific form of racism, a dimension that, as seen, has not yet been incorporated into legislation. They also agree on including institutional, social, and individual acts and practices that involve both

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.13>

<sup>6</sup> <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definition-antigypsyism-anti-roma-discrimination>

violence and direct discrimination, as well as the repetition of stigmatizing and pejorative images of entire communities.

However, some differences are considered of great importance in the Italian context. The ECRI definition reiterates the historicity of discriminatory acts, not associating them exclusively with the 'Nazi era' as a starting point, but rather with an ideology of racial superiority that found some of its most significant theorists in Italy, well before Nazism and Fascism incorporated it as their own. Above all, in the definitions found, among the directions of antigypsyism, the specific form of racism: dehumanization and institutional racism. In our opinion, for an analysis of Italian specificities, it is necessary to give priority to these two dimensions, both because of the impact they have had on the individual and collective histories of members of the Roma and Sinti communities, and because it is necessary to emphasize how the dynamics that have characterized and continue to characterize Italian antigypsyism revolve mainly around practices of institutional racism, which have involved and continue to involve all secular and religious state and local administrative bodies and apparatuses, educational and protective institutions, and legal institutions to varying degrees over the decades with which the Roma and Sinti communities have had to negotiate their right to exist.

## 2. Historical roots: From Fascism to the post-war period (1922-1948)

Since 1422, the year in which an anonymous Bolognese chronicle dates the arrival of a group describing themselves as pilgrims from Little Egypt, which Italian Roma and Sinti communities recognize as the year of their arrival in Italy, expulsion orders have followed one another throughout the modern age across Italian kingdoms, duchies, and principalities. Have been collected documents of expulsion orders from the Papal States, the Kingdom of Naples, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and the autonomous municipalities of central-eastern Italy. Currently, although it is impossible to define with certainty the auto-ethnonyms, the names that the Roma and Sinti groups give themselves, a differentiation has been codified between groups defined as 'ancient settlement' and those of 'recent settlement', which distinguishes: the Sinti, who practice itinerant trades and settle in the regions of central and northern Italy, where groups of Sinti from Emilia, Tuscany, Veneto, Lombardy, and Piedmont still live today; and the Roma from Abruzzo and Molise, probably the largest Roma community in Italy, who have always lived mainly in Abruzzo, Molise, and Calabria. The Neapolitan Roma present throughout Campania and the Cilento Roma, who have been settled for centuries in the province of Salerno; finally, the Roma of Basilicata and the Roma of Salento, who at the time were mainly, and to a lesser extent still today, horse breeders and traders. The other groups, *Kalderasha and Lovara* Roma from Eastern European countries, and *Harvati* Roma from Croatia, settled in Italy from the early 1900s onwards, following the events of the First and Second World Wars. The *Xoraxané* (Muslim) Roma from Bosnia and Montenegro and the Serbian Roma, who are Orthodox Christians, arrived in the late 1960s, and a new wave of migration began in the 1990s with the wars in the former Yugoslavia and subsequently the Kosovo crisis. Finally, there are the Romanian Roma, belonging to various groups, who arrived in the last two decades.<sup>7</sup>

The expulsion orders and control policies targeting these long-established communities known as "gypsies," a derogatory term that has remained in use to the present day, continued from the late 1400s until after the unification of Italy in the mid-19th century, when the *Dizionario Criminale* (Criminal Dictionary) defined them as "idle and vagrant" and in some ways formalized the overlap between itinerancy and criminality.

The persecution and internment of Roma and Sinti in Italy has been the subject of in-depth historiographical and anthropological research over the last twenty years, and

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on the groups present in Italy, see Spinelli S. (2021); for further information on the groups in southern Italy and on the expulsion notices in Renaissance Italy, see respectively the volume *Italia-Romani* Vol. III (2002), Piasere L. and Pontrandolfo S. (eds) and *Italia-Romani* Vol. V (2008), Aresu M., and Piasere L. (eds).

even today there is still no comprehensive understanding of it. The drive for further study stems from the communities' need to recount the Porrajmos,<sup>8</sup> to understand and share this painful moment in their history. Until this desire matured, in academia the issue of deportation and internment had "always represented a sort of hasty juxtaposition to what happened in Germany during the Nazi regime" (Bravi, 2007, p.35). Currently, historical hypotheses are divided into two camps: some theories interpret the persecution and internment that took place in Italy during the twenty years of Fascism and during the Second World War as the result of a public security policy, while the second camp interprets them as persecution dictated by racial inferiority.<sup>9</sup> According to historian Luca Bravi:

The first and most widespread is that of Mirella Karpati, according to whom the internment of Roma in Italy took place solely for reasons of public security, i.e., at the behest of a regime concerned with controlling individuals hypothetically prone to crime. The second, expressed first and with due caution and differentiation by Giovanna Boursier, is still a working hypothesis and questions the sources to clarify whether, even in Italy, we can speak of racial persecution carried out or about to be organized against the Roma.

The research will therefore explore these two positions in depth, examining the events and phases that characterized this period, which are considered fundamental because they encompass all the anti-Gypsy positions analyzed in this report. These positions did not disappear with the end of the world war and the dictatorship, but were transformed, insinuated themselves, and crystallized in institutions and common sentiment.

At the same time, it will be shown that the communities' response, although unspoken and unrecognized for years, was immediate and marked by commitment and participation, in stark contrast to the accusations and stigma of "asociality" that had motivated their forced removal.

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<sup>8</sup> "Porrajmos", which literally means "devouring" in Romani, is the term most commonly used internationally to refer to the persecution and extermination of the Roma and Sinti peoples during Nazi-Fascism. However, Porrajmos is not used in all variants of Romani, as in some of them it also means "rape" and is considered a very vulgar word. The debate within the communities is reflecting on the use of a word with a pejorative connotation even in institutional documents at the national and international level. Other less problematic terms in Romani used in communities to refer to the genocide suffered are: Samudaripen (general massacre), Baro Merape (great extermination), or Sintegre Laidi (suffering of the Sinti), Kali Traš (black terror) (Rizzin, 2020, p.113).

<sup>9</sup> We report the bibliography provided by the author Luca Bravi in the cited text: 'With reference to the theses that interpret the persecution of Gypsies as the result of a public security policy, see M. Karpati, La politica fascista verso gli zingari in Italia, in M. Karpati (ed.), Zingari ieri e oggi, Rome, Centro Studi Zingari, 1993, pp. 59-64; M. Karpati, La politica fascista verso gli zingari in Italia, in "Lacio Drom", 1984, nos. 2-3, pp. 41-47; M. Karpati, Zingari ieri e oggi, in "Lacio Drom", 1993, pp. 39-68; regarding the hypothesis of arrests of gypsies in reference to a fascist racial policy, see G. Boursier, La persecuzione degli zingari nell'Italia fascista, in "Studi storici", year XXXVII, 1996, no. 4, p. 1065' (Bravi, 2007, p. 45).

## 2.1 The fascist regime and racial laws

The Fascist Party, already present in parliament, took control of the Italian government in 1922 following well-known historical events. In the following years, a series of freedom-destroying measures, known as the 'Leggi Fascistissime' (Fascist Laws), led to a gradual transformation of the country. The first fascist measures specifically targeting the communities then known as 'gypsies' took place in this context of social discipline and repression, and took the form of measures restricting their movement and entry into the country.

In this regard, it is necessary to recall the Circular Dispatch of the Ministry of the Interior No. 11352, "Entry of Gypsies into the Kingdom" of August 25, 1924, addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Consulates. This is the first official measure of the twenty-year Fascist period that deals with "the presence of Gypsies in the territory of the Kingdom," even if only those coming from abroad. The Ministry "proposes that, in the future, entry visas to the Kingdom should not be granted to caravans of gypsies or individuals belonging to them." Below is the Circular of the Ministry of the Interior, General Directorate of Public Security, General and Confidential Affairs Division, Section III, No. 31398, entitled "Gypsy Caravans" of August 8, 1926, addressed to Prefects, requesting "the purging of the national territory of the presence of gypsy caravans, whose danger to public safety and hygiene needs no reminder," and which also specifies that "it remains the responsibility of the border offices to reject gypsies in principle, even if they are in possession of valid documents."

It was in the following ten years that the so-called "gypsy problem" was reconfigured from an exclusively public safety issue to a racial science theory. "The idea that the internment of Roma in Italy took place simply for reasons of public safety, completely unrelated to eugenics, therefore appears rather simplistic" (Bravi, 2007, p. 37). The first phase of this overlap involved round-ups and internment measures initially targeting communities on the Istrian border and included in the Telegraphic circular from the Administrative and Judicial Police Division, no. 45941, to the Chief of Police and the prefects of Trieste, Gorizia, Pola, Fiume, Zara, Bolzano, and Trento on December 6, 1937, which stipulates "that vagrants of certain or presumed Italian nationality be rounded up as quickly as possible and concentrated in the most suitable locations in each province to prevent their movement, adopting measures of confinement and subjecting them to strict control."

The following year, on July 14, 1938, the Manifesto of Race was published, which would form the ideological and scientific basis of the racial policy of Fascist Italy. It was inspired by theories of race classification and the link between hereditary physical and

psychological traits and criminal behaviour, and imposed a clear direction for the fight against any form of “alteration of the purely European physical and psychological characteristics of Italians.”

The Roma and Sinti communities thus became the main target of punitive measures, driven both by categorization linked to racial contamination and by social order and state security concerns, with deportations at the border. On January 17, 1938, Arturo Bocchini, head of the fascist police, ordered all Istrian Roma to be counted and categorized, dividing them into those with non-dangerous criminal records, those with no criminal records and dangerous individuals, and dangerous individuals. With the circular of September 11, 1940, from the Ministry of the Interior, signed by police chief Arturo Bocchini and addressed to the prefects of the Kingdom and the police commissioner of Rome, internment became systematic: “Without prejudice to previous provisions regarding the rejection or expulsion of foreign gypsies, it is hereby ordered that those of certain or presumed Italian nationality still in circulation be rounded up as quickly as possible and concentrated under strict surveillance in the most suitable locations” (Cagna Ninchi, 2018, p.83).

Starting in 1938, all the gypsies of Istria, who had previously been registered in detail, were rounded up by the Italian police and deported to Sardinia, where they remained until the end of World War II. In 1942, it was the turn of those living in Slovenian territory under Italian occupation, who were deported to Tossicia in Abruzzo, where they remained confined until September 8, 1943 (Bravi, Bassoli, 2013).

The internment camps set up by this circular multiplied, starting with a former tobacco factory near Bojano (province of Campobasso), where, between 1940 and 1941, 58 Roma and Sinti from all over the country arrived, and were then transferred to the nearby town of Agnone, in the province of Isernia. The camps at Prignano sul Secchia, in the province of Modena, and Tossicia, in the province of Teramo, were added.

On May 14, 1942, the Italian embassy in Berlin sent a confidential telegram to the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of Popular Culture informing them, “for their information,” that “Gypsies had been placed on an equal footing with Jews.” After the armistice of September 8, 1943, Roma and Sinti were deported from Italy to other camps under the direct control of the Third Reich in Bolzano, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Natzweiler, and Ravensbruck.

Despite this assimilation within the provisions of racial laws, according to historian Luca Bravi, Roma and Sinti never represented an imminent and uncontrollable threat: “Gypsies had in fact long been relegated to the margins of society with few means of

social advancement. It should therefore come as no surprise that the persecution of this group was certainly not a priority of fascist demographic policy" (Bravi, 2007, p. 46). They continued to be considered a danger in the "racial vision" that identified gypsies as carriers of psycho-moral and therefore social inferiority. This was because, at this stage in history, as in subsequent ones, they represented "an internal pocket of resistance," a tangible sign of the ineffectiveness of policies of expulsion, persecution, or forced assimilation, and therefore an alternative to the cultural model perceived as dominant. The historian's position is interesting in that he suggests a lens of analysis that places the primacy of educational dynamics in the measures that, starting from this historical phase, will follow over the decades, thereby explaining why "racial research would be structured along a distinct path from the legislative one". It is reported below:

The governments said that they could never win by pursuing re-education, because the peculiar characteristics of the Roma's antisociality, idleness, sloth, love of orgies, impetuous anger, ferocity, and vanity, as Cesare Lombroso would also point out, represented genetic traits that could not be changed by any intervention. The failed attempt was interpreted as clear proof of the impossibility of civilizing this people. The time was ripe to support such a thesis on a scientific level, without being forced to bring down the house of cards of the dominant culture.

The sometimes unspoken, sometimes overt aims of re-education and civilization and the consequent narrative of their failure, due to the immutability and antisociality of the Roma and Sinti linked to Lombroso's "hereditary defect" with which the Roma and Sinti communities were publicly described, crystallize from this historical phase and remain for years to come and, as It will be shown later, according to many positions across academia and activism, still remain today.

As already mentioned, the discovery of the existence in Italy of concentration camps reserved for Roma and Sinti in the period 1940-1943 is recent, and only in the last few years have historians, politicians, and activists made it the subject of specific investigation and commemoration. This process of re-appropriating historical memory, shared only at the family level or completely hidden, is of great importance in this discussion because it is one of the few examples in the Italian context, perhaps the only one to date, in which the work of historians, the involvement of communities through Roma and Sinti organizations, and finally, gradually, of institutions, has taken place in a concurrent and equal manner.

In the following paragraph, It will be presented some examples of this harmonious design in an effort to raise awareness and disseminate information, which has led to the

creation of platforms for sharing historical memory that are important both, obviously, from the point of view of the historical reconstruction of the Porrajmos, and for the history of the civil rights movement of the Roma and Sinti in the strict sense, which recognizes some of the leading figures of the partisan war as founding fathers.

## 2.2 Roma and Sinti resistance

The recognition of the genocide of Roma and Sinti in Italy during Nazi-Fascism is one of the cornerstones of the civil rights movement of Roma and Sinti in Italy, as in many other European countries.

The process of awareness and historical research in Italy is recent, as has been repeatedly emphasized, but to date, through the collection of memories and testimonies and comparison with historiography, an important starting point for future reflection has been handed down to the younger generations. The number of Roma and Sinti who participated in the resistance war is still unknown. Some stories have been reconstructed by cross-referencing testimonies with documents related to the National Liberation Committee concerning partisan actions, most of which are preserved in the memories of the protagonists' families.

Here is a brief account of the stories of some heroic figures collected in memory projects and publications by activists and historians in recent years, mainly through the *Memors* project of the Fossoli Foundation, funded by the European Union for the year 2012-2013 as part of the EACEA program, thanks to which 'The first virtual museum of the Porrajmos in Italy. The persecution of Roma and Sinti during the Fascist period', called *porrajmos.it*, and the publication *Attraversare Auschwitz Storie di rom e sinti: Identity, memories, antigypsyism*, produced as part of the project 'Promotion and dissemination of the culture of the Roma, Sinti and Caminanti', funded under the PON Inclusion program with the contribution of the European Social Fund 2014-2020.

