

Archaeology of *Zigeunerlager*: Results of the 2018–2019 investigation at the Roma detention camp in Lety

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Abstract

Archaeological research in Let carried out within the framework of the Accessing Campscapes project has revealed the location, and preserved material traces, of the Roma detention camp from the period of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the area of which was partly destroyed and superseded by the industrial pig farm in the 1970s. The investigations have not only produced tangible evidence regarding the camp operation, structure, buildings and living conditions of the inmates but have also provided a means for the Roma to reclaim their neglected heritage. The planned Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia will take account of the results of the archaeological project and transform the site into a Romani memorialscape.

Key Words

Roma and Sinti, Holocaust, conflict archaeology, WWII archaeology, campscape

In recent decades, former Nazi labor, concentration, and extermination camps have become the subject of intense archaeological research. Investigations at the locations of the Holocaust, mapping of campscapes and studying their materiality – based on archaeological techniques, including novel, mostly non-invasive methods – have come to represent a dynamically evolving field of research within modern archaeology (Kola 2000; Gilead et al. 2008; Theune 2010; Jasinski and Sternvik 2015; Sturdy Colls 2015).

Nevertheless, until recently, those attempts have rarely been directed at assessing the material testimony of the Romani Porajmos. The first project of this kind was undertaken at the former Roma camp in Lety between 2016 and 2019. It was carried out by archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology at the University of West Bohemia in Plzen within the framework of project Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage.

In this paper I present contextualized research results of the archaeological investigation of the site carried out between 2018 and 2019. Lety Camp: History and Postwar (Mis)use Lety served as one of two internment camps for Roma that were established in 1942 in the

Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren [Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia], a part of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Czech Romani were concentrated there before being sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Around 90% of the prewar Romani community did not survive the Holocaust.

As early as 1942, legal measures, mirroring those that laid the ground for the system of prosecution of Sinti and Roma in the Third Reich were implemented in the Protectorate. On 9 March 1942, an ordinance prescribing preventive custody of “Gypsies and people travelling like Gypsies” was issued. On June 22, 1942, the General Commander of the non-uniformed Protectorate police ordered all “Gypsies, mixed Gypsies and people of Gypsy lifestyle” to register. According to registration lists created at that time, a total of 6,500 people were sent to both *Zigeunerlager* set up on August 1, 1942, in Lety (Písek district) for the territory of Bohemia and in Hodonín (Blansko district) for the territory of Moravia (Nečas 1981). The camp was located around two kilometers southeast from the village of Lety. It was erected at the site of a former penal labor camp, operational between 10 August 1940, and 31 July 1942. From August 1942, 1,309 Sinti and Roma passed through the camp. 327 of

them died at the site, including 28 of the 36 children born in Lety. The Protectorate Police and Gendarmerie oversaw transport to the camps and were in charge of its operations. Prisoners' belongings (mostly wagons, horses, money, and jewelry made of precious metals) were confiscated upon arrival; men, women and children under 12 were separated. The inmates were forced to perform labor in the vicinity of the camp, including road construction, logging, working in quarries and agriculture. Due to very poor hygienic conditions and severe malnutrition, prisoners' health deteriorated quickly, leading to the outbreak of a typhus epidemic, which cost the lives of many inmates.

