

MANOLITO STEINBACH

# BETWEEN THE NOTES OF LIFE

*The traumatic experiences of a  
second- and third-generation  
Sinti survivor*



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## My name is Manolito Steinbach

I'm a musician and I represent the second and third generation of Auschwitz victims. I was born in 1971 in Berlin-Wedding.

That's where I grew up and went to school. I experienced racism and antigypsyism very early on. I was teased and bullied by my classmates because I'm a member of the Sinti community.

My classmates always shouted at me: *'Thieving Gypsy. Bang bang, I'll get you Gypsy!'* I had to constantly defend myself and I didn't feel like going to school anymore. When my grandmother asked me why I didn't want to go to school anymore, I told her and she went with me to the headmaster.

Later I went to another school. I didn't have the same problems there because there were a lot of foreign classmates and I got on well with them. They also accepted my background.

I also had two friends; they were German and had a completely different attitude towards me. They didn't call me a 'Gypsy' or insult me with other swear words.

I lived in Berlin for 30 years, and then in 2001 I moved to Oldenburg for my wife's

sake. There I experienced a new environment, but was still confronted with the shadows of my past.



**Above: Photo of the Steinbach family: my grandma, my grandpa, my uncle, my aunt and my mother (in the middle). The picture below shows my aunt from my grandfather's first marriage. Photos: Private property**

## My family and their Holocaust experience

I grew up with my grandmother and learned from her at an early age what happened to us Sinti during the Second World War under National Socialism.

My childhood and youth were shaped by my grandmother's survivor mentality. When she was 28 years old, the Nazis took her to the women's concentration camp Ravensbrück, and in 1942 she was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. Her husband, my grandfather, was in Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin-Oranienburg. Unfortunately, I never got to know him because he died in 1968.

While I was growing up with my grandmother, I saw her cry again and again. At first I didn't know why. I've heard from many who knew her well that she was a fun-loving person before the years in the concentration camp turned her into a serious person.

She spent four years in Auschwitz. Four long years. She suffered trauma there.

At some point - I was still young - I asked her why she had the 'Z' and number tattooed on her left arm. Then she told me what she and her family experienced in the concentration camp. She didn't tell it all in one go; sometimes months went by before she would pick up the story again. They were always terrible, the stories she told.

One day she told me that she sometimes couldn't sleep at night in the concentration camp because she could



***My great aunt, my grandmother's sister, with her two children. All three were gassed and burned in Auschwitz. Photo: Private property***

hear the children and adults crying. She and all the other inmates had nothing to eat or drink. Sometimes there was soup or turnips - or potato peelings, which they sometimes shared with the rats. Many of the other prisoners were sick, had typhus, lice or scabies.

The emaciated prisoners had to run and carry bricks or pull road rollers like a team of horses. Anyone who tried to rest was immediately killed.

My grandma told me about when she and her sister and her two small children, a girl and a boy, were all standing in a line in front of the gas chamber. My grandma was very lucky to survive. She and others were called back,

but she had to watch as her sister was sent alive to the gas chamber with her two small children and they came out dead and were then burned in the oven like the other dead victims.

My grandma witnessed how my grandpa's daughter from his first marriage, my aunt, was also killed. She was 24 years old and had two small children who were taken to Dr. Mengele to be experimented on. Mengele was the doctor in Auschwitz who killed people with his medical experiments.



***The photo shows me at the age of about four with my grandmother Selma Steinbach, who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp and was a contemporary witness. She raised me and taught me our culture, tradition and humanity. I owe her a lot*** Photo: Private property

My great-grandfather was in Sachsenhausen concentration camp and in a forced labour camp in France. There he had to dig mass graves for the dead and also trenches for the soldiers. When

he returned from the camp, his wife, daughter and grandchildren were gone.

He later learned that his daughter and grandchildren had been murdered in Auschwitz. As my grandmother told me, he suffered from trauma, depression and delusions in later life and began to drink because of the terrible things he had experienced.

My grandmother told me all of this - and that's how it all happened. And a lot more happened during that time that doesn't fit in this little brochure. You need several books for that. They were madmen! What an ideology! A perverse system! Auschwitz was a killing factory.

I didn't understand at the time why we Sinti were locked up, mistreated, gassed and burned. Why medical experiments were carried out on us. I simply didn't understand it. There was only a WHY. My grandma couldn't give me an answer either - she didn't understand it herself. She just told me that Hitler and the Nazis didn't like us because we were different.

My grandma and a younger sister were liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January 1945.

Whenever my grandma told me about the time in the concentration camp, she would cry and say, 'Dear God, why did you let it happen?' Then she would say that she was so homesick for her sister, her cousins and her relatives, who were all killed in Auschwitz. What I heard from my grandma sparked a rage in me that I couldn't describe. I hated the perpetrators.

## Living in the shadow of the past

**A**fter being liberated from Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, many Sinti tried to return to their hometowns. My family lived in West Berlin after 1945. After the war, until 1964, my grandparents lived in various places in Berlin-Wedding with other relatives who had survived the Holocaust. They all lived in flat-topped caravans like the ones used on construction sites. Among other places, they lived by the former East-West border crossing at Bornholmer Brücke.

In 1964, my grandparents were offered a three-room apartment in West Berlin. My grandfather only had four years to experience what it felt like to live in an apartment with running water and a tiled stove. In 1968, he died of lung cancer.

We lived in the shadow of the past. My grandmother always wanted us to be as inconspicuous as possible. She was afraid that someone would notice that we were Sinti.

For example, I had to be completely quiet while everybody else was enjoying their mid-day rest and was not allowed to play the guitar, no matter how softly. When I went down the stairs (we lived on the second floor), I had to walk slowly and was not allowed to jump. She was simply terrified that the neighbours would get upset about the music or the noise. She was afraid that the tenants would get up a petition to the housing association and that we would be given a warning or evicted straight away.