The first testimony is that of Amilcare Debar, whose story was collected by Giovanna Boursier in 1998 in an interview in Italian for the visual history archive of the USC Shoah Foundation.

Amilcare Debar was born in Frossasco, near Turin, on June 16, 1927. He grew up in an orphanage and had no ties to his family of origin. At the age of 17, he joined the partisan struggle for the 48th Garibaldi Brigade in the "Dante Nanni" battalion, first as a courier and then in partisan actions in the Langhe under the nom de guerre "Corsaro" until the liberation of Turin. He met a very young Sandro Pertini, also a partisan, who would become President of the Italian Republic from 1978 to 1985. After the war, he was

offered a position in the police force, and in this role he met a Sinti family with the same surname as him, through whom he reconstructed his origins and chose to reunite with them because, as he said in the interview mentioned above, "As a policeman, I would certainly have had to arrest gypsies, and then I would have had to arrest my own brother." In the early 1980s, Pertini awarded him the "Certificate of Patriotism" – the famous Alexander patent – which is still the only certificate issued to a Roma or Sinti partisan. In the interview mentioned above, Debar talks about shootings and prisoners on both sides, and when asked about his opinion of his opponents, he replies with extreme lucidity: "To be honest, they were guys like us."<sup>10</sup>

The second story mentioned is that of the "Leoni di Breda Solini" brigade, composed exclusively of Italian Sinti who had escaped from the concentration camp in Prignano sul Secchia (MO), where they had been deported in September 1940. These Sinti belonged to families such as the De Bar, Truzzi, and Triberti, who were involved in traveling entertainment, performing in town squares during the day and participating in partisan activities at night.

Finally, are mentioned the partisans known today as "the martyrs of Vicenza," ten partisans, including four Sinti from the Vicenza area, who, on November 9, 1944, blew up the railway near the Ponte dei Marmi to prevent the passage of a convoy of weapons that would have supplied the Nazis. The Sinti partisans who worked in traveling entertainment were Walter Vampa Catter, Ercole Lino Festini, Silvio Paina, and Renato Mastini. They were all arrested and, after days of torture, shot near the bridge they had sabotaged. The story of the martyrs of Vicenza lives on thanks to the testimony of Vincenzina Erasma Pevarello, who searched for days for her partner Renato Mastini and the others who had been arrested, until she discovered of their deaths. The massacre is known as the Ponte dei Marmi Massacre, and a memorial stone in the city of Vicenza commemorates the Ten Fallen.

In conclusion to this overview of the Roma and Sinti resistance in Italy, it is presented an example that is apparently opposite but symptomatic of the relational dynamics with the non-Roma and non-Sinti Italian majority community, which is extremely important as evidence of the "cultural myopia" surrounding the stigma of "asociality."

The precursors of contemporary antigypsyism, represented by the persecution and internment described above, present us with attitudes that are completely opposite to antisocial dynamics. On the contrary, they seem entirely geared towards active participation, which, as the research will try to demonstrate, will entirely characterize the

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<sup>10</sup> [https://www.audible.it/podcast/Uno-di-noi-Rom-e-Sinti-nella-Resistenza/B0FHQVCVJF?source\\_code=ASSGB149080119000H&share\\_location=pdp](https://www.audible.it/podcast/Uno-di-noi-Rom-e-Sinti-nella-Resistenza/B0FHQVCVJF?source_code=ASSGB149080119000H&share_location=pdp).

dynamics of negotiation between Roma and Sinti and non-Roma and non-Sinti in Italy. In that same phase of confrontation and fratricidal conflict between the armed forces of fascist Italy and the partisan militias, Roma and Sinti were present on both sides. The presence of Roma and Sinti within the regular fringes of the regime is poorly documented, or perhaps even absent, for various reasons that are difficult to explore in depth here. Indeed, the Italian reluctance to truly and objectively examine the historical truth of the twenty years of fascism and the war years, and to hold a lively debate on the reasons for joining fascism and the legacy of this undeniable participation at all levels of Italian society, has had an impact. Another decisive factor is undoubtedly the peculiar situation of the Roma in southern Italy, whose gradual 'disappearance' from the public sphere of identity recognition has been explained by anthropological and historical studies of Roma groups. However, the documentary "Gitanistan" by Pierluigi De Donno and Claudio Giagnotti, on the Roma families of Salento, offers us invaluable testimony on southern Italy in the private sphere. This study will refer to this document several times in the course of our discussion, but at this stage it is necessary for the testimony of Giuseppe Rinaldi, Giagnotti's maternal grandfather, a merchant and horse breeder, who enlisted in the royal army under fascist control and took part in the 1926 campaign to reconquer Cyrenaica, now Libya. For Rinaldi, as for many other young Italians of his age, enlistment in the army was the result of compulsory conscription and did not constitute adherence to fascist ideals, but rather corresponded to a patriotic involvement at a time when, probably for the vast majority of young Italians, patriotic irredentism was a pervasive and dominant ideology. According to his heirs, upon his return, Rinaldi processed his experience of the Libyan campaign in many ways, especially due to the treatment he and his family received as 'gypsies' upon his return. His sacrifice for his country (Rinaldi was wounded and risked his life as a soldier) in the name of Italian belonging was not recognized in any way by mainstream society, and so he remained 'Beppu the gypsy' for the rest of his life.

### 2.3 Continuity in the post-war period

In the post-war period, the disorderly and traumatic return of communities, in some cases to their previous territories, in other cases to rebuild family networks, is poorly documented and belongs to oral history.

On the other hand, it is possible to reconstruct in detail the main institutional interlocutor of the Roma and Sinti communities during this period: the Catholic Church. The analysis of this relationship is very important for the development of subsequent policies and dynamics that influenced the communities *themselves* and the institutional policies aimed at them, but, above all, they were decisive in shaping community representatives in the years to come.

The evangelization of groups at the time, defined by the all-encompassing term “nomads” (used in this part of the discussion), predates the phase analyzed above of the twenty years of Fascism. In fact, it dates back to the 1920s and the group of Catholic women UDCI centered around the figure of Agar Pastorello.

The nun initially came into contact with several families in the Padua area and later with others across northern and central Italy through unstructured initiatives. Her diary, *Oasi di Carovane* (Oasis of Caravans), offers a riveting testimony of the groups at that time and the dynamics of family mobility in north-eastern Italy.

The first increasingly organized initiatives date back to the post-war period and the work of Father Dino Torreggiani in the Treviso area with traveling show nomads. From 1958, this work was directed by the Opera Assistenza Spirituale ai Nomadi in Italia (OASNI). The figure of Father Torreggiani is certainly controversial, above all for his ambiguous stance toward fascism (Piasere, 2018, p. 55). From the priest’s writings, the readers know that he was aware of the internment in concentration camps, probably from the stories of the families he came into contact with every day during his evangelizing mission. However, he never promoted the dissemination of this reality and the crimes suffered. His pastoral ideas, on the other hand, were not only a source of teaching for subsequent generations of clergy but also contributed to establishing the categories and imagery that would form the basis for subsequent categorizations.

Father Torreggiani’s Manual for Religious Assistance to Nomads in Italy, published in 1961, includes the “ethnic and psychological characteristics of Italian nomads” in addition to the general and specific rules that should apply to their spiritual and social assistance. He was the first to divide the users into three categories: “equestrian circus artists,” “traveling entertainers,” and “gypsies,” counting a total of about 40,000. This distinction remained in the pastoral care of the Italian Church for years.

Father Torreggiani’s work is also important because it was a source of inspiration for the socio-legal process that led to the establishment of rest camps in the 1980s. Leonardo Piasere, in his book *La Chiesa Nomade (The Nomadic Church)*, quotes an internal document linked to a speech given by the priest at the Institute of the Servants of the Church in Reggio Emilia, which describes the rules for managing a rest camp:

The San Giuseppe voluntary “camp” had to be: 1) voluntary, free, private, “entirely dependent on the Catholic Mission”; 2) governed by precise rules of conduct within the camp and 3) outside the camp; 4) managed by a single authority: the Director of the Mission (who could also be assisted by the police); 5) no “gagi” of bad

character could enter the camp, nor could anyone leave at night. The organizational chart included the Director of the Catholic Mission, a manager appointed by the former, and the “Council of Fathers,” which, among other things, would elect those in charge of services (cleaning, etc.) (in Piasere, 2018, p. 64).

As It will be shown, this organization based on control and regulation of entry is not so dissimilar from the current system that regulates the management of camps entrusted to service cooperatives and quite clearly implies that “nomads” are considered “poor, abandoned, and needy.”

These early examples of organizational directives mark the beginnings of the Catholic Church’s “mediation” role between “nomads” and society, which OASNI represents at a stage where “the state appears on the horizon, but is still far away” (Piasere, 2018, p. 63-83). However, it was in the 1960s that a system emerged in which the mediating role of Catholic institutions “became a paradigm” through the figure of Father Bruno Nicolini and Opera Nomadi.

Father Bruno Nicolini carried out his pastoral work in the province of Bolzano, where he developed the guidelines related to “social assistance” in Father Torreggiani’s Manual and, in 1965, the year of the famous meeting between nomads and Pope Paul VI, founded the Opera Assistenza Nomadi (Nomad Assistance Organization), which became Opera Nomadi (ON) in 1970, recognized as a moral entity by the Italian State. It focused primarily on the education of “nomads” and “gypsies” and initiated the construction of nomad camps. From the beginning of his pastoral work in Bolzano, Father Nicolini’s work was linked to that of the educationalist Mirella Karpati (1923-2017), with whom he founded the magazine *Lacio drom* and then the Centro Studi Zingari (Gypsy Study Center) in Rome. According to Leonardo Piasere, “with Father Nicolini, we have the ‘civilizing’ side that apparently takes precedence over the ‘evangelizing’ side, at least in the rhetoric prevailing in the Opera Nomadi under his leadership”. However, religious and civil elevation, that is, the processes of evangelization and citizenship, had sociological and psychological obstacles among the Gypsies, according to Father Nicolini.

From Piasere’s analysis of the religious man’s texts, diaries, and public speeches, a vision emerges, grounded in strongly anti-Gypsy assumptions about the communities he encountered every day. In fact, Gypsies would not have “evolved” due to psychological factors such as “the instability of character of the Gypsy ethnotype.” Father Nicolini also cited and identified with the racist research of German physician Hermann Arnold and Robert Ritter, two of the Nazi doctors involved in the genocide of the Gypsies during World War II, such as the thesis of psychological instability as hereditary.

It is therefore clear, Piasere continues, “how racist theories about Gypsies in the Italian Catholic Church have for a period flanked theological reforms and the drive for social advancement, without highlighting the contradictions that this entailed” (Piasere, 2018, p. 102-119).

It is important to clarify how re-educational and civilizing theories that arose from the ashes of race theory in previous years, just as had happened with race theory itself, have been accompanied from the outset by constant debate within the social sciences, humanities, and academic circles in Italian universities, without these theories ever being fundamentally questioned in any way. This debate led, for example, to the establishment of *Lacio Drom* schools under ministerial mandate. Before delving into the analysis of this experience, which was decisive for all those involved at the time and, from many points of view, founded the Roma and Sinti civil rights movement, it will be briefly described another phase of encounters and collaboration between religious figures and communities in which the evangelizing and civilizing-educational mission was replaced by a pastoral approach based on participation and encounter.

A new generation of religious figures is forming around the figure of Father Mario Riboldi, a priest in a small village in the diocese of Milan who, in 1971, began to live permanently among the Roma and Sinti and who points to life with the gypsies, learning their language and praying in their language, daily witness, invisibility or low visibility, as the main path for pastoral care.

Father Riboldi’s experience took place during a contradictory period: on the one hand, there were the objectives of segregation and sedentarisation, with the revival of anti-vagrancy laws, which allowed local authorities to expel ‘nomads’ and prevent them from entering and staying in the area by means of widespread signs with the words “No stopping for vagrants,” on the other hand, a Circular from the Ministry of the Interior, No. 17/73 of October 11, 1973, was sent to all mayors in Italy asking them to abolish parking bans and to encourage registration, work permits, stopping areas, and schooling for children.

This phase coincided with the establishment of the first parking areas in the Milan area, where Father Riboldi worked, as well as in other Italian cities such as Rome, Florence, Bologna, and Turin. In Turin in particular, the Italian Association of Gypsies Today (AIZO) was founded during these years by Carla Osella, also inspired by Catholicism in the socio-educational field. Both Opera Nomadi and AIZO are still active today, after more than thirty years in which they have been the main interlocutors of the institutions in defining policies towards the communities, as will be shown in the second part of this

report, where it will be presented a focus on the history of the civil rights movement, examining the structure and choices of these organizations in greater depth.

The example set by Father Mario Riboldi was followed by many other younger clergymen and women “trained in the spirit of Vatican Council II, as well as in the ideas of the youth movements of 1968 and the worker priests,” who challenged “pre-conciliar ecclesiastical practices, going so far as to propose innovative pastoral and theological reflections” (Piasere, 2018, p. 94). Among these, it mentioned above all Father Alberto Garau, who worked among the Roma of Cosenza in Calabria in the early 1980s. Activist Stefania Bevilacqua particularly remembers this figure for his promotion of a sense of pride in Roma identity and culture and tradition, in stark contrast to the general feeling of rejection and shame that Bevilacqua perceived at school and in other non-Roma contexts.<sup>11</sup>

The OASNI, already mentioned, passed under the leadership of the CEI and the Episcopal Commission for Migration and Tourism (CEMiT), then disappeared and was replaced by the National Office for the Pastoral Care of Roma and Sinti (UNPRES) within the Migrantes Foundation, founded in 1987. The term ‘nomads’ disappeared from Catholic nomenclature, with the Foundation establishing the National Office for Circus Performers, Amusement Park Workers, and Street Artists in addition to the aforementioned office.

The choice of the generation of young religious leaders, starting with Father Riboldi, gave rise to a network of “mimetic sharing” operators that remained active until the 2010s. It was supported by Father Piero Gabella, director of OASNI and then UNIPRES in 1984, during which time ‘careful and informed denunciations against the rising antigypsyism in Italian society’. In 1989, in a special issue of the magazine *Roma*, an article probably attributable to Sister Giuseppina Scaramuzzetti launched a precise attack on the policy of setting up ‘nomad camps’ that the Italian regions had been pursuing for some years under the impetus of Opera Nomadi.

As already mentioned, the Opera Nomadi experience is definitely, for better or worse, the most transformative experience of recent years. The ‘camping sites’, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, were and still are a uniquely Italian phenomenon, arising precisely from the alliance between the Catholic Church and the Italian state in their relationship with the Roma and Sinti communities. Another equally important experience, albeit more limited in scope, which also originated with Opera Nomadi, is that of the *Lacio Drom* classes.

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<sup>11</sup> Ethnographic interview, 07/08/25.