The first transport from Lety to extermination camp Auschwitz II (Birkenau) took place on 4 December 1942; the second on 7 May 1943 (Nečas 1995, 1996, 1999; Klinovský 2016). The camp covered an area of 6,600 m². Due to its overpopulation, a triangular extension was added in 1942 to the earlier part of the camp that was based on a rectangular plan. The original camp consisted of four wings of wooden cabins (2.5 × 3 meters) and one large barrack (9 × 12 meters) lining the central yard, a kitchen, a cellar, some workshops, a storage area, dispensary, washroom/laundry, detention quarters, garage, shed and latrine. An administrative building was located outside of the fenced-in area, along with five small buildings, which housed camp guards. Later on, three additional larger barracks and some other facilities were erected at the camp. As a result of the typhus epidemic and emptying of the camp during the summer of 1943, all wooden buildings were burned and the area disinfected with chlorine lime. The camp was officially liquidated on 8 August 1943 (Nečas 1995). According to oral history research carried out in parallel to archaeological investigations at Lety, in May 1945 the Red Army used the area of the former camp as a gathering place for German prisoners of war. The witnesses claim that the graves of some POWs are still located in the nearby forest. As we learn from the 1960s documentary *Nezapomeňte na tohle děvčátko* [Don't forget this little girl], devoted to the extermination of Czech Romani, the remains of the former camp, ditches and debris from buildings were still visible on the surface 15 years after the war.

Nevertheless, in the early 1970s, the local Communist government decided to establish a large, industrial pig farm at the location of the former camp. Built in two phases, in 1972–1974 and in 1978, it consisted of 13 big halls housing 1000 pigs each (Pařízková 2008). A memorial to the camp victims was founded in the nearby wood as late as 1995 in a part of the site which was believed to have corresponded with the camp cemetery, however the pig farm remained in operation until 2017. Archaeology of Lety camp Determining the exact location of the Roma camp was the main aim of the first archaeological research undertaken at the site between 2016 and 2017. At that time, no research activities were permitted within the premises of the pig farm by the owner, the AGPI, a joint stock company that privatized the enterprise after the Velvet revolution in the 1990s. Both survey and test-pitting

were therefore carried out in the area outside the pig farm. The results showed that a small section of the camp was situated outside the fenced pig farm on municipal ground and its archaeological remains were well preserved underneath the current terrain. For instance, the stone foundation of the administrative building and its floor level were uncovered outside the fenced area, also the remains of the western row of small barracks and part of the camp yard were exposed. Burnt remains of wooden structures, as well as the presence of lime, provide confirmation of the testimony from documentary evidence about the burning of camp buildings and disinfection of the area. Burnt debris contained several iron artefacts used in the barracks' construction along with glass from the windows of the barracks, but also artefacts that may be linked to prisoners, mostly dress accessories. Small glass beads found in this context further strengthen existing written evidence that girls and women lived in this part of the camp. However, most traces of the camp were expected to be found within the complex of the pig farm (cf. Vařeka and Vařeková 2017, 2018; Vařeka 2018, 2020; Vařeka et al. 2018).

The archaeological research carried out in 2016 and 2017 focused on five objectives: 1) determining the exact location of the camp, 2) assessment of anthropogenic remains on the surface in the area around the camp, 3) detecting the character of archaeological remains of the camp and establishing the possibilities for interpretation in order to identify the camp structure, 4) collecting material evidence which may elucidate everyday life in the camp and 5) determining the exact location of the camp cemetery and its layout.

The first phase of the research, conducted in the autumn and winter of 2016 and 2017, was based on non-invasive techniques, such as surface and topographic surveys, and geophysical surveys. Complementary methods helped give a more complete picture – aerial scanning data processing (LiDAR), documentary and visual evidence, and analysis of post-WWII aerial images. During the second phase, carried out in July 2017, we conducted trial excavations. Small-scale sondage of the accessible north-western part of the camp tested results of non-destructive research methods and sampled the archaeological situation. The archaeological research, which received extensive media coverage, contributed significantly to the heated public debate regarding the scandalous situation in Lety (van der Laarse 2017). Research activities were broadly presented to the experts and the public, including Roma organizations (including the Committee for the Redress of the Romani Holocaust and Romea; reports on the field research elicited a high level of public/media response in July 2017) and to government representatives (especially the Ministry of Culture and Minister of Human Rights, Equal Opportunities and Legislation). An expert committee was convened at the site on July 14, 2017, consisting of archaeologists, historians and national heritage representatives. As regards the research findings, the committee strongly recommended that action should be