***My ancestors lived in such skylight cars. It wasn't until 1964 that my grandparents were able to move into a three-room apartment in West Berlin – with running water and a tiled stove. Photo: Mack Rides archive***

She was so afraid of that because she had experienced something like that herself. My grandmother also did not want me to go to my friends' apartment under any circumstances. She said she always had a strange feeling and thought that people would accuse me of doing something or taking something or some other misdeed.

Like many Sinti, my grandmother had to fight for a long time for reparations and a compensation pension. The official agencies were staffed by the same people who had worked there during the Nazi era and who did not acknowledge that the Sinti were racially persecuted under National Socialism. They kept more files on us long after the end of the war, and the old files were not destroyed.

I think it's a scandal that these files were treated as legitimate planning documents for the genocide. That these files were not given to archives, but continued to be used by the same people who had been perpetrators before 1945. It was not until 1982 that the Nazi

persecution of Sinti was acknowledged under international law by the German federal government.



***It is important to me to report as often as possible about my family and their fate during the Nazi era. For example, I had the opportunity to take part in the Hessischer Rundfunk TV documentary »The Long Journey of the Sinti and Roma« (together with my cousin Romani Weiss). Photo: Hessischer Rundfunk / Adrian Oeser***

Now, in retrospect, when you're a little older, you can understand it all better. And you can also take it all in and think about it in a completely different way.

It's important to me, out of love for my family and my fellow Sinti people, that I tell this story. Many other Sinti who weren't in the concentration camps or are still young and didn't experience it themselves, and people from the majority society, cannot imagine the reality of what these people suffered. What pain, grief and despair they carried within themselves and still carry today.

## **My painful visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau**

**A**RBEIT MACHT FREI – Work will set you free - is written at the entrance to the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, which is now a museum. I was there in 2019. Exactly where my grandma, my aunts and my other relatives were.

At the exact site of the events, I also went into a gas chamber and looked around. On the walls I could still see scratch marks from the desperate people who were facing their death.

I stood in a room in front of a pane of glass, behind which lay mountains of people's hair, as well as prostheses, children's clothing, baby clothing.

I couldn't breathe anymore, I couldn't breathe and tears came. It hurt me so much, and then memories of what my grandma had told me about it raced through my head.



***When I visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in 2019, I stood where my grandmother, my aunts and my other relatives were – and where many of them were gassed and burned.***

*Photo: commons.wikimedia.org*



*Today I play in various bands – also with musicians who are not Sinti, but respect me as a Sinto. Above: with the formation »Chapeau Manouche«; below: with my cousin in the »Romani Weiss Swingtett«.*  
 Photos: Lars Kaempfer, Kerstin Kozubeck

## **Sinti culture and the meaning of music for me**

**I**t's not their origin that says something about a person, but always the human being themselves. Nor is it their religion, because God created every human being equal.

Respect belongs to all people. No matter what skin color or origin.

Music is part of our culture, which is why I also came into contact with music at an early age. Since many of my relatives are musicians, I learned to play the guitar at an early age, but I taught myself. My family also includes a musical legend: the world-famous German Sinti guitarist Häns'che Weiss, who unfortunately died young. A role model for me (and many Sinti musicians) is Django Reinhardt, the forefather of Sinti swing and European jazz.

I play in various bands, including with musicians who are not Sinti, but who respect me as a Sinto, where there is no antigypsyism and no discrimination. There I am respected as a human being, just as I respect them as human beings - even though they're descendants of the perpetrators.

## **Forgive, don't forget**

**I**t's very important to me to tell others about what happened in the Third Reich. Because what happened then could happen again. Racism and antigypsyism are still in many people's minds. It's important that people speak openly about these issues in order to raise awareness and combat discrimination. By promoting respect, understanding and equality, we are actively contributing to ensuring that the past is not forgotten and that negative patterns are not repeated.

In retrospect, you can see that a lot has not changed from how things were back then. Because the hatred, prejudice,

discrimination, stigmatization and antigypsyism that I had to experience over the course of my life - whether it was when looking for work, looking for housing or in many other things - are still there. I experienced it myself and still do today - there are no words for it. All that is missing is for the concentration camps to be rebuilt. It's quite a shame that people haven't learned from history and still behave in the same way towards us Sinti and foster their prejudices.



***New Generation: We Sinti are now settled and go about our work, as employees and self-employed. Some become musicians and follow in the footsteps of their fathers, brothers or cousins (pictured is my nephew Romano Schwarz). Photo: Private property***

Because we no longer live in forests and are no longer outlaws, as we were branded back then. Anyone who saw us could shoot us. Today we have permanent homes. We used to travel around because nobody wanted us. When we came to the villages, people just shouted 'Take the laundry off the line and bring the children in, they'll

steal our laundry and our children.' When my ancestors used to take laundry off the line, they didn't do it to enrich themselves - no, it was because they had no other way to buy clothes. Without work or the right to peddle, they had no money, and if they did have money, they weren't allowed to go to shops to buy clothes because they were Sinti. And the thing about stealing children was simply pinned on us: It was the Nazis who took *our* children away from us, forcibly sterilized us and seized our property.

We Sinti all have German citizenship and work hard. Many of us are self-employed in various trades and businesses or work as employees. And many are musicians. Our children go to school. And - of course, when the holidays come, many Sinti still go on holiday with their caravans or mobile homes. But many are not allowed to go to public campsites because the owners still have prejudices. At some campsites it was or still is posted that 'Gypsies' or 'travellers' are not welcome.

Nevertheless, it is important to forgive - but not to forget.