On September 15, 1965, with an agreement between the Ministry of Education, the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Padua, and Opera Nomadi, the latter was assigned primacy in the field of education and training of minors from Roma and Sinti families. Among its activities, the most important was the establishment of 11 special *Lacio Drom* classes (“good journey” in the Romani language). Launched a few years earlier on an experimental basis outside of schools, by 1972 there were 60 classes spread across major Italian cities from north to south. The agreement also provided for specialization courses for teachers for “scientific study of the problem of the education of Gypsy children.”

The analysis of the work and impact of the *Lacio Drom* classes is very recent. Among the texts and research produced, it mentioned the project “Stories in history: learning together,” which, with a team of historians, researchers, and educators, reconstructs “the stages of the schooling of Sinti and Roma in Italy and describes, through the voices of the protagonists, the inclusion and exclusion, the positive educational processes and the practices of keeping these communities at a distance”<sup>12</sup> and the publication by Eva Rizzin and Luca Bravi *Lacio drom. Storia delle “classi speciali per zingari”* (*Lacio Drom. History of the “special classes for gypsies”*), which describes the experience from the point of view of the history of schooling in Italy. The publication analyzes the documentation produced in relation to the *Lacio Drom* classes, including the bulletin also entitled *Lacio drom*,<sup>13</sup> published from 1965 to 1999, first by the Opera Assistenza Nomadi di Bolzano, then by Opera Nomadi, and finally by the Centro Studi Zingari, established in close collaboration with Opera Nomadi in 1970.

The magazine publishes articles related to school experiences, but also in-depth and historical articles related to the humanities, experiences of social intervention related to ‘pastoral care for gypsies’, and even simple exchanges of information. For decades to come, it represented “the main source of dissemination of research, objectives, and actions aimed at the Roma and Sinti context in Italy” (Bravi, Rizzin, 2024, p.10).

The *Lacio Drom* classes formally ended in 1977 following Law No. 517 of August 4, which introduced the concept of school integration, although the year before, in a letter to school superintendents and councilors of the municipalities and regions involved, the National Nomad Organization itself “suggested the abolition of special schools for

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<sup>12</sup> <https://storie-nella-storia.it/>

<sup>13</sup> “While the bimonthly magazine *Lacio drom* was primarily a vehicle for reflection and theoretical dissemination, other more strictly educational tools were equally important in school practice: there were student notebooks called *Baro Jag* (big fire), which recorded classroom activities; there was a newspaper for special classes for ‘gypsies’ entitled ‘*Ticno Lil*’ (small document), which reported on the reflections of teachers/experts/educators based on what had been produced in the classroom; finally, there was a specific ‘*Ticno Lil Maestri*’ (Teachers’ Small Document) that served as an educational link between the teachers working in those classes” (Bravi, Rizzin, 2024: 9).

gypsies and their integration into mainstream schools.” In reality, mono-ethnic classes continued to exist until the 1980s, and examples of school segregation of the same nature continue to this day in Pescara and Reggio Calabria. In the aforementioned analysis by Rizzin and Bravi (2024), three elements of the “construction of ‘Lacio drom’ classes” are distinguished: administrative choice, the objectives of “gypsy pedagogy,” and the work of teachers in the classroom.

Concerning the administrative choice to create a specific schooling path for Roma and Sinti, the analysis reveals a response to the urgent need to rapidly increase the schooling of children from these communities, which, however, translates into the legislative framework (as well as the collective imagination) of special schools for people with disabilities, thus creating a public image of problematic diversity.

The pedagogical point of view and its translation into the teaching of special classes prove to be equally interesting. Not only do the educational objectives, focusing on basic skills - reading, writing, and arithmetic - neglect socialization, thus the initial premise of encouraging the integration of children, to the extent of achieving the opposite, i.e., full-fledged spatial and relational segregation in schools; but the theoretical and pedagogical framework of these educational objectives demonstrates, in a way that is not so much latent as quite manifest, the educational consideration of the ‘gypsy family’ as incapable of playing an adequate role in the proper socialization of their children. It is therefore easy to see how, decades later, the beliefs about the ‘asociality’ of the Roma and Sinti, then ‘nomads’ and ‘gypsies’, and their reluctance to adapt, also referred to in a polysemous sense as ‘resistance’, have returned. This is particularly evident when rereading the testimonies contained in the aforementioned *Storia nelle Storie-formarsi insieme (History in Stories-learning together)* platform.

Here are some testimonies taken from the video of interviews of the same name, produced and published on major video platforms.<sup>14</sup>

For us here in Prato, when I was 14, there were special classes and they put all the children of all ages together, from six to twelve or thirteen, all together in one class, and we didn't learn anything.

Sometimes they were in separate buildings, sometimes they were even held in the same schools outside of school hours, in the afternoon when the normal pupils weren't there. They didn't think that we Sinti children could be like other children, i.e. go to first grade, learn to read, go to second, third and fourth grade, normally,

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<sup>14</sup> <https://storie-nella-storia.it/interviste/>

because they thought we were less intelligent [...] We didn't learn anything there because they didn't teach us anything. It wasn't that we didn't want to, there was nothing to learn. [...] There was a lot of racism. I have a very clear memory of this: at school, they asked us to draw our house on a piece of paper, so everyone drew a house with bricks, a roof, and a chimney. I simply drew what my house was, which is a trailer, and when I had to show it to the class, I remember my classmates' wide eyes because they didn't understand.

Sometimes they were separate buildings, sometimes even sitting in the same schools outside of school hours, in the afternoon when there were no normal pupils. They didn't think that we Sinti children could be like other children, i.e., go to first grade, learn to read, go to second, third, and fourth grade, which is normal, because they thought we were less intelligent.

You arrive at the camp and you're home, because you know you're protected, let's say, from the world elsewhere. However, it's your downfall because when you walk home, you have to take a longer route, you have to wait for your classmates to leave, you have to get dropped off at a different building first and take a different route, which means always feeling like you're at the post office, at Esselunga, at school, everywhere, comments about that camp, thinking that others pay for things for you. You are a freeloader who lives off others, when that is absolutely not the case. But the camp also takes you away from reality, because you are put in a dark place, because it was dark, hidden, far from the world.

It is clear, even from these brief excerpts, that the recurring themes in the review of *Laciodrom* by the students themselves, now adults, are linked to the paradigm of educational poverty and school and housing segregation. Memories of school discrimination are etched in the memories of many Roma and Sinti across all age groups and regions, and this is one of the main focuses of activism, as will be shown in the second part, both at the local level and as a pillar of the National Strategy.

It will be concluded this in-depth analysis of the 1980s, both chronologically and to clarify the institutional importance of the experiences described, by mentioning the laws that were passed at the regional level in compliance with the Circular of the Ministry of the Interior No. 1518 of July 15, 1985, which asked local authorities to provide "an adequate response to the basic needs of nomadic populations, which at the same time respects the culture and traditions of life, which are extremely diverse, of the various ethnic groups that are part of nomadism." These laws address the same issues, both in terms of language and content, that characterized the previous phases.

The Regional Law of Lazio No. 82 of May 24, 1985, entitled “Regulations in favour of the Roma,” still in force, sets as its priority “avoiding impediments to the right to nomadism and to stopover” (Art. 1). It is the first in a series of regional laws that dictate the guidelines for local interventions in the following decades. This was followed by Veneto Regional Law No. 41 of August 16, 1984, “Measures to protect Roma culture” (repealed by Regional Law No. 54/1989, “Measures to protect Roma and Sinti culture,” which was in turn repealed in 2016).

This was followed by Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional Law No. 11 of March 14, 1988, “Regulations for the protection of Roma culture within the territory of the autonomous region of Friuli Venezia Giulia,” and Sardinian Regional Law No. 9 of March 14, 1988, entitled “Protection of the ethnicity and culture of nomads.”

These initial measures were followed in 1988 by the enactment of Regional Law 47/1988 (repealed by Regional Law 11/2015) “Regulations for the protection of nomadic minorities in Emilia Romagna,” through which the region “regulates and contributes to the concrete implementation of the right of nomads to transit and stop, and to facilitate their integration into the regional community,” and Tuscany’s Law No. 17 of March 12, 1988, “Measures for the protection of the ROM ETHNIC GROUP.” (Repealed by Regional Law No. 73/1995); Lombardy Regional Law No. 77 of December 22, 1989, “Action for the protection of populations belonging to traditionally nomadic and semi-nomadic ethnic groups” (Repealed by Art. 14, paragraph 1, letter b) of Regional Law No. 20 of July 8, 2015, Simplification Law 2015).

The in-depth analysis of the contents of the research “Contemporary antigypsyism in Italian local regulatory provisions” carried out as part of the project “Countering antigypsyism: a cultural journey between memory and current events” in agreement between the Presidency of the Council of Ministers - Department for Equal Opportunities - UNAR and Formez PA,<sup>15</sup> focuses on the terms used in the laws of the 1980s and 1990s to refer to beneficiaries: “gypsies/nomads/Roma and Sinti”) and on the legal principle defined in the texts as “the right to nomadism” (e.g., Picker 2015).

As highlighted by studies on the categorization of Roma and Sinti, the umbrella category “gypsies/Roma” is “the result of a complex dialectic between self- and hetero-ascriptions which, under presumed common origins and socio-cultural characteristics, groups together a super-diverse and territorially dispersed population” (Pontrandolfo, Solimene, 2018, p. 13). In addition to being categorized homogeneously, these groups, which are in reality quite heterogeneous, are also categorized as “nomadic,” and

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<sup>15</sup><https://sites.dsu.univr.it/creaa/progetto/antiziganismo-contemporaneo-nei-dispositivi-normativi-locali-italiani/>

consequently exotic, uncivilized, backward, primitive, traditional, placeless, uprooted, and in constant mobility as a threat to the creation of external and internal borders of the EU and its member states.

Thus, “gypsies/Roma” are interpreted as outsiders to the body of the nation, thought to they may threaten the integrity of cultural values and social assets. In Italy, the derogatory overlap between “gypsies,” “Roma,” and “nomads” and the overlap between them has greatly influenced local policies towards these populations, which in fact have extremely diverse and us histories, different legal statuses, and live in highly variable social, economic, and cultural conditions.

The recurring reference in regional laws to the ‘right to nomadism’ therefore appears highly contradictory: first of all, it ends up defining as nomadism what are rather historically and locally situated strategies (Piasere, 2004), sometimes economic subsistence strategies, other times strategies linked to a precarious personal and legal situation, escapes from persecution or war or difficult economic situations (think of immigration to Italy from the territories of the former Yugoslavia following the wars in the Balkans, or the arrival of Romanian Roma following the collapse of the Ceaușescu regime, movements that were extremely important for Italy, as it will be shown). Furthermore, the aim is to protect nomadism as an aspect of the cultural identity of Roma and Sinti, starting with an attribution of nomadism that is detached from any historical or social considerations of Roma and Sinti groups. Presumed nomadism is considered, in fact, to be the main socio-cultural identity trait, incorporated into the identity of the ‘Roma’, who are considered a homogeneous group, without noting that around 80% of Roma and Sinti have not practiced any form of itinerancy for some time (sometimes for centuries) (Piasere, 2004), and that those who practice forms of itinerancy do so for reasons of economic subsistence that do not undermine, but rather may strengthen, their roots in certain territories (Pontrandolfo, Trevisan, 2009). Therefore, what the laws aim to protect is not in fact ‘real’ nomadism, in the forms and ways in which it is practiced as a lifestyle linked to itinerant work activities, but rather a supposed, imagined nomadism, crystallized in the construction operated from outside by various forces and motivations that drive legislators.

The laws of the 1980s, therefore, effectively provide legal legitimacy to the ‘camp system’ (ERRC 2000), which was already widespread throughout the peninsula in various informal, unauthorised forms. The ‘camp system’ in Italy, which originated in some cities in northern Italy as early as the 1970s, is the result of a “sedentarisation policy set out in three circulars from the Ministry of the Interior, dated 1973, 1982, and 1985, respectively, addressed to local authorities, which stipulated the need for municipalities to abolish the ban on ‘nomadic’ families stopping there” (Picker, 2015, p.76). Scholars

agree that, during this process, camps are viewed positively as a tool for integration because they allow municipalities concerned to control the population living there, maintain acceptable levels of hygiene and sanitation, and, at the same time, carry out the necessary educational and vocational training activities for young people. The laws of the 1980s therefore reflect this reinterpretation of supposed nomadism, translated into public housing policies that consist of authorizing and managing stays in caravans or mobile homes, effectively leading to a re-categorization as 'nomads' of those who were no longer nomadic or had never been so, considering how Roma groups from areas where they had led a sedentary life residing in permanent dwellings were being channelled into camps. Therefore, the "nomadism" envisaged by regional regulations is more of a sedentary lifestyle, characterized by "residential segregation" (Di Noia, 2016). The laws analyzed, therefore, define a broad spending ceiling, and the appropriations are mainly aimed at the creation, management, and maintenance of rest and transit areas, which are always entrusted to municipalities, even from a strictly administrative point of view. The study will return to rest areas, transit areas, and nomad camps later, when the phenomenon of residential segregation, exclusion, and antigypsyism that the camps constituted and continue to constitute enters the European debate in the next paragraphs. However, to fully understand the triumph of the camp system and its role as one of the main mechanisms of antigypsyism, it is necessary to focus on its configuration and history in the 1990s and early 2000s.

### 3. Contemporary manifestations (1990-2008)

In this part of the discussion, it will be analyzed a twenty-year period characterized by violent waves of antigypsyism unfolding in a context of institutional policies that increasingly regulated the daily life of Roma and Sinti communities, to the point of becoming discriminatory policies.

From a demographic point of view, Italians witnessed the arrival in Italy of Roma from the former Yugoslavia, which was falling apart, who were entitled to recognition of their legal status as 'refugees'. The presence of the first groups to arrive was legalized with residence permits under the Martelli Law 39/1990, a measure aimed at 'regularizing non-EU citizens and stateless persons already present in the territory of the State' (Law 39/1990, Art. 1, paragraph 1) and through the provisions of Law 390 of 24/9/1992 "Extraordinary humanitarian measures in favour of displaced persons from the republics that arose in the territories of the former Yugoslavia," promulgated to respond to the migration emergency linked to the wars in the Balkans.

This phenomenon amplified the "camp system" that had been initiated in previous years, definitively establishing its structure for years to come.

The 1990s ended with national provisions on reception management, with measures linked to the refugee emergency for Roma from the former Yugoslavia, opting for reception and support measures at the end of the period of stay linked to refugee status, refugee or stateless status based on gradual integration into work and housing, and with the establishment of policies aimed at the Sinti for the management of parking areas, surveillance and health intervention, and efforts for school integration.

#### 3.1 Waves of antigypsyism

In the early 1990s, there was a Ministry of the Interior Circular No. 4/91 entitled "Settlements of nomads, gypsies, and non-EU citizens. Surveillance and control activities" dated January 18, 1991, which required local authorities to monitor and control "aggressive begging, palmistry, and, in the worst cases, crimes against property and drug-related offenses."