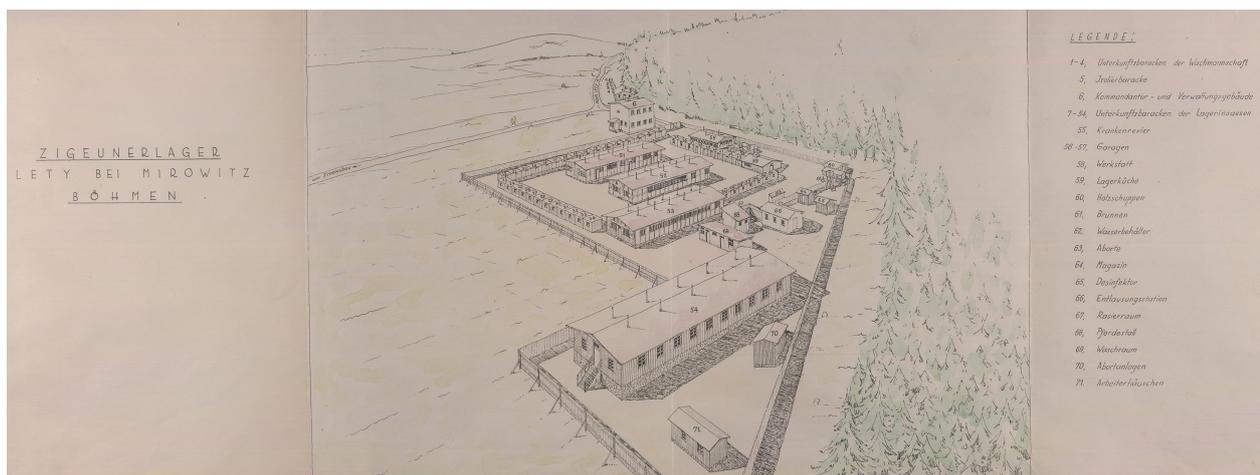


Figure 1. Axonometric drawing of Lety camp (undated; probably beginning of 1943; National Archive Prague, GKNP–Addendum).

taken to declare this site a cultural monument. Retrieved archaeological data were immediately communicated to the Ministry of Culture and the Czech Government decided to purchase the pig farm; this process was completed by the end of 2017. In the spring of 2018, the pig farm was transferred to the Museum of Romani Culture which started preparing demolition of the industrial farm complex and an open architectural competition for the new Czech Roma and Sinti Memorial in Lety (Berkyová et al. 2020). Archaeological research within the area of the pig farm represented part of the preparatory works and its results were included in the tender documentation. A survey and trial excavations of the presumed location of the camp cemetery were also carried out as part of the Accessing Campscapes project. Detention Camp The first phase of the archaeological research within the pig farm consisted of a non-invasive survey. A ground penetration radar (GPR) survey was carried out in autumn 2018 by Will Mitchell and his team from Staffordshire University (Mitchell and Colls 2019: 39–45). Additional geophysical surveys combining both magneto-metric and GPR technique were completed in summer 2019 by Michal Vágner and his team from Masaryk University (Vágner 2019). Both surveys detected the majority of the remains of the camp complex in the unbuilt north-eastern section of the pig farm. From late August to December 2019, a total area of 406 m² was excavated using 1 m wide interventions that intersected all parts of the camp area situated in the pig farm. One intervention was extended to provide a representative sample of the discovered cesspit (additional 10 m²; Figs 3, 4). Members of the Roma communities were involved in the excavations. A combination of the geophysical survey and trial excavations revealed an almost complete camp plan, showing its structure and providing detailed information about individual sections. Excavations also showed the extent of damage to the site caused by the construction of the pig farm in the 1970s. Interpretation of archaeological situations was based on archival sources, post-war aerial photographs and newly recorded testimonies of local people who remembered the site before the construction of the pig farm (Vařeka 2020;

