

# Their Skin Was their Only Sin: Anti-Roma Murders in Hungary and Austria

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In recent decades, there have been many hate crimes targeting Romani people in Europe, and the most recent example is the murder of a Romani boy by Greek police (Rorke 2024). These crimes rarely are linked together at the international level but rather viewed as one-off events. Due to this de-linkage, hate crimes against and murder of Roma go unpublicised among different countries and are forgotten quickly by media, state, and society.

Máté Fuchs' documentary *Feldolgozatlanul* (Unprocessed) focuses on the actual events of racist serial killings committed in 2008 and 2009 in Hungary and a subsequent play, *A gyűlölet mosolya* (Smile of hatred), created by Romano Teatro and based on these horrible events. Shortly after the online premiere on 6 March 2023, the Romani Studies Program organized a screening at the Central European University. It was followed by a topical discussion with the director and a panel composed of Angéla Kócze, CEU Romani Studies Program; Aladár Horváth, Roma Parliament – *Polgárjogi Mozgalom* (Civil Rights Movement), and Manuela Horvath, *Stadtgemeinde Oberwart; Roma-Pastoraller Dienst in der Diözese Eisenstadt* (Oberwart City Council; Roma pastoral services in the Diocese of Eisenstadt).

The documentary follows the creation of a play by the Romano Teatro drama company that works with Romani and non-Romani children. By focusing on the story of the play, *A gyűlölet mosolya* (Smile of hatred), Fuchs shows how some Romani communities have dealt with the trauma after the killings. As we listen to the actors, director, and Romani activists, it becomes clear that the wounds inflicted by the racist serial killings have not yet healed. Zsolt Horváth, director of the theatre company, explains in the film how sadness, fear, empathy, and shock combine, when he states: “It was like they killed us too. [...] They killed people who did not have any sins, they were killed merely because they were Roma.” Later, János Joka Daróczi, a Romani activist, explains why some Roma do not like commemorating the attacks. He tells Fuchs that he is reluctant to give interviews because he finds it too painful to recall how easily Roma lives were destroyed. However, we also see how art allows a new generation to learn and talk openly about the events in 2008–2009.

The movie ends with a dilemma: while Romano Teatro was given the opportunity to perform at the National Theatre, a far-right politician, Előd Novák, protested in front of the building. But he is alone, and by the time the child actors leave the building he has already departed. The kids wave to the camera and seem empowered by the applause they received after the show, not knowing anything about the protest.

During the discussion afterwards, the panelists pointed out the connection between bombings in Oberwart<sup>1</sup> in Austria in 1995 and the racist serial killings in 2008–2009 in Hungary.

1 In the worst racially motivated crime in Austria since 1945, four Roma were murdered in a bomb attack on the night of 4 February 1995. The bombings in Oberwart were soon linked to other bombings and letter bombs in Austria

## Keywords

- Art
- Austria
- Healing
- Hungary
- Institutional racism
- Trauma

Manuela Horvath, who is a member of Oberwart city council, as well as related to the murder victims there, told the audience that the situation in Oberwart was tense before the attack in February 1995. People already felt threatened some days before the bombing in their Romani neighborhood, and that's why the four male victims went out at night to scout for signs of danger. On the night of the attack, they found a sign that said: "Roma zurück nach Indien" (Roma go back to India). When they tried to remove it, they were killed by a bomb. They were not found by family members until the next day.

When discussing how hard it was to deal with this traumatic event as a community, Manuela Horvath made it clear that, even though there was political interest in the bombings, neither family members, friends of the murder victims in Oberwart, nor the Romani community in the town, were supported. They were alone in 1995 and are alone now, Horvath added.

In Hungary, the racist serial killings in 2008–2009 were politically motivated, said Aladár Horváth: Nazi terrorists wanted to start a civil war, and by killing innocent Roma they hoped to provoke riots by Romani sections of society. Despite the political motivation of the crimes, there was no acknowledgment of any responsibility by the state. He described the reaction of society as not shocked "enough" as there was far too much silence. He also wondered why there was not more outreach by Romani communities themselves. Angéla Kócze took a different perspective on silence by raising some important questions. Could the trauma itself be the reason why affected communities remained silent – as they first must cope with the trauma inside themselves? Was there anyone who helped? Was there any discussion at the societal level about the murders? Aladár Horváth and Angéla Kócze agreed that there is a need for open discussion and to share common experiences of Roma and non-Roma to increase empathy, break the silence around anti-Roma hate crimes and heal the wounds of those carrying the trauma within themselves.

Lastly, the audience questioned the role of state violence and racism linked to mistakes in the investigation, in both Hungary and Austria, because in both cases the police regarded the prime suspects to live within the affected communities or even live among the victims' families, instead of treating the violence as racist in itself. The question of how society reacted to the news was also asked. Participants raised questions about how the murders in Oberwart and the racist serial killings in Hungary were processed both by Roma and non-Roma, by other minorities, and also on an international level. Some of the participants reacted to Maté Fuchs, who was not optimistic about the future of Hungary. They pointed out that the film was very poignant, and that they viewed art as a good tool to heal trauma or to prompt society realise primarily that there is trauma underneath the surface that should be dealt with. In the view of some of the participants, the documentary should be distributed widely, because the film promotes greater understanding in cases of racist murders and better understanding of each other.

The event "Their Skin Was their Only Sin: Anti-Roma Murders in Hungary and Austria" opened up an important discussion about hate crimes against Romani people in Europe. Racist murder cases in

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targeting minorities and politicians. They were carried out by a right-wing extremist group. One of the members was Franz Fuchs, who was arrested in 1997 as a prime suspect in the Oberwart bombing (Sinti und Roma 2024).

Hungary and Austria were compared and their similarities discussed, despite temporal and geographical differences. The event offered space to talk about these and other hate crimes in an international environment and start a conversation with Roma and non-Roma from different countries. Another topic that came up was around healing trauma, and how it was possible. Art was seen as an important tool in the healing process, as long as it is produced alongside, or with the agreement of, affected individuals and communities.

## References

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