At this stage, with regional laws multiplying in the wake of those previously observed, driven by attempts to regulate stopping from an institutional point of view, it is always through the categorization of the large melting pot of "nomads, gypsies, and non-EU citizens" that institutions deploy the most discriminatory policies.

The decade is marked by intense contradictions from a legislative point of view, but also from a social point of view, as relations between the majority community and the Roma and Sinti communities become increasingly strained.

The story is one of an emergency that various voluntary associations and the administration are struggling to deal with due to the fragmentation of the groups (with different traditions, customs, and religions) and their size, but also from a legislative point of view, due to the different regularization methods adopted for the different groups.

In this crucial historical phase of contradictions, it is necessary to cite one of the most violent racial hate crimes in the history of the Roma and Sinti communities in Italy, which, in our opinion, contains many of the traits that will be attributed to antigypsyism proper in the years to come.

On December 10, 1990, the criminal group defined by the media as the “Banda della Uno Bianca”, composed of agents of the State Police and led by brothers Roberto, Fabio, and Alberto Savi - the first two serving with the Bologna and Rimini police forces - attacked the S. Caterina di Quarto camp in Bologna, inhabited mainly by Roma from the former Yugoslavia, leaving nine people wounded. On December 23, they attacked the camp in Via Gobetti, inhabited mainly by Sinti. Patrizia Della Santina, a 34-year-old mother of four, and Rodolfo Bellinati, only 27, were killed. Sara Bellinati, a six-year-old girl, and Lirije Llukaci, 34, originally from present-day Kosovo, were injured.

It is highly complex to examine these crimes, which have a long history of legal proceedings, in depth in this discussion, but we would like to point out some specific details that are useful in this reconstruction. The witnesses to the shooting, heard at the Bologna Police Headquarters as eyewitnesses, recognized Roberto Savi as the perpetrator of the crime in the days following the shooting, but, as they stated immediately and in the years that followed, they were not believed “because they were gypsies.” So much so that the gang committed countless crimes and robberies over the next eight years before being identified and arrested. This attitude on the part of the police, given that there is currently no clear evidence of police officers covering up for colleagues who were engaging in criminal behaviour, clearly demonstrates all the theories expressed above regarding the underlying sentiment of refusal to consider Roma and Sinti as men and citizens with a right to testify, with credibility given by their physical presence in a given place, as if their eyes and bodies were not enough to be considered trustworthy. Another interesting point in this episode is how, from the point of view of the municipal and regional administration, it was openly ‘the events of the Uno Bianca’ that led to the setting up of a macro-area in Via Erbosa, granted on an

emergency and temporary basis to the families previously settled in Via Gobetti. After twenty-five years of emergency and temporary measures, the macro-area, the nomad camp in Via Erbosa, has recently been 'overcome' with the housing of most of the families and the construction of two public micro-areas for those who were not willing to move into apartments. There have been countless incidents of violence and attacks against the Bologna parking areas since then, with cries of 'let's finish them off like the Uno Bianca'.

It is also in this decade that violent institutional antigypsyism practices have developed and crystallized, such as the removal of Roma and Sinti children from their families by child protection services.

The research: *Amputated Families. The adoption of minors from the point of view of the Roma* by Carlotta Saletti Salza (2014), conducted in seven of the twenty-eight Italian Juvenile Courts, shows that from 1985 to 2005, 258 Roma and Sinti minors were declared adoptable, based on the provisions on national adoptions, 258 Roma and Sinti children were declared adoptable, of whom about 60% were aged 0 to 4, and 1.85% were Roma of foreign nationality. Roma children given up for adoption sometimes represent 10-12% of the total, with the Roma and Sinti minority accounting for 0.2% of the total Italian population. Similar findings were reported in research conducted at the Juvenile Court of Rome, which has jurisdiction over the entire Lazio region, by Angela Tullio Cataldo for Associazione 21Luglio, which found that 11% of minors in the region are Roma, even though the Roma and Sinti communities account for only 0.35% of the population. Ninety-two percent live in official 'nomad camps' built by municipal authorities or otherwise tolerated and therefore known.

These data reveal 'the application of the old stereotype that Roma families are incapable of educating their children and, in fact, most often give birth to them in an uncontrolled manner precisely in order to exploit and mistreat them' (Piasere, 2015, p.67).

Based on the same time frame, Sabrina Tosi Cambini's research contained in *La zingara rapitrice [The Gypsy Kidnapper]* notes that between 1986 and 2007, there were 29 reports of child abductions by "gypsies" (the figure is already small in itself, given that in the five years 2001-2005 alone, the total number of reports of missing children in Italy amounted to 1,653). Of these 29 reports, 23 were not pursued, and only 6 led to criminal proceedings, which in turn resulted in 4 acquittals, 2 convictions for 'attempted abduction', and no convictions for 'abduction'.

The criminalizing projection underlying the stereotype of the "gypsy who steals children," which has been alive in Italy since time immemorial, is the same one on which

the stigma of educational incapacity on the part of Roma and Sinti families is based. These stereotypes recur cyclically in public discourse, depending on current events and the political use made of them. However, they are constantly fueled by the same assumptions of “inferiority” that fuelled the racial theories of the 1920s.

This historical phase ended with the aforementioned Law 482/99 on linguistic minorities, which excludes Roma and Sinti based on the principle of territoriality. They are not recognized by the Italian state in their linguistic and cultural specificity and never will be, at least formally, to this day.

### 3.2 The country of camps

The 2000s began with the ‘Campland’ scandal, following the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) report *entitled Campland: Racial Segregation of Roma in Italy* (2000), which brought the issue of housing and racial segregation affecting certain communities throughout the peninsula to the forefront of European debate.

The report describes the poor conditions in authorized camps and the recurring evictions of illegal ones, with testimonies of violence, threats, torture, and abuse suffered at the hands of the police. The country was swept by waves of legalized and widespread violence, perpetuated by the very forces responsible for defending citizens, which resulted in the legitimization of acts of racial hatred and vigilante justice. On October 30, 2007, Giovanna Reggiani was attacked in Rome, in the Tor di Quinto area in northern Rome. The woman was raped and beaten in a shack near the now almost abandoned Tor di Quinto nomad camp, and then thrown to her death on an embankment. Her body was found thanks to the testimony of a Roma woman from the camp who alerted the emergency services. The same woman identified Nicolae Romulus Mailat, a 24-year-old Romanian citizen who had arrived at the camp a few months earlier, as the perpetrator. He was found guilty in court and sentenced to life imprisonment as the sole perpetrator.

The media constructed a narrative around the case that focused heavily on the nationality of the victim and her alleged killer, while political forces exploited the case to fuel a campaign in which security became a priority on the political agenda across party lines. “A chain reaction is triggered, leading to evictions, raids, and the wholesale destruction of Roma camps in Rome along the banks of the Aniene River, in the Nomentana, Trionfale, and Eur areas, and then also in Florence, Salerno, Lecce, Turin, and Bologna, within a few hours.”<sup>16</sup> In the following months, and after the victory of the

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.rivistailmulino.it/a/30-ottobre-2007>

right-wing coalition in the 2008 general election, attacks against Romanian citizens and Roma camps multiplied throughout the peninsula.

In May of the same year, the episode remembered as the Ponticelli *pogrom*, in the eastern suburbs of Naples, forced the Roma in the neighbourhood to flee following an attack with sticks, iron bars, gasoline cans, and Molotov cocktails by an angry crowd against a girl from the camp accused of wanting to kidnap a child from the neighbourhood.

The events described above led the government, then headed by center-right coalition leader Silvio Berlusconi, to declare a state of emergency on May 21, 2008, in relation to the settlements of nomadic communities in the regions of Campania, Lombardy, and Lazio: "Considering that these settlements, due to their extreme precariousness, have caused a situation of serious social alarm, with possible serious repercussions in terms of public order and safety for the local populations."

On October 22, 2008, the prefects of Rome, Milan, and Naples, appointed as special commissioners for what would be defined in public debate as the "nomad emergency," presented Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni, the results of a "census" carried out the previous summer, which also included the collection of fingerprints from minors, with a view to building "equipped villages" in which to concentrate them: 12,346 people were registered, including 5,436 minors. The 'equipped villages' were built by the far-right mayor of Rome in the following years and concentrated Roma people, rounded up from makeshift settlements, in camps equipped with fences, police checkpoints for entry and exit, and surveillance cameras.

On November 16, 2011, a ruling by the Council of State (No. 06050/2011)<sup>17</sup> annulled the 2008 Declaration of a State of Emergency due to "an absolute lack of factual grounds to justify a declaration of emergency [...] dictated by intentions of ethnic and/or racial discrimination against the Roma community, incompatible with constitutional, EU, and international principles," upholding the ERRC's appeal against the Nomad Plan. The Council of State rejected the appeals of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of the Interior, the Department of Civil Protection, and the territorial offices of the Government of Milan, Rome, and Naples, which had challenged the ruling of the Lazio Regional Administrative Court, which, on July 1, 2009, had upheld the ERRC's complaint, declaring certain parts of the regulations issued in Milan, Rome, and Naples, and subsequently extended to Turin and Venice by the Prefects appointed by the Ministry of the Interior as Special Commissioners for the Nomad Emergency, to be

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<sup>17</sup> [https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/doc\\_normativa\\_europea/2011/novembre\\_2011.pdf](https://presidenza.governo.it/USRI/confessioni/doc_normativa_europea/2011/novembre_2011.pdf)

unlawful.<sup>18</sup>

Also in 2011, amid a widespread perception in Europe of the need for a common action plan—also on the occasion of the new phase of the enlargement process that brought many republics of the former Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary (in addition to Malta and Cyprus) and, in 2007, Bulgaria and Romania—in implementation of European Commission Communication No. 173 of April 4, 2011, the first Italian national strategy, called the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti, and Caminanti (RSC), was developed on February 24, 2012.

In these first fifteen years of the 2000s, the process of ‘collective demonization’ (Piasere, 2018, p.142) of Roma and Sinti, which had begun in previous decades, reached its peak in Italy. The institutionalization and subsequent construction of ‘nomad camps’, carried out for decades by local authorities, increased both their visibility and the visibility of their state of separateness, and the new waves of migration linked to the liberalization of visa policies for thousands of people from Eastern Europe amplified this visibility.

With the direct intervention of European institutions, through a huge flow of information and money, the third sector specifically aimed at Roma and Sinti, but not managed by the communities, exploded.

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<sup>18</sup> [https://old.asgi.it/home\\_asgi.php%3Fn=2720&l=it.html](https://old.asgi.it/home_asgi.php%3Fn=2720&l=it.html)

#### 4. Antigypsyism today

Describing contemporary antigypsyism is a challenge in terms of conveying its complexity. Two political categories come together: antigypsyism and belonging to the Roma and Sinti communities in the specific Italian context that it was described over the decades.

The most recent data on the current situation show “glimmers of hope” (Ass. 21 luglio, 2024) linked to a slight improvement in schooling data and, above all, to the process of overcoming mono-ethnic settlements, on which efforts have effectively focused in recent years.

In the current landscape, antigypsyism within legislation, bureaucracy, and political discourse in the Italian context is the subject of recent research, which shows how it has been repeated over the decades, taking on new forms.

The regional laws for Roma and Sinti that have followed one another and were analyzed when first introduced in the 1980s have been modified and consolidated into two exemplary laws: Regional Law 11/2015 of Emilia-Romagna and Regional Law 34/2019 of Calabria.

It is necessary to focus very briefly on Regional Law 11/2015, while the analysis will return to the second one later (see section 4.1), because, it is important to note how local government policies (regions and municipalities) are moving towards Roma and Sinti communities and how antigypsyism is configured in these institutional contexts.

Emilia Romagna Regional Law 11/2015, which is the result of a long process of consultation with the Roma and Sinti communities in the region, aims to guarantee the right to housing for Roma and Sinti, identifying among the possible housing solutions proposed as a replacement for the old ‘rest areas’ (the so-called ‘camps’): ‘transition processes to conventional forms of housing’; ‘initiatives, including experimental ones, for self-construction and self-renovation’; but, above all, ‘family micro-areas’ as ‘innovative settlement solutions of public interest’ (Art. 3 L.R. 11/2015). However, in the subsequent phase of implementation of the law through the regional directive of the following year, D.G.R. 43/2016, family micro-areas—identified as a housing solution that could meet the needs of the community—inexplicably took on an “extraordinary and temporary” character, “intended to fulfill their function until the families concerned can move to conventional forms of housing,” revealing the persistence of a strong sedentary bias in housing policies for Roma and Sinti, which continue to fail to conceive of stable, non-temporary community living, such as that of micro-areas, requested by some of the Sinti families living in Italy. Regional Law 11/2015, considered on paper to be a “perfect

law” precisely because it respects the needs of the Roma and Sinti it is aimed at, thus proves to be a real “betrayal” of expectations and also of the work carried out in political consultation between the parties (Scrimieri, Pontrandolfo, 2023).

On the other hand, forced evictions and dispossessions continue, as does the exploitation by political forces—across party lines—of the marginalized situations in which some Italian Roma and Sinti communities still live, albeit to a minimal extent. Politicians play a key role in producing and spreading hate speech and have a political responsibility in the ‘de-tabooing’ of racist language (Pontrandolfo, Rizzin, 2020). In a recent analysis by Pontrandolfo and Rizzin (2020) on the production of antigypsyism in political discourse, which analyzes statements made by representatives of political parties currently in the government majority, it can be noticed the reappearance of the same criminalizing stereotypes and explicit racialization that was shown in the substratum of race theories (“they have theft in their blood,” “it’s in their DNA”), incitement to separate Roma children from their families, violent and dehumanizing language (“shitty gypsies, ticks and parasites”) and the criminalization and opposition between “Italians” and Roma, the former in a position of superiority and greater rights than the latter. The construction of a nationalized, humanized, and deserving “us” is contrasted with a denationalized, criminalized, and dehumanized “them” in a public debate that is constantly repeated by the most influential traditional media, such as television. In 2018, in the midst of the political election campaign, the current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni expressed her support for an ethnic census of Roma and, on several occasions and on several platforms, uttered the now unfortunately famous phrase “if you are a nomad, you must nomadize,”<sup>19</sup> coining an *ad hoc* term for that alleged nomadism that constitutes one of the cruxes of historical Italian antigypsyism. Another constant is the presence of marked antigypsyism in traditional and digital media, which play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and, in the case of antigypsyism, are often its main amplifiers. News stories involving Roma or Sinti people are often presented with a marked emphasis on ethnicity. This process of “ethnicizing crime” creates a distorted perception of reality, where the entire community is criminalized for the actions of individuals.