Vařeka et al. 2020). The research uncovered an outline of the prisoners' yard measuring 45 × 55 m of the western section of the camp which was lined with small wooden prisoners' barracks (2.5 × 3 m) and one large barrack of post-built construction situated on its south-eastern side (9 × 29 m). Two more large wooden barracks with stone foundations (9 × 28 m) were built in the central part of the yard, probably in autumn 1942, to increase the accommodation capacity of the camp which had proven completely insufficient (Figs 3, 5). Remains of the camp's fence were traced along its southern side. Operational, storage and hygiene facilities were situated in the eastern section of the camp. Remains of several buildings were detected by geophysical survey in this area which were verified by excavations. Interventions uncovered massive foundations and fragments of floors of the washroom/laundry building, stable and delousing station (Figs 3, 6). The waste drainage system left significant traces in this area, including a cesspit equipped with a stone revetment (3.95 × 2.95 m, depth 2.15 m). The fill of the cesspit included the liquidation phase of the camp but also wet sediments from the period of the camp's existence (Fig. 7). An edge of the lowered terrain for the construction of three north-eastern halls for pigs was identified. Further east behind this edge, original archaeological situations were completely destroyed as demonstrated by test-pitting in this area (Fig. 1B). Thus, the south-eastern part of the camp, where the remains of another large prisoners' barracks, latrine and one small building could be assumed to have stood, has been bulldozed away. Excavations showed that the camp was liquidated by burning, leaving significant burnt debris and the site spread with chlorine lime.

More than 7,100 items were found during excavations of the Lety camp in 2019, and the processing and conservation of these finds are still in progress. The vast majority of artefacts is constituted of unburnt components of camp buildings and their equipment – building iron and window glass, for instance – however, some can be linked to the prisoners as well as to their captors. Excavations of the cesspit have yielded an exceptional find complex providing a detailed insight into everyday



Figure 2. Localization of the Roma detention camp and the camp cemetery. Red line – camp area (A. Archaeologically preserved camp area; B. Part of the camp area destroyed during construction of the pig farm; C. Headquarters/administrative building; D. location of the camp guards' barracks; E. Anti-air-raid trenches; F. Surface remains of camp cellar; G. Camp cemetery (localization based on archival evidence and archaeological research), yellow – industrial pig farm area (map by P. Vařeka, orthophoto map by ArcGIS on ags.cuzk.cz).

life and living conditions in the camp. The set of findings seems also to comprise confiscated and discarded belongings brought to the camp by the inmates which uniquely reflect the material culture of the Roma and Sinti of the period. Due to the specific soil conditions (wet sediments without air access), artefacts from organic material have also been uniquely preserved, such as fragments of wooden constructions, textile and leather clothing and footwear. Evidence of shaving and cutting prisoners' hair, which includes hair and even an entire plait, provides a stark testimony to the forced transformation of human beings into prisoners (Figs 8–10). Analysis of fragments of animal bones and macro-botanic remains from the camp shed a new light on the prisoners' diet and document desperate attempts – probably undertaken during periods of forced labor outside the camp – to get anything to eat, such as wild berries, wild fruits and small animals (Kočár and Kočárová 2020; Sůvová 2020). The only surface remains of the camp were identified in the woods close to the northern edge of the pig farm. A combination of archaeological research

