

Philomena Franz, Narrator of the Romani Holocaust

by María Sierra

The author of this book was born in Germany in 1922. Coming into the world in the bosom of a Romani (Sinti) family made her an involuntary protagonist in the most tragic story of the 20th century: the Nazi Holocaust.¹ Anyone who reads her story will know that, at a very young age, Philomena Franz suffered the persecution and genocide of the Romani people executed by Nazism at first hand. Today, she is a survivor of Auschwitz - and other camps with lesser known names but no less dedicated to extermination - living in the German town of Bergisch Gladbach near Cologne. She is also the first Romani narrator to write and publish memoirs on the Romani Holocaust, which is seen as a personal testimony of denunciation and as a vindication of the rights of the victims. They are, logically, memoirs anchored in the past, that traumatic past that the author tries to articulate verbally so that it can be understood and shared, but they are also memoirs stemming from her real present and which encapsulate demands for the future.

The autobiographical account of Philomena Franz, with the accompaniment of her other writings also included in this volume, constitutes a fundamental testimony of the Nazi racial policy and, more precisely, the programme to destroy the Romani people in Europe. She is an exceptional narrator of the Romani genocide for several reasons: a pioneering writer from her dual role as victim and witness, her effort to break the wall of silence that

¹ I refer to footnote 1 of this edition of Philomena Franz's memoirs for an explanation of the use of the terms "Gypsy", Romani and Sinti in this study. This work is part of the research projects HAR2015-64744P and PCI2019-103527.

exists around the survivors, the imperative to respond to the racism experienced by her son still decades after the official end of Nazism, the publication of her memoirs in German at a key moment for Sinti activism... There are several reasons why it can be said, without any doubt, that this short text released as a book in 1985 is a founding milestone in Romani literature on the Holocaust.

Moreover, her narration breaks the chains of testimony about a traumatic past to also construct an account about the daily life of many German Sinti families before Hitler came to power, something that allows us to look in great detail at a fragment of European history that has been erased from official annals and archives. Finally, this book by Philomena Franz contains the affirmation of a persecuted cultural identity that is vindicated as well as explained to mainstream society, based on the conviction that an effort to promote intercultural coexistence is both possible and necessary.

(...)