They also present a binary and stereotypical representation. On the one hand, there is the “criminal Roma,” and on the other, the “romantic” and folkloric Roma, devoted to music and dance. Both representations are reductive and deny the complexity, normality, and diversity within these communities. Success stories, stories of integration, or stories of ordinary life among the Roma and Sinti middle class are almost entirely absent. Although the Carta di Roma (Charter of Rome) was signed in 2008 by

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<sup>19</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.it/politica/2018/06/19/news/se\\_sei\\_nomade\\_devi\\_nomadare\\_meloni\\_dice\\_si\\_al\\_censimento\\_dei\\_rom\\_e\\_lancia\\_una\\_proposta-5408775/](https://www.huffingtonpost.it/politica/2018/06/19/news/se_sei_nomade_devi_nomadare_meloni_dice_si_al_censimento_dei_rom_e_lancia_una_proposta-5408775/)

the National Council of the Order of Journalists (CNOG) and the National Federation of the Italian Press (FNSI) as a code of ethics for more responsible journalism in the treatment of migrants and minorities, these guidelines are still often ignored or violated altogether. Roma and Sinti are still too often “represented as scapegoats for social issues” (Di Giovanni, 2012, p.22), creating a vicious circle based on media stigmatization, social marginalization, and the impossibility of integration.

The management of *hate speech* within online platforms, on the other hand, is completely uncontrollable. Platforms do not have a way for users to report antigypsyism as a specific form of racism, and algorithms repost digital content that is sure to engage Roma and Sinti communities, as in the most recent cases involving young women accused of being “subway pickpockets.” Content creators on platforms such as YouTube, in particular, acting as vigilantes, usually harass young girls, almost always very young, following them with cameras, publicly accusing them of theft and pickpocketing or of being about to do so, filming their faces and publishing them in videos with *clickbait* titles. None of the videos capture the actual crime or wait for the police to arrive, but rather incite vigilante justice and praise the ‘legitimate defence of one’s wallet’. The young women are subjected to verbal and sometimes physical violence, being pulled, followed, and insulted. They respond and defend themselves as best they can, trying to escape the lynch mob. This is in a country where there is a presumption of innocence and where criminals who have committed far more heinous crimes are interviewed with their faces covered and their voices disguised to protect their right to privacy and that of their families.

It still seems to recognize that status defined as “imperfect citizenship” (Sigona, Monasta, 2006) in which Roma and Sinti still live in Italy, where the search for invisibility is the main way to avoid discrimination and ridicule for those who are never considered “full citizens.” (Piasere, 2015, p.77).

## Part Two

### 1. Activism

This part of the discussion reconstructs the history of the Roma and Sinti civil rights movement, which, in light of the historical insights of the previous part, takes on a specific meaning: to reconstruct the responses of the Roma and Sinti communities in decades of negotiation and conflict with the majority community, thus inevitably reconstructing the policies of public institutions and of an entire society towards its minority.

To date, the research distinguishes between two generations that correspond to two phases within the movement and which will be analyzed as follows: the first phase (1990s-2012): from the 1990s until the implementation of the first national strategy in 2012, characterized by the emergence of some fundamental vocations for the movement in Italy and by a reorganization with respect to the secondary role of previous years, leading to the discovery of a leading role by representatives of the Roma and Sinti communities in the creation and management of Roma and Sinti civil society. This phase of genesis was led by an old guard of **pioneers**, many of whom had broken away from the religious mediation of the 1970s and 1980s, some linked to international organizations, some linked to academia, some linked to Catholic religious' organizations, some with a history of local socio-political struggle, and others with a history of mediation and cultural and linguistic dissemination. They are surrounded by volunteers, collaborators, and supporters who are Roma and Sinti, but also non-Roma and non-Sinti.

A second phase (2012-present), from the failure of the first national strategy to the present day, characterized by a slow process of detachment from the demands of the pioneers and a gradual adherence to methodologies and objectives more closely linked to international activism.

This second phase is characterized by a new wave of activism by **Artivists** and *Influencers* formed by European Roma civil society and international organizations, but well rooted in the local fabric where it was formed, which creates content, petitions, and social campaigns, expresses itself mainly through web platforms, and also finds its main form of struggle and adherence to the movement in artistic expression.

## 1.1 Mediators and disseminators

To date, it is only possible to reconstruct the history of the Roma movement in stages; this research is certainly necessary for reconciliation and genuine mutual understanding, which urgently needs to be explored in the Italian context. The research will therefore attempt to describe these phases through the voices of the protagonists who have made themselves available or whose testimonies have been collected by the communities themselves on other occasions, or whom were heard in public speeches that the author of this research have been fortunate enough to attend, in dialogue with the chronological reconstruction made previously and with some positions of international *Romani studies* and the anthropology of Romani groups in the Italian context. The interpretation of these events is also made in light of three focuses in the analysis, which we also deduce from the previous theoretical reflections, but above all from the observation of the most recent dynamics and the accounts of the leaders.

The first focus concerns the dynamics of invisibility, visibility, and hypervisibility of activism that have characterized and continue to characterize the movement in line with the strategies adopted by the communities themselves over the decades, even overlapping them. These have always been a source of internal conflict within the movement that is still detectable today. The second is the education/re-education dichotomy mentioned above, which the movement still grapples with, especially when reflecting on its origins.

The last issue concerns the ongoing negotiation between simplification and complexity, even on the part of the activists themselves, whereby the movement, in an attempt to account for the political nature also noted by scholars, is forced to leave out parts of itself.

According to the activists' account, in the system described of post-war return to temporary settlements, camps, in northern Italy, but also to sedentary dwellings in central and southern Italy (in a condition of itinerancy in which the Catholic Church intervened with pastoral aims that soon became welfare and re-educational), which can be ascribed as precursors of the birth of Rom and Sinti activism in the context of the founding in the 1970s first of Opera Nomadi and then of Aizo.

Opera Nomadi, as already mentioned, was founded in 1966 and for decades held the record for mediating between the state and communities. From Bolzano, it spread throughout the peninsula, reaching 27 local branches that operated with increasing autonomy. Working mainly with Sinti families, the organization decided that the term "nomads" was the most appropriate to convey the tradition of itinerancy as their main

characteristic. This name was, in fact, one of the main simplifications of the complexity of the communities present in Italy and, without exaggeration, it changed the history of the image of Italian Roma and Sinti communities forever.

The local presidents, who for the first twenty years were always non-Roma and non-Sinti, sometimes also members of the Catholic Church, managed the offices, liaising mainly with local authorities and trying to identify the needs of the communities. This was particularly true in the northeast and for the Sinti community, where the development of the experimental actions that it was analyzed as being at the basis of the creation of regional laws and camps to regulate and manage the settlement of communities linked to a tradition of itinerancy, as well as actions related to the schooling of minors. At the same time, Opera Nomadi will begin collecting and studying memories of deportation, conducting initial research, and publishing them in the magazine *Lacio Drom* and later in specific publications through the work of journalist Giovanna Boursier. Even today, in the words of President Massimo Converso, Opera Nomadi's archive of testimonies concerning the memory of persecution is the most extensive available, as is the photographic archive of the history of the Italian Sinti traveling theatre company.<sup>20</sup>

This widespread presence and the progressive involvement of community members in various capacities led to the growth of many vocations among those who would later become the first generation of leaders of the Roma and Sinti movement in Italy.

It is interesting to highlight a document dating back to this very early preparatory phase, part of the personal archive of Father Mauro Rabatti, president of the Opera Nomadi di Prato, already featured on the aforementioned platform "Storie nella Storia" (Stories in History). The document is the 1971 bulletin "Devel dic pren le sinti"<sup>21</sup>, which was created through collaboration between the Centro Studi Sinti in Turin and the Sinti of Cuneo, with the aim of becoming "a newspaper made by Sinti for Sinti, to promote unity, self-confidence, and solidarity among communities." It contains an appeal to the Sinti throughout Italy from a group calling themselves "the Sinti of Cuneo" who: "encourage them not to be ashamed of their identity and to unite to fight prejudice; emphasize that unity and solidarity are essential to improve living conditions and demonstrate that 'gypsy' does not mean 'thief.'" Ten "concrete proposals" are listed by the Sinti of Cuneo to improve life in the camp. Although it has not been possible to trace the authors of the Bulletin, which is signed only with names that could be "Romano Lav," i.e., Rom names rather than registered names, and although the Sinti Study Center no longer appears to be active, it will be reported the concrete proposals to indicate how the initiative to organize and move together towards common needs has its roots far back

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<sup>20</sup> Ethnographic interview, May 15, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> <https://storie-nella-storia.it/archivio-storico-lacio-drom/>, in the Art section.

in time in dynamics that do not seem to be directly linked to Opera Nomadi, but which the organization seems to have simply intercepted. The proposals were: “to move the camp to a safer area, away from the road; to create a school in the camp (mornings: literacy; afternoons: crafts) for children and adults; to build temporary houses for those in need; to promote traditional crafts and outdoor work; revive ancient crafts with the help of elderly Sinti; set up a craft workshop in the camp; create an internal organization of heads of families to manage the camp; promote and study the Sinta language; teach the history of the Sinti in school, rather than only that of the gagé (non-Sinti); oppose unjust laws such as the ‘mandatory expulsion order’ and municipal ‘anti-parking’ ordinances. The Bulletin testifies to “the mistrust of the authorities and the gagé, which forces them to move constantly” and contains an “invitation to all Sinti to collaborate” and to “respond to proposals and send news, ideas, and letters to maintain contact between communities.”

The document is a strong call for collective action, for the assertion of rights and the enhancement of Sinti identity and culture, with a view to social redemption and autonomy that it could be considered to be of inestimable value, especially as a testimony to the first responses, in the contemporary era, to acts of antigypsyism perpetuated by municipalities such as “expulsion orders.”

During the same period, the association AIZO <sup>22</sup> (Italian Association of Gypsies Today) was founded in Turin, directed since its inception by Dr. Carla Osella. Also inspired by Catholicism, it was created at the request of the community and became an association, gathering the support of 431 Sinti families.

After two years of recreational activities, the Sinti community asked to open a school, an “incredible” idea at the time, given that children did not attend public schools and “survival was considered the primary objective.”<sup>23</sup> Founded by three Sinti and three non-Sinti, the school began in a small house thanks to the support of the Municipality of Turin and operated for 23 years, welcoming over 6,000 children and teaching in Piemonte region’s dialect, which was considered the lingua franca.

It should be noted that the activities in this first phase were entirely focused on mediation using entirely experimental methods, and, according to part of the movement, any mistakes that may have been made can also be attributed to this trial-and-error approach, which responded to evolving needs with regard to the new regulatory requirements of the state. At the end of the 1980s, a self-critical reflection began both on experiences considered failures, such as special schools, and on the lack

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.aizo.it/aizo-rom-sinti/>

<sup>23</sup> Ethnographic interview, 09/15/25.

of involvement and decision-making power of Roma and Sinti within the organization.

The first demand for the direct participation of Roma and Sinti in the activities of pro-Roma and pro-Sinti associations was represented by the founding of the Thèm Romanó association in Lanciano, in the province of Chieti, by Santino Spinelli in 1990. A musician and composer, Santino Spinelli began to involve the audience at his concerts in spreading awareness of the Romani language and culture in a way he described as a 'seminar-concert' which "was interesting because it combined art with entertainment, and culture too, so to speak, when we talked, but at the same time it was also a statement, it was unintentionally and indirectly activism, because everything was aimed at enhancing and promoting this enormous artistic and cultural heritage."<sup>24</sup> Thèm Romanò's journey has grown over time and continues today. For the first generation, it represents one of the examples of the birth of Romani activism and is certainly the ultimate representation of a struggle fought through artistic expression.

Since 1994, he has promoted and organized the Amico Rom International Art Competition in Lanciano, which includes poetry, fiction, theater, photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, music, essays, and cinema (documentaries and films), and is open to published and unpublished works.

The path taken by the members of Opera Nomadi, on the other hand, led to the departure of some of them starting in the 1990s. According to Carlo Berini<sup>25</sup>, now president of the Sukar Drom association in Mantua, it was the election in Mantova in 1992 of the first Sinti president of Opera Nomadi, Bernardino Torsi, that marked the beginning of the dissolution of the organization's historical structure. The election of a Sinti to the presidency led the members of the community to embark on a new path of autonomy from the national leadership. From this phase of slow detachment, which lasted about a decade, various associations were born which, in 2007, at the instigation of Sukar Drom (Bernardino Torsi, Yuri Del Bar, Carlo Berini in Mantova), Nevo Drom (Radames Gabrielli in Bolzano), Rom, Sinti e politica (Nazareno Guarnieri in Pescara), merged into the Comitato Rom e Sinti Insieme (Rom and Sinti Together Committee). In 2009, in Mantova, the Committee was established as the Federazione Rom e Sinti Insieme (Rom and Sinti Together Federation), with around forty Sinti and Romani associations formed in the meantime throughout the country among its members. It launched the first bill for the recognition of linguistic minority status and promoted the creation of Sinti and Romani associations throughout Italy, supporting the need for direct mediation through national and regional offices within which the presence of

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<sup>24</sup> Ethnographic interview, 09/23/25.

<sup>25</sup> Ethnographic interview, 09/03/25.

community representatives could make participation effective.<sup>26</sup>The main objective is undoubtedly the active and direct participation of Roma and Sinti in decision-making processes affecting their communities, a political participation that had first materialized in 2005 with the election of Yuri Del Bar to the Mantova City Council and which therefore proved to be feasible.

According to activists, the Spinelli family's efforts at the international level, which led to their entry into the IRU, of which Santino Spinelli is now one of the vice presidents, and to the hosting of the 6th World Congress of the IRU (International Romani Union) in Lanciano in 2004, with the participation of over 200 delegates from 39 countries, were contemporary.

In the following years, the movement focused on a number of common objectives, but each member channelled their energies into different strategies. It will be summarized this complexity, focusing in particular on the direct responses to acts of antigypsyism that we highlighted earlier.

The Sukar Drom Association and the Associazione 21 Luglio, with the support of ASGI (Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration), undertook a series of crucial legal battles, using the judicial tool to counter discriminatory policies and public statements. These lawsuits aimed not only to obtain justice for individuals but also to dismantle the political and cultural consensus that normalizes racial discrimination.