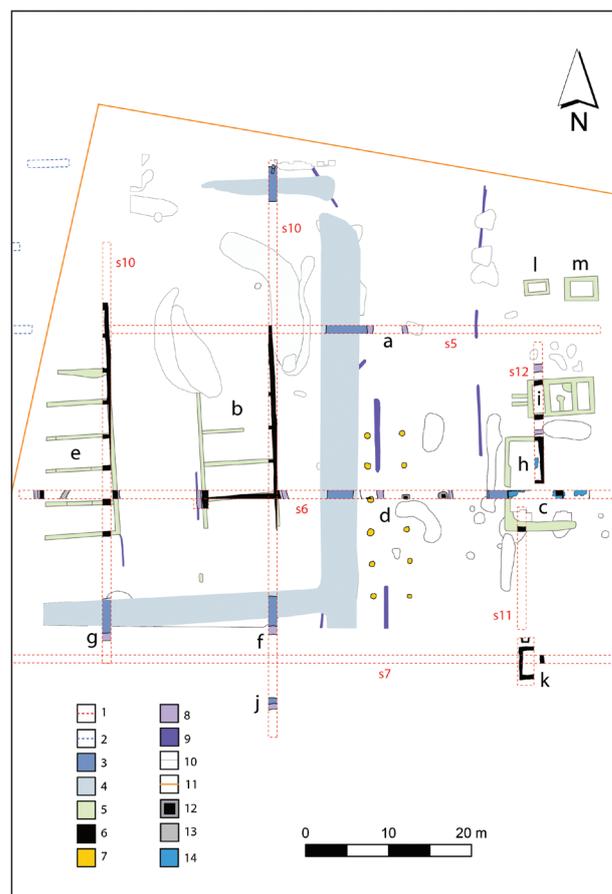


Figure 3. Lety camp, area within the industrial pig farm – archaeological research results. a, g, f. Remains of small prisoners' barracks; c. Washroom/laundry; d. Large prisoners' barracks with post-construction; e, b. Large prisoners' barracks with stone foundations; j. Fencing of the camp; k. Cesspit; h. Stable; i. Delousing station; l, m. Store and disinfection building; 1. interventions 2019, 2. interventions 2017, 3. footpath with reinforced surface revealed by excavations, 4. footpath with reinforced surface detected by GPR survey, 5. masonry foundations detected by GPR survey, 6. masonry foundations revealed by excavations, 7. remains of post-built construction detected by the GPR survey, 8. excavated drainage ditches, 9. drainage ditches detected by GPR survey, 10. unspecified features detected by GPR survey, 11. pig farm fence, 12. excavated footings of post-construction, 13. underdrain, 14. preserved floors, s5–s12 – intervention numbers (plan by P. Vařeka).

and documentary evidence analysis showed that the zigzag trenches which were previously associated with the end of the war or post-war period (Vařeka and Vařeková 2017: 26) can be linked to the camp air-raid shelter (Fig. 1E). A relief formation with a half-circle plan and concave-shaped central section, which is situated only a few meters east of the trenches, can be identified as a remainder of the camp's cellar that was placed outside the fenced camp area (Fig. 1F). Cemetery of the victims In January 1943, a provisional camp cemetery was established – previously, deceased prisoners had been buried in the Mirovice parish cemetery, over 5 kilometers east of the camp. The cemetery was established south-east of the camp, a location which is not accurately reflected in



Figure 4. Presentation of the research results to the camp victims' ancestors and representatives of the Museum of Romani culture (Photo by Z. Vařeková).



Figure 5. Intervention 10. View from the north to the uncovered north-eastern corner and the eastern part of the large prisoners' barracks (9 × 28 m; photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 6. Intervention 6 and 12. Remains of the washroom/laundry (A), stable (B) and delousing station (C; photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 7. Intervention 7, sector D, extension. Cesspit lined with granite blocks; northern part excavated to the bottom; two different parts of the fill can be seen on the profile – the upper dry part was deposited after the camp’s liquidation and the lower wet one from the period of the camp’s existence (view from the west, photo by P. Vařeka).



Figure 8. Enamel dishes for babies (cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).