In 2009, a historic ruling by the Verona court definitively convicted Flavio Tosi, then mayor of Verona, and five other members of the Northern League, who in 2001 had launched a racist campaign against the Sinti people of Verona. Evicted from their place of residence, described as an "illegal camp," Italian Sinti families had wandered from one open space to another throughout the summer, until they were settled in a parking lot. This was accompanied by a violent media campaign and a petition that gathered numerous signatures to drive them out of the city. The Veronese Sinti testified at the trial, supported by the then Opera Nomadi di Mantova, which later merged into the autonomous association Sukar Drom, and by ASGI (Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration). Mayor Tosi was sentenced to two months in prison for 'racist propaganda', as well as being ordered to pay €50,000 to the victims and all legal costs.<sup>27</sup>

Another of the most emblematic cases is the judicial response to the so-called "Nomad Emergency Plan" implemented by the Berlusconi government in 2008, which, presented as a response to a public order emergency, effectively institutionalized discrimination

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<sup>26</sup> <https://comitatoromsinti.blogspot.com/2007/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://sucardrom.blogspot.com/search?q=+flavio+tosi>

on ethnic grounds. The most serious element was the decision to conduct a census of Roma and Sinti settlements, including the collection of fingerprints, even from minors. In 2013, in an equally historic ruling, the Civil Court of Rome recognized that Italian Roma citizen Elviz Salkanovic had been the victim of ethnic discrimination during the operations of the “Nomad Plan” in 2010, when, despite being in possession of a valid identity document, he was stopped by the police who took his fingerprints. The man, supported by Associazione 21 luglio, ASGI, and Open Society Justice Initiative, appealed to the court, arguing that the identification was discriminatory and harmful to his dignity. Three years later, the court ruled that the fingerprinting was an act of discrimination based on ethnic origin and ordered the Prime Minister’s Office and the Ministry of the Interior to pay €8,000 in moral damages<sup>28</sup>.

These are just two examples of associations responding to institutional antigypsyism through legal action, examples that legitimize institutional criticism, demonstrating that this is not a political opinion but an objective violation of fundamental rights. and create a legal and cultural precedent, making it more difficult for future administrations to repeat similar practices in such an explicit form. Furthermore, they bring the issue to the European level, focusing the attention of European institutions on events in the country.

The value of these legal battles goes far beyond the outcome of individual cases; they undoubtedly have strategic and cultural value, providing a means of defence for marginalized communities that often lack access to traditional channels of representation and aiming to de-normalize discrimination by building anti-racist case law.

Since its foundation in 2010, the Associazione 21 Luglio, chaired by Carlo Stasolla, has focused on that part of the Roma and Sinti communities living in marginalised housing situations and therefore on the reality of the camps, with a strategy aimed primarily at quantitative and qualitative research. Today, it is considered a point of reference at European and national level in this field.

A few years later, the Kethane Movement was founded in Milan, born out of a program led and funded by the European Council (RomAct) to train mediators who work directly with institutions and local authorities, bypassing associative structures. From the outset, it has been led by Dijana Pavlovic, who was already active in the Roma and Sinti Federation. In recent years, the activists of the Khetane Movement have represented the multifaceted and complex nature of the movement, embodying different demands

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<sup>28</sup> [https://www.old.asgi.it/home\\_asgi.php%3Fn=2758&l=it.html](https://www.old.asgi.it/home_asgi.php%3Fn=2758&l=it.html)

within the movement itself. This *grassroots* activism adopts methodologies that are entirely different from those previously used, reaching out many young people from the communities and training them in the tools of democratic consultation through the experience of the 'Political School', so that they are able to engage directly with the authorities through methods of civic action: assembly participation, petitions, flash mobs, and the use of new forms of communication that were developing at that time. It therefore responds to the need to overcome certain internal dynamics within the association and to train a new generation, thereby fostering generational change and adapting to the new requirements of European planning for Roma and Sinti.

In conclusion of this brief overview of the movement's history, the experience of the Calabrian Roma communities will be mentioned: in 2008, they formed an association called Lav Romanò under the leadership of Luigi Bevilacqua, now deceased, and which is still active, with Fiore Manzo as its president.

In our opinion, the experience of Lav Romanò is important both because it highlights the particular case of residential segregation in the 'ghetto neighbourhoods' of Calabria and because it led to the enactment, in 2019, of Regional Law No. 41 'Integration and promotion of the Roma minority'. The law therefore leads to the recognition, albeit at the regional level, of the Roma as a linguistic and cultural minority and allocates funding for the promotion of April 8 as 'International Roma Day' (Art. 2 L.R. 41/2019). All those who consider linguistic and cultural recognition a priority will rally around the importance of this law. While its detractors emphasize that the plan of action is too bland in terms of both content and the scope of funding that the law allocates to cultural activities, its supporters consider it a fundamental precedent in local legislation, serving as a driving force and example for other regions until recognition is achieved at the national level.

## 2. New activism

The civil rights movement of the Roma and Sinti communities in Italy is now a complex, fragmented, and constantly evolving reality, operating in one of the most difficult social and political contexts in Europe. It is currently undergoing a new phase, marked by the establishment in 2017 of the National Platform and the Roma and Sinti Forum, as consultative bodies for the drafting and implementation of the National Strategy 2022-2030.

Currently, the contemporary movement rests on several fundamental pillars. Certainly, **historical** and community **associations**, whose origins and development were briefly described, still play a significant role, pioneering the bringing of community issues to the institutional level. Over the last decade, a new crucial role has also emerged for **Romnìa**, Roma and Sinti women of different social backgrounds, ages, and origins, who are at the forefront of the movement, fighting both against external discrimination and for emancipation and affirmation within their own communities. Among these, we would like to mention Stefania Bevilacqua, vice president of UCRI (Union of Italian Roman Communities), the aforementioned Dijana Pavlovic of the Khetane Movement, Saska Jovanovič from Romnì Onlus, Eva Rizzin, scientific director of the National Observatory on Antigypsyism at the University of Verona, and among the figures of local organizations, Simonetta Malinverno from the association Amici di Via Django in Modena. These figures, in their stories of community life and their motivations for participating, represent the transition from activism to the consolidated reality of the third sector of the Romani and Sinti movement, with all the contradictions that this transition has brought with it. There is also a new generation of **intellectuals and activists**, young Roma and Sinti women and men, often born and raised in Italy, university graduates and perfectly integrated into the social fabric, who are redefining the movement through art, music, literature, and a conscious use of social media, publicly challenging stereotypes in order to be recognized as full citizens and bearers of a “living culture.”

The movement's demands now focus on specific areas where discrimination is most acute. There are some macro issues that have emerged over the decades as priorities, such as the right to housing and the fight to overcome institutionalized “nomad camps” — perhaps the most symbolic battle. The movement challenges this model of housing segregation, calling for inclusive housing policies and denouncing forced evictions as violations of fundamental human rights. The second of these macro issues is the **right to education**, where the movement's action aims to combat high school dropout rates, promoting the role of cultural mediators and fighting against the reality of de facto “differential” classes. The goal is quality education that, while respecting cultural identity,

opens up all the possibilities of the future to the younger generations. The third macro theme, which cuts across all associations, is the **fight against institutional antigypsyism**, for the recognition of antigypsyism as a specific form of racism, and for the fight against discrimination in law enforcement, the media, and access to work and healthcare. Finally, it necessary to report on the fight for **the recognition of the Romani ethnic-linguistic minority**, which is also cross-cutting but considered a priority only by part of the movement, and, in conclusion, with the fight for the recognition, awareness, and dissemination of the historical memory of deportation and persecution during World War II, i.e., the recognition of the Porrajmos.

From the observation made during the event '(More) Participation, Inclusion and Equality. Roma and Sinti in Italy in the new National Strategy', organized by UNAR in collaboration with the Municipality of Rome and Formez PA, in the presence of the Platform of Roma and Sinti Communities and the Forum for the presentation of the new National Strategy, it is clear that these issues are somewhat polarized between two extremes of the movement in a struggle articulated mainly through the linguistic and cultural dimension as a weapon of dissemination to combat antigypsyism and as a priority pursued by UCRI (Union of Italian Romani Communities), which supports many of the "Artivists", who will be discussed later; a second that considers the right to housing a priority, which on this occasion seemed to revolve around the Kethane Movement. Furthermore, a fairly widespread criticism has emerged of the mechanism of planning through calls for proposals, which has increased competition between organizations and transformed activism into an economic sector, preventing organizations from focusing on the real problems of the territory and making them dependent on national or European funding.

Relatively 'new' issues in Italian activism also emerge, such as the battle against cultural appropriation, support for ethnic coming out, and a focus on gender and intersectional dynamics, which mainly concern the LGBTQ+ community within the Roma and Sinti communities. A final point, which emerges purely from the ethnographic interviews conducted for this research, is defined as **'the invisibility of the Sinti'**, i.e. the disappearance of the cultural specificities of the Sinti due to the umbrella term 'Roma' adopted at European and international level (despite the fact that, in the official Italian context, the terms Roma and Sinti are used).

Many of the movement's new protagonists are making artistic expression the focus of their activism, concentrating on cultural dissemination and the fight against stereotypes. They still experience persistent tensions within the movement: the struggle between invisibility (as a survival strategy) and hypervisibility (necessary for advocacy) on social media, and the constant negotiation between simplifying their message for

the public and representing their immense internal diversity.

## 2.1 Artists

In the complex and often conflictual public narrative surrounding the Roma and Sinti communities in Italy, a powerful and transformative cultural phenomenon is gaining ground: activism. This neologism, a syncretism of 'art' and 'activism', defines the work of Roma and Sinti artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers who use creative languages not only to express their own aesthetics, but also to combat antigypsyism and centuries-old stereotypes, reclaim a denied and sometimes hidden identity, and open a dialogue of equals with mainstream society. Roma and Sinti artists in Italy are today the protagonists of a silent revolution that, through beauty and criticism, is rewriting their own history from within. They are young women and men from different local backgrounds and with different personal stories, in which certain decisive events and encounters with representatives of the first generation of the movement in Italy and with European realities have been the genesis of their commitment. They direct their artistic production towards the structural antigypsyism that was shown as to be deeply rooted and prevalent, which denies the human and cultural complexity of these communities, erasing their history, internal diversity, and right to self-determination.

Traditional artistic experiences, often confined to folkloric spaces or marketed as 'ethnic', risk being absorbed by dominant narratives that appropriate them without contextualising or questioning them. Activism, on the contrary, makes the deconstruction of certain clichés its strong point, expressing itself through a plurality of languages, each with a specific intervention strategy.

The research will attempt to describe the most wide-ranging and interesting current experiences linked to a specific professional choice, selected exclusively on the basis of discussions with members of the community, in particular to provide an overview of the issues and methods currently in place. These experiences will be described into different areas; insofar as artistic expression can be clearly defined.

**Music:** music is one of the forms of expression that has most characterized Romani artistic production over the centuries, yet activists imbue it with new meanings.

**The Alexian Group**<sup>29</sup> has a long history, owned by the Spinelli family, whose seminar-concert format we described earlier. Among their many experiences at national and international level, the awards and recognitions they have received and their participation in the most important international festivals, we would like to mention the

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.alexian.it/>

recent concerts in historic venues of Italian musical culture such as the Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, which take on extraordinary symbolic significance in terms of the goal of recognizing the Romani musical tradition and affirming how alive, contemporary, and in dialogue with the world it is, and how it is an integral part of contemporary Italian culture. The lyrics, sometimes in the Romani language, speak of freedom, cultural resistance, and dignity, transforming each concert into a musical manifesto. The violinist of the Alexian Group is **Gennaro Spinelli**, whom the research focus on because of the role he has assumed in recent years. Gennaro Spinelli grew up in a family of activists and musicians. His story is not one of rediscovering his identity, as will be shown later, but he is considered as unique because, as president of UCRI, he is leading the movement into a completely new phase. Gennaro Spinelli fully embraces the strategy of hypervisibility and, through content on social media platforms, participation as spokesperson for UCRI on major Italian television programs, and the publication of informative texts written in extremely simple and direct language, he envelops activism in a contemporary dimension. The movement's opinions on the figure are conflicting, both with regard to the 'culturalist' priority that leads UCRI to mainly support linguistic and cultural research and dissemination projects, and with regard to the simplification of some more complex issues, such as the assertion that "Italian Roma are not nomadic by culture" (Spinelli, 2022), which completely overlooks the tradition of itinerancy among the Sinti in the northeast or, in any case, reduces the scope and historical objectivity of their forced sedentarization in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, those in the movement who embrace cultural priorities and believe in hypervisibility see Gennaro Spinelli as the future of the movement and the true leader of "nothing about us, without us" (Charlton, 1998).

In this focus on music, it also mentioned Claudio "Cavallo" Giannotti and **Mascarimiri**, who bear witness to one of those dynamics between "invisibility and visibility" that have characterized the Roma and Sinti communities over the decades and who bring the experience of the Roma of Salento, not present in the public debate. Through a blend of traditional Salento music and the sounds of the Romani tradition, the group recounts the past of Salento Roma families dedicated to horse breeding and trading as a historical profession and the tradition of the "Pizzica Scherma" during the days of the Feast of San Rocco in Torrepaduli (Ruffano) in the album *Gitanistan* and the documentary of the same name.<sup>30</sup>The documentary overlaps the stories of ordinary discrimination against three generations of Salento Roma families with institutional antigypsyism and hate speech in the media towards Roma from the former Yugoslavia who are victims of the 'camp system', bringing to light the forgotten history of these 'disappeared' communities, their importance in the culture and economic and social history of Salento,

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<sup>30</sup> For further information, see Melchioni, E. (2002) "The Salento Roma and the pizzica fencing of Torrepaduli". In *Italy Romani Vol III, The Romani of ancient settlement of south-central Italy*, Piasere L., and Pontrandolfo S. (eds).

and denouncing the recurrence of antigypsyism in different forms, but always the same. Since their very first album, “Li mulè de li gagè,” which translates a Salento dialect expletive into Romani, the group has operated in an irreverent dimension of revenge through language and music.

**Literature:** writing is one of the most prolific and interesting dimensions of current activism. Writers such as Morena Pedriali Errani and newcomers such as Virginia Spinelli use the written word to restore historical and emotional depth to communities described only in sociological or crime news terms.

**Morena Pedriali Errani** is a Sinti writer. She comes from a circus family in the province of Ferrara. In 2017, she was a semifinalist for the Campiello Prize, Youth section, with her short story Khorakhanè. In 2024, she published *Prima che chiudiate gli occhi* (Before You Close Your Eyes) for Giulio Perroni Editori, in which she recounts, with evocative images, the persecution and deportation of Roma and Sinti in Italy through the eyes of the young Jezebel. She recounts the difficulty of recounting this historical memory, which is also a family memory, both in gathering testimonies that would serve as the foundation for writing this story, given the Sinti tradition of not talking about their dead, and in the responsibility of doing them justice. She also emphasizes the importance of writing as a means of “reclaiming one’s own narrative, choosing one’s own way of doing so.”<sup>31</sup> She has been active at the local level in the difficult city of Ferrara since she was very young and is a member of the Kethane Movement, for which she deals with issues related to communication, including through social media platforms. Today, she has distanced herself from the hypervisibility of communities on social media and from activism, and feels closer to a “dimension of language, thought, and community struggle” than to the protagonism and isolation that social media dynamics can lead to.

**Virginia Spinelli** is a Romani writer from Pescara, Abruzzo, who is close to the UCRI organization, thanks to which she became involved in activism. She began writing during a period of double displacement, both within her community and outside it, where she faced discrimination in accessing work because she was recognized as Roma. She recounts “a personal journey of liberation and salvation through writing and study, to which she returned with great sacrifice and passion.”<sup>32</sup> Today she is a student of literature at the University of Chieti. She has published *Con cura* for Bookapoem and written many pieces for UNAR and UCRI events and meetings. She is very active on social media, where she shares her thoughts and experiences of emancipation through the Romani language and words. In the appendix is an unpublished work donated by the author to this research (Appendix A).

**Simonetta Malinverno** is a Sinti activist from Modena, now spokesperson for the association Amici di Via Django. She began her commitment to the Modena community

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<sup>31</sup> Ethnographic interview, 04.09.25.

<sup>32</sup> Ethnographic interview, 01.09.25.

through dynamics related to the overcoming of the Via Baccelleria camp in 2007 and over time became a point of reference for activism related to gender dynamics and the right to housing. She participated in the round tables set up by the Emilia Romagna region for the drafting of Regional Law 11/2015 and for the regional and national strategy. She writes to tell the story of her community and to renegotiate her personal history, always torn between life in the camp and life in an apartment, between life at the Luna Park and the struggle of political negotiation with local authorities. Her writing is highly personal and vivid, a writing of 'survival' driven by the desire to tell the story of the Sinti and their culture to prevent it from disappearing under the weight of the difficulty of understanding itinerancy and the travelling entertainment profession.<sup>33</sup> In the appendix is an unpublished work donated by the author to this research (Appendix B).

**Santino Spinelli** stands out in Italian poetry, for whom writing in the Romani language is an act of linguistic resistance and preservation of memory. Spinelli's poetry is a cry of pain and pride that recalls the genocide of Roma and Sinti and his own family history, which is shared by communities throughout Europe. In the appendix, is includes the poem *Auschwitz*, engraved on the stone of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin, inaugurated on October 24, 2012, and the poem *Per non dimenticare (Lest We Forget)*, which accompanies the commemorative plaque on display in Padua, in the Museum of Internment since 1997 (Appendix C).

The **performing and visual arts** are a very lively and prolific current within Romani and Sinti activism. These artists use the body, images, and installations to subvert hegemonic views. Their works often address themes such as memory, gender identity within the community, and the violence of antigypsyism. Staging one's body in institutional spaces such as museums, galleries, and institutional halls is, in itself, a political act: it is an affirmation of presence and the right to cultural citizenship.

**Luna De Rosa**<sup>34</sup> is a Romani artist from Abruzzo. Marginalized and discriminated against because of her ethnicity, she began to reflect on her origins after moving to Milan to study and undergoing what she describes as a sort of "identity migration." She began to translate themes related to her community into her art, encouraged by the Spinelli family, who recognized her as a Roma artist of excellence and encouraged her to become a spokesperson for her identity and culture. At the heart of this artistic and activist practice is the exploration of her identity, but also the stories of other women, especially Roma and Sinti women, and "an idea of art as a form of resistance, but also as a space to give voice to these silent stories."<sup>35</sup> Luna De Rosa's works are exhibited throughout Europe; the latest, from 2015, *Rom & Sinti - Motherhood Otherland*, is at the

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<sup>33</sup> Ethnographic interview, 08.09.25.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.lunaderosa.com/it>

<sup>35</sup> Ethnographic interview, 08/28/25.

Triennale di Milano. In the appendix (Appendix D) is the collage *The Structure of Antigypsyism*, in wool and oil, where “multimedia and multimateriality represent the complex and multifaceted nature of antigypsyism” and where various figurative suggestions inspired by historical events are linked by a common thread: “the resilience of Roma populations throughout history.”<sup>36</sup>

**Ivana Nikolić** is a Romani performer from Turin of Bosnian origin. She began her activism in her neighborhood working with children and very young people, graduated in education sciences, and was an activist and collaborator with various organizations in Italy and Europe in the 2010s. Today, she is a dancer and teacher of Romani dance. She has written and performed in theater productions (*Coming out etnico: essere orgogliosi di essere rom e sinti*) of what she defines as “social theater,” in which she recognizes a personal form of expression, but currently expresses her activism through the creation of digital content. Activism through social media is the newest form that the movement has taken on today. In the Italian context, it is becoming increasingly important both for its ability to intercept different interactions of the social media audience with regard to the issues raised, and for the innovative nature of the issues themselves, such as ethnic coming out, intersectionality, and self-critical reflections on the movement itself. Through the Instagram profile *Non chiamateci zingare (Father’t call us gypsies)* and the podcast *+Rom-Rum*,<sup>37</sup> Ivana Nikolić manages to bring together Roma and Sinti activists with other associations linked to other minorities and acts as an educator and influencer in the true sense of the word. The goal is to dismantle stereotypes through direct and mutual knowledge and the direct and personal participation of community members, while at the same time conveying the message about the importance of claiming one’s identity, defending it, and taking pride in one’s belonging.<sup>38</sup> The text of the trailer for the third season of the *+Rom-Rum* podcast is included in the appendix (Appendix E).

**Cinema** is a form of artistic expression in which there are fewer examples. There are many documentaries made by non-Roma and non-Sinti directors, in collaboration with Roma and Sinti associations, focusing on the communities; among Roma directors, the most important example is that of Romani director **Laura Halilović**<sup>39</sup> (*Io, la mia famiglia rom e Woody Allen* del 2009; *Io rom romantica* del 2014) [Me,my Roma family and Woody Allen; Me romantic rom]. Laura Halilović is not an activist; however, the story told in the documentary *Io, la mia famiglia rom e Woody Allen* takes on a highly symbolic value in recounting the experience of the director’s family in *Uscita dal campo* (Leaving the Camp) and their new life in an apartment. This is one of the very few cases of reappropriation of the narrative of the reality of the life of Roma from the former

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.lunadosa.com/it/works/the-structure-of-antigypsyism> (Ethnographic interview, 01.09).

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKe6TEAPctj?igsh=MTgydXExeHpqaWFxbw==>

<sup>38</sup> Ethnographic interview, 10.09.25.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/p/laura-halilovic/>

Yugoslavia in Italy, in which the themes are the future aspirations of a young woman grappling with the negotiation of her family and cultural traditions, such as marriage.

It will be decided also to include **fashion** design in this review, placing it within the artistic expressions because, in the global fashion scene, dominated by often homogeneous narratives, powerful voices are emerging that challenge centuries-old stereotypes and rewrite the rules of aesthetics and identity. In this field, it is necessary to mention the Sinti designer **Noel Maggini**,<sup>40</sup> from Prato, who embodies a journey of reconnection with his Sinti roots through fashion. His aesthetic is distinguished by an elegant sobriety, far from the folkloric and tacky stereotypes often associated with Romani culture in the collective imagination. Maggini performs an essential deconstruction of traditional elements. His inspiration comes from family memories: his grandmothers' gold jewelry, the dignity of his community's clothing, the search for a discreet but deeply rooted beauty that transforms fashion into an emotional archive. Noel Maggini collaborates with the Kethane Movement, but his commitment to the community is entirely devoted to his art. It is important also to mention **Sara Cetty**<sup>41</sup>, the stage name of Concetta Sarachella, a Romani designer from Isernia, who responds to the stereotype of Romani poverty with abundance, explosions of color, majestic volumes, golden embroidery, and luxurious fabrics that echo, in a hyper-contemporary key, the traditional splendor of the dresses worn by Roma women in Eastern Europe. While the image of Roma women is often victimized or exoticized, she proposes a powerful, regal, and intrepid femininity. Her models, often members of the community, walk the runway, transforming fashion into a political statement. Comparing Maggini and Cetty, it could be discovered not a contrast, but a fruitful dialogue. Both, starting from different sensibilities, fight the same battle against cultural homogenization and prejudice.

This overview concludes with **Rašid Nikolić**,<sup>42</sup> a Roma puppeteer and stand-up comedian from Turin with Bosnian origins. Rašid Nikolić, alias *The Gypsy Marionettist*, has been performing his eponymous show since 2012, believing in the "mystical power of puppets" and staging a composite narrative of spectacle, twists and turns, dissemination, and material culture against the "failure to recognize Roma as bearers of culture."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, with his stand-up show *Rom vs tutti* (Roma vs everyone), he represents in Italy that strand of stand-up comedy known as 'ethnic humor' (Lowe, 1986), through which he engages with the audience, exploring stereotypes about the Roma community, both hidden and overt. He is also very active on social media platforms, where he wages targeted battles against cultural appropriation and the racism hidden in the use of the term "gypsy" for commercial purposes, against antigypsyism in the

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<sup>40</sup> <https://noellmaggini.it/?srsltid=AfmBOoqIQdcFZE3JICIBikcUxgQ6P70w3JqTxcK-TugKuAz26NQ40RNA>

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/stiliamociconsarachetty/?locale=it\\_IT](https://www.facebook.com/stiliamociconsarachetty/?locale=it_IT)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.thegipsymarionettist.com/>

<sup>43</sup> Ethnographic interview, 18.09.25.

traditional media, and against “the welfare mentality of associations” and the “disease of the third sector,” which leads to “calibrating associative objectives on the economy.”<sup>44</sup> The movement considers him one of the most controversial figures at present, and opinions vary across generations, ranging from contemptuous accusations of self-promotion and prioritizing battles for their own sake, to unconditional support and great admiration for his ability to juggle new media and keep the debate about Roma and Sinti communities alive and fueled every day. Attached is a transcript of an excerpt from the show *The Gypsy Marionettist* (Appendix E).

Despite its vitality, Romani and Sinti activism in Italy faces considerable challenges. Certainly, the lack of established networks and funding in the arts and the persistence of prejudice within cultural institutions themselves make it difficult to access funding and visibility. Furthermore, there is the constant danger of being confined to an ‘ethnic enclosure’ by being recognized only as ‘Roma artists’ or, conversely, of being considered only for their commitment and the issues addressed to their communities, rather than for their artistic production itself and its themes as a source of inspiration. Many activists fight on multiple fronts: against external antigypsyism and against dynamics within their own communities. However, the future of this movement looks incredibly promising. The emergence of autonomous cultural associations, the strategic use of social media to bypass traditional *gatekeepers*, and the creation of transnational networks with other Roma and Sinti activists in Europe are multiplying the resonance of these voices. Roma and Sinti activists in Italy are carrying out a fundamental cultural and political operation, transforming their community from the object of narration to the subject of narration. Through their works, they are not asking for pity or forced integration, but for recognition, justice, and the right to complexity.

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<sup>44</sup> Ethnographic interview, 18.09.25.

## Concluding reflections

The analysis presented here demonstrates the persistence and adaptation of antigypsyism in the Italian context. Antigypsyism in Italy is not an episodic phenomenon, but a structural and persistent form of racism that has adapted over time, from Renaissance expulsion orders to fascist racial laws and from post-war re-education policies to the 'camp system' and contemporary media and political criminalization.

Roma and Sinti communities are subject to a paradox whereby they are simultaneously hypervisible as scapegoats in public and political discourse, and invisible in their human, historical, and cultural complexity. Public policies, such as the camp system, have increased this negative visibility, crystallizing segregation.

Despite centuries of discrimination in various forms and ways, the Roma and Sinti communities have always demonstrated resilience and strategic capacity for action. The history of the civil rights movement is the story of a progressive and tenacious conquest of self-representation, which has led from early external mediation to activism increasingly driven by the communities themselves.

Today, the emergence of activism, the commitment to artistic production, represents a mature and powerful phase in the struggle. Art has become the preferred tool of the younger generations to dismantle stereotypes, reclaim a positive and complex identity, and rewrite their own narrative, taking it away from those who have historically exploited or denied it.

The history of the movement and its demands show that combating antigypsyism requires not only the overcoming of discriminatory laws and policies, but also a recognition of historical responsibilities, a genuine listening to the voices of communities, and a commitment to supporting their struggles for the recognition of rights and full citizenship.

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## Appendix<sup>45</sup>

### Appendix A.

*Jekh duj Trin* by Virginia Spinelli

Iav, Ivan whispered to me that night as we hid in a dead-end alley.

Come.

The sky was open, night blue.

I can smell whoever was here and left immediately afterwards.

Passing through, perhaps myself.

Slow footsteps, scattered hay.

I hear chords from far away, someone is playing.

Someone is thinking about tidying up. Someone is thinking about the rest.

I glimpse the blue people.

No them, roots.

Barefoot, on the move.

So free to be themselves among themselves.

<< Play again, repeats the little girl. >>

jekh

duj

Trin

They speak a language unknown to me, but I am learning.

Flashback:

A girl with black eyes looks at me suspiciously, calling me caggio; to her, I am a stranger.

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<sup>45</sup> All texts are reproduced in accordance with the author's original formatting and layout. For transcriptions of audio-visual products, the sources are indicated in the notes. The translation was carried out by the author of this research.

<< Giattù>> she shouts.

Go away.

As if she were afraid that others would judge something she cared about.

The intimacy of a lit fire.

Her skin is so amber-colored, she wears white tights and torn overalls. She makes me smile, but I don't let her see it.

She's different from other girls.

She has fire in her eyes.

I am drawn to her.

Her wavy hair is tied back in a funny little ponytail.

You can see she has grown up too quickly.

She scrutinizes me, looks inside me, and I am afraid.

I ask her name, she doesn't answer.

She hints at a smile.

<< Iav>> she says, without caring who I am.

She is not afraid.

She challenges me, makes me vulnerable.

I am screwed, I say to myself.

Nina, that's her name.

She nods, she doesn't speak, her body communicates for her.

Nina notices everything.

I find out her name because she has a tag with her name on it.

Written in blue.

I roll up my sleeves, roll up my shirt, and sit down in front of her.

Yet we are not at a police station.

I want to know.

<<Tell me your story Nina >>

She looks up and glares at me.

<<What do you want to know? Did you come here like everyone else to extract information so you can tell a story? The usual story of a Roma girl living in pitiful conditions?>>

Nina speaks perfect Italian.

<< Enná >> she shouts.

No.

<< Do you want to know my story, stranger? >> She calls me stranger to emphasize her distrust.

She's mocking me.

She bursts out laughing, and I think to myself: what beautiful teeth.

He sits down, his awareness overwhelms me.

<< I'm Nina and I'm an educator >>

I'm taken aback.

<< Continue>> I say to her.

From here, a stream of consciousness:

<< I grew up between these thin walls, the wind knocked them down.

I felt like a stranger to myself and I was a stranger here. I didn't recognize myself, now I know who I am >>

I do not immediately understand her intent, so I let her talk.

She gestures, shrugs her shoulders.

She never justifies herself, she is always clear.

I am screwed, I tell myself again.

<< To find myself, I lost myself many times.

My journey began at birth.

I have always been the different one,  
in my family and in society.  
Studying set me free.

Time stands still, Nina tells me about herself.  
I discover that she studies, works, and has never loved anyone.

Nina speaks her language and has kept her roots strong.  
She has never been ashamed of them.  
Nina never felt disadvantaged, even though the world screamed the opposite.