Figure 9. Earrings, hair clips, beads and other components of necklaces (gold, silver and glass; cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).

the archival evidence. A total of 120 camp victims were inhumed here, including 77 children, between January 16 and April 23 1943 (Nečas 1999: 63). The exact location of the burial ground vanished in the post-war period. The memorial to the victims of the Roma internment camp in Lety was established in 1995 on the site which, as it was believed, more or less corresponded to the location of the cemetery. Archaeological research comprised topographic survey, aerial photographs from a drone, geophysical survey and trial excavations. Geomagnetic, electric-resistance and ground penetration radar survey did not produce any convincing evidence regarding grave-pits due to extensive ground disturbance around the memorial by service trenches and pipes from the watering system (Křivánek 2016; Mitchell and Colls 2019, 34–38; Vágner 2019). However, relevant results were gained by archaeological intervention located 8 meters west from the memorial. Excavations over an area of 38 m² revealed the south-west section of the camp cemetery, indicated by margins of eight grave-pits formed in rows of various sizes. This suggested that there was an age difference between buried individuals very likely in-

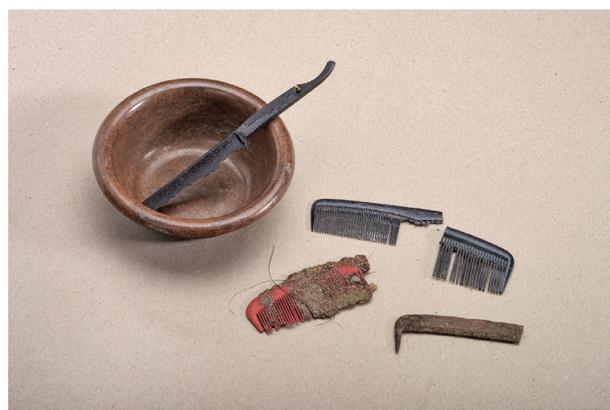


Figure 10. Shaving bowl, razor and combs (plastic and iron; cesspit fill; photo by I. Ibrahimovič).

cluding adults, adolescents (grave I, II, IV, VI, VII, VIII) and small children (grave III, V).

A hypothetical reconstruction of the whole area of the camp’s cemetery was enabled by using the results of archaeological research and archival evidence – this area overlaps with the eastern section of the granite



Figure 11. Camp cemetery. Memorial act organized by the Museum of Romani Culture on 11th September, which was attended by the relatives and descendants of the victims (photo by P. Vařeka).

monument by academic sculptor and painter Zdenek Hůla but is mostly situated in its north-western vicinity. Outcomes of the research will be used in the planned adaptation of the cemetery. In accordance with the requirements of the survivors' relatives and the Museum of Romani Culture representatives, two graves were excavated in order to ascertain preservation of human remains and the form of burial. Human remains were not exhumed and anthropological analysis was carried in situ (Kwiatkowska 2019) and samples for subsequent genetic analysis were also taken (Molak 2020). Grave I contained a young woman who died before the age of 40 and was buried in the wooden coffin in a crouching position. Fragments of the wooden coffin were found without any preserved human remains in Grave III, a very small and shallow grave where it is likely that a baby under one year of age was buried (Kwiatkowska 2019). The poor conditions for the preservation of the skeletal remains of small children are caused by soil conditions but also the fact that the graves were sprinkled with quicklime. Relatives and descendants of the victims were present during excavations and a memorial service was organized on the site by the Museum of Romani Culture on September 11, 2019 (Fig. 11).

Conclusions

Archaeological research in Let carried out within the framework of the Accessing Campscapes project has revealed the location, and preserved material traces, of the Roma detention camp from the period of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the area of which was partly destroyed and superseded by the industrial pig farm in the 1970s. The investigations have not only produced tangible evidence regarding the camp operation, structure, buildings and living conditions of the inmates but have also provided a means for the Roma to reclaim their neglected heritage. The planned Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia will take account of the results of the archaeological project and transform the site into a Romani memorialscape. Personal items of prisoners, most of whom did not survive the Holocaust, and other artefacts from the camp, will be presented to the public in the exhibition hall that will form one section of the Memorial. Archaeological methods also exactly located the cemetery of victims where the contemporary Roma families can commemorate their ancestors who lost their lives in the camp.

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