<< When I was younger, I never wanted to say that I was Roma, but today it is my greatest pride because this is where I come from >>

Count, float, black-eyed dancer.  
Resistance.  
Plotting.  
Voice.

Run fast, come home.  
What brought you here? My heart.

Tatà.

## Appendix B

*Between the lights and shadows of the Luna Park* by Simonetta Malinverno

Of the world of Luna Park, as we see and remember it, we know only its beauty. We perceive it when we see it, hear it, and even smell it. The music, the lights, the sounds of a microphone inviting people to get on the rides in a loud voice.

And among the attractions, the wind carries various scents: that of the candy stall, that of cotton candy, real mobile sandwich bars for short breaks or dinner before returning home. Their smell surrounds the area of the carousels, perfuming the air, making everything cheerful and appetizing.

It is at sunset, when evening falls, that the amusement park with its lights takes shape in all its splendour. I always look at it with admiration, it makes me relive some parts of my life; when I was a child, a teenager, a woman inside the big amusement park. The feelings I experience are always the same: magic, enchantment, and beauty.

Maybe it's the music, maybe it's the lights, maybe it's the beauty of the attractions.

Or simply because that kind of work is in our blood?

Anyway, one thing I am sure of: the work of the carousel operators is truly wonderful, and attention is paid to every detail.

It pains me sometimes to think that, as a job, it is underestimated and undervalued.

There are many stereotypes among people that still confine us, and very often our work is belittled: we are still seen as people who don't want to work. We live in a taboo, but that doesn't mean we're not happy. We've learned to be strong and shrug off negative judgments, and despite everything, we have been—and continue to be—be - the entertainment for entire generations, both past and present.

The work of carnies and attraction operators is hard. Sometimes only the good side is seen, but it takes a lot of strength, intelligence, passion, and patience. The life of a traveling show.

Try to imagine yourself grappling with the construction of a puzzle. Well! It's not easy: I assure you that among the lights there are also shadows and sacrifices.

Yes, because another thing that fairground workers have to take into account is that a season can go badly, creating economic problems and leaving entire families in precarious situations. There is rain, bad weather, natural disasters, low earnings, and high expenses to bear. Sometimes they go bankrupt.

But the carnies get back up, the carnies hope, and they trust that for a week or even two weeks it won't rain and the sun will shine. They hope that tomorrow there will be people, lots of people, and that entire groups will repopulate the amusement park. They hope that amid smiles, fun, and music new loves and new memories for tomorrow will be born, and that entire families, children, and teenagers, will find serenity in a carefree day. They hope for whispers of youth...

How wonderful it is to spend a whole day at the amusement park, the one near home, which if you don't visit in a couple of days, it will be gone and you'll have to wait a year for it to come back!

Yes, because the times of the carnies can vary. It depends on the duration of the fair.

When the traveling show group prepares to leave the city in the evening, men, women, and entire Sinti families work hard to dismantle it piece by piece - it's like playing with Lego - their carousel, their bread and butter, their life, their livelihood. There is tiredness on their faces and sweat on their foreheads, but also smiles on their lips because it's nice to work in the community, all together, chatting, having a coffee, a glass of fresh water, joking, sharing even those hours that become pleasant lightening the whole atmosphere. And after resting and sleeping a little, they prepare the caravans for the journey. They all set off in single file and say goodbye with a honk of the horn and a wave of the hand. As the line gradually thins out—some going right and some going left— a great void remains in the village and who knows, perhaps even some regret.

The carousel operator perseveres and doesn't give up, working even in bad weather and difficult conditions, for better or bad times. He doesn't give up even when he is left alone.

His fellow entertainers continue their journey for six months of the year. These are the friends of traveling entertainment traveling show.

## Appendix C

**Pi ta risal** by Santino Spinelli

***Pi ta risal***

*Bàr kirkò rovibbè  
Opràlè romané khă  
lènè di dukhaddipé  
andrè ni jilò binafèlè,  
xoxanò mištípé  
Zungalé divèssè  
look bišundipé  
mularò rovibbè  
Xandivalò sabbé  
merribbé barò  
na chèlè duràlè*

***Lest we forget***

*Bitter tears  
from Roman eyes,  
sources of pain  
in an innocent heart,  
tortured feelings  
cruel events  
unheard cries  
dying sobs...  
repulsive grin  
perennial danger  
always looming...*

***Auschwitz***

*Muj šukhò  
Khià kalé  
Vušt šurdé.  
Kwite.  
Ilò cíndò  
Bi dox  
Bi lav  
Nikht rovibbé.*

***Auschwitz***

*Hollow face  
dark eyes  
cold lips.  
Silence.  
Heart torn apart  
breathless  
without words  
no tears.*



We will talk about history, culture, art, resistance, memory, activism, and above all, we will tell stories of other fantastic Roma and Sinti activists and Gadje (= non-Roma).

## Appendix F

*The Gypsy Marionettist* by Rašid Nikolić<sup>48</sup>

Well, well. So today's event will not be a show, but a moment together. This is special for me because I will also have the opportunity to show you things that I never normally show during the show. Things like what happens behind the trunk. Is that okay? Let's do it this way. Now I'll show you a puppet and then we'll have a question and answer session. Is that okay? Are you in? Okay. How is that okay? Where's the enthusiasm? What do you do when you see a good show? And what do you do when you see a great show?

[Applause from the children]

I make all my puppets by hand, so all the professions you mentioned earlier, mimes, jugglers, obviously you're not born that way, right? There's a lot of training and preparation behind it, isn't there? In my work in particular, I spend the winter in my carpentry workshop. Do you know what a carpentry workshop is? OK. Yes, exactly. And I build, design, and plan puppets. And this is a real career, so if any of you didn't know what you wanted to do in life until now, this is an idea. Okay? Puppet shows are an Italian tradition, right? The story of Pinocchio tells us that, right? But it's also a tradition in my family, right? Have you ever heard of the Roma people? Well, they are often called by the wrong name, so I'll tell you today, they are often called gypsies. Have you heard the word gypsy before? I'm sure you have. Okay, but I'll tell you today so you can learn it for the future. The word gypsy literally means slave and is a derogatory term that only promotes hatred, okay? The correct word to refer to people of my ethnicity, my people, is the word Romani. Romani in our language means human being. Clear? So what should we not say? What should we say? Thank you. Let me show you, I'll take this opportunity to show you the Roma flag. Have you seen it before? Wait, I have some clothespins. A white mill. Now yes, now yes, wait. So, I want to tell you about it. In this flag, which is a universal flag, there is the sky, no, is that clear? There is the sky, and what does the green represent? The earth, the earth, no? The planet. What looks like a wheel is actually an Indian chakra, an Indian symbol representing the connection that the Roma have with their homeland, India, okay? Very good, the Indian flag also has a similar chakra, we

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJt3iC3NuzO/?igsh=bmxzdXlyc2ZkbjBs>.

were inspired by that. So this also comes from India and the history of the Romani world. The Romani world was the first, bringing what is an Indian heritage, to bring street performances to Europe. So the first forms of entertainment, hundreds of years ago, were done using shadow puppets, right? You know what I mean? Cardboard, lights, using puppets, using marionettes, using string puppets. So this is a tradition that also comes from the Romani world, which then evolved when it arrived in Europe and became busking. Have you ever heard this term? Busking comes from an English word that means basket, and it has become a term used to mean hat, when you pass the hat, right? A busker is a person who performs street shows, where at the end of the show the audience, if they want, only if they want, and if they can, can participate in their life by making a donation, okay? And so then there are also street shows, right? So, in all the street performances you see, these people are not magicians, they are people who have trained their whole lives to be able to bring you something incredible, right? Like the tiger you saw today. It took me four months to create the tiger, two of which I spent drawing and designing, using images of anatomy. Do you know what anatomy is? The study of muscles, fibers, and bones that are held within the tiger's body. To understand how to reproduce the movements, right? And then to build the body, which in this case is not a skeleton, it's an exoskeleton, it's a reproduction of the exterior, right? To build this puppet, okay? Do you have any questions? Tell me?

[Question from the audience]

I mean, how do you get the wood to make the puppets? Do you go and get it somewhere?

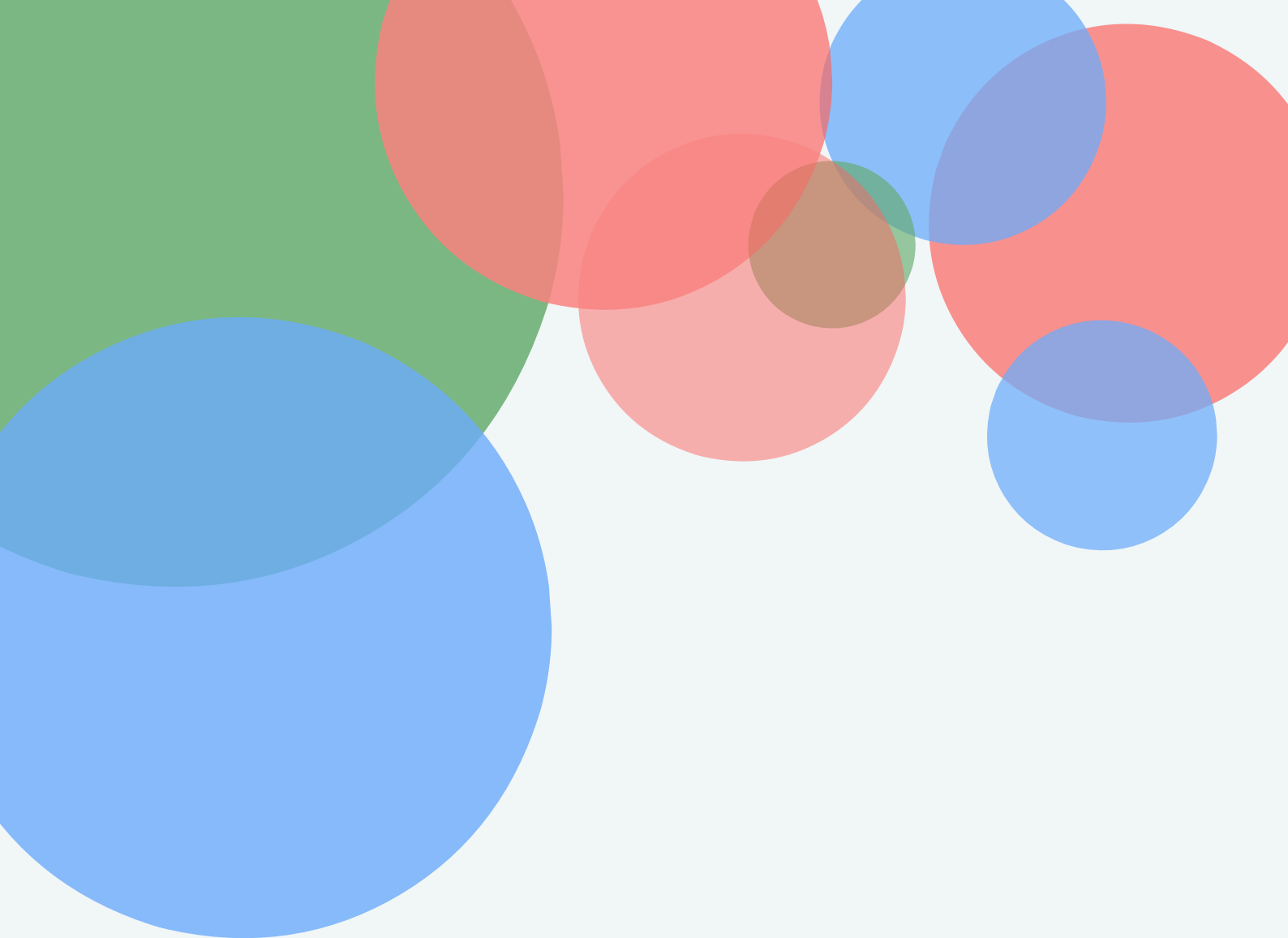
Yes, yes. Well, I have a carpentry workshop. So I have two large rooms where I keep all the machinery and tools I've bought over the years while working. And the wood, I buy really big logs, right? Much thicker than these. Which are then cut. You know you can't just take this tree and build something, because the wood has to be dried. Wood naturally absorbs water, so it takes a while. It usually takes a year for every centimetre of wood. So if you have a 5-centimeter plank, how many years does it take to dry? Five. Shall we answer the questions? Ah, what a nice question. Did you hear that? Okay. My grandfather, whose name is Rašid like me. Actually, I'm named after him because he was born before me. When I was a child, we used to spend time together, usually in silence, sitting close to each other, and he would show me how to work with wood with a knife, teaching me not to cut myself and how to carve sculptures out of wood, okay? For me, it wasn't work, it was a way to spend time with my grandfather. Then, when I was 16, I saw a puppet show on the street for the first time. The show was so bad that I thought, "I think I can do better than that." And that's how it started. So I taught myself, which means I tried to learn on my own. I built my first puppets myself. Then I went to puppet

school in Ukraine. Now I'm very old, I'm 35. Number... Thank you! To make this puppet, this is the most complex one I have, okay? It's also the most difficult to manipulate because it has so many strings, 23 in fact. It took me six months to make it, okay? Six months of work for two and a half minutes of show. I usually present it on stage with music, but since today is a special occasion, I want to show you how I take it out of the box because it's full of little mechanisms with magnets and things that are used to build the puppet before pulling it up. Okay?

These are the controls. That's what they're called, okay? No, no, the controls aren't the puppet, they're its nervous system. By moving these strings, I can move the puppet's body, okay? So the puppet is there, you haven't seen it yet. So, this puppet is inspired by my sister. My sister Ivana is a very funny, beautiful woman, and she just became a mother a few days ago.

[Applause from the children]

And I'm your uncle. Then, usually at the end of a show, the street performer comes to the centre of the stage, proud of his work, looks the audience in the eye and asks for a donation, which is not a forced economic gesture, you are not obliged to give anything at all, the donation always comes from the possibility and the desire, okay? So today, when you attend the festival, remember that this is part of the job and the form of street theatre. Street performance is one of the ultimate forms of democratic art that exists because, unlike a museum or a theatre show, there is no ticket. The ticket to a street performance is the desire to stay until the end to watch it, and real street artists never leave their hat on the ground from the beginning of the show, but only take it out at the end and only if they have done a good job, okay? When you arrive at a street performance, it is important to respect the artist, as we have done today. The best way to watch the show is to sit on the ground and form a circle, as we have done today, and participate in the show. As soon as you see something that seems to be the result of a lot of work, of many years of work, then give a big round of applause. Even better than applause is cheering. And when you realize that a moment of silence and concentration is needed, then be silent. And when you see another child, someone on the phone, tell them that street theatre is a true form of theatre and we are not on the street begging or because we cannot get to the theatre, but because the square and street theatre are our theatre and we work with everyone. Thank you.



# JEKHIPE

Reclaiming Our Past, Rebuilding Our Future:  
New Approaches to Fighting Antigypsyism

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