

## Reinhard Florian, A Sinti-German Youth in the Weimar Republic (retrospective account, 2013)

### Abstract

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Reinhard Florian was a Sinto (“gypsy”) man who died in 2014, just one year after publishing a memoir of his survival of Nazi persecution, including his internment in the Mauthausen and Auschwitz concentration camps. Florian and his family referred to themselves as “Sinti,” even though most of their non-Sinti German neighbors referred to them as “gypsies” [*Zigeuner*].

In the following excerpts from that memoir, Florian described his youth in the Weimar Republic. Born in 1923, he grew up in rural East Prussia, a part of Germany geographically separated from the rest of the nation to the west by a strip of territory that the Versailles Treaty had granted to the new Polish state so that it had an outlet to the sea. Because of that separation, East Prussians often referred colloquially to traveling “to Germany” [“ins Reich”] whenever they went to the part of Germany on the other side of the Polish strip. Florian’s father had served in the German military from 1916 to 1918, as had several uncles, some of whom received decorations for their service. Like most Sinti men in East Prussia at the time, the father earned a living as a horse trader. Also like most Sinti at the time, according to Florian, his parents did not officially marry. These excerpts from Reinhard Florian’s memoir give some insight into family life and gender roles at this time, in this place, and within this community. In addition, they show the difficult economic circumstances under which so many people in rural areas lived—particularly the Sinti—and the measures that they took in order to get by. These included engaging in sharecropping, working as itinerant traders, and, in the most extreme circumstances, even sending one’s own children to orphanages. Florian remained uncertain as to the exact circumstances under which two of his older sisters wound up in an orphanage, but he suspected that his parents either gave them up voluntarily, because they could no longer feed them, or that the authorities took custody of the two girls. Photos of family barracks in East Prussia that housed destitute Sinti further attest to the dire conditions under which many within this community lived. (See photos of Sinti barracks in Königsberg in this chapter.) In addition to their insights into a Sinti family during the Weimar Republic, these excerpts also reveal the survival, well into the 1930s, of traditional markets and long-standing customs of conducting business, such as the *Magrietsch* that Florian described below as signaling the conclusion of a trade. These same passages also show the uneven implementation of technology during this period. At a time when parts of German agriculture had moved to mechanization, we see here the parallel use of horses for much or even most of the farm work, as well as the durability of traveling, door-to-door sales—by foot—as a dominant means of providing goods to consumers.

### Source

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*About his father, Florian recalled:*

He is a small, slender man. If you didn’t know, you wouldn’t guess that he is a Sinto. His skin is light, not much different from that of the other rural population.

First of all, he is the main breadwinner of the family. That is his role. And he also takes on the most noticeable part of our upbringing. If we children have done something wrong, he will certainly give us a hiding. He has a pretty loose hand. He gives slaps that make your face glow afterwards. But that is nothing special at the time. It is not abuse, but simply a common means of child-rearing. No one thinks anything bad of it. It’s fine. Even for us. Dad is strict, but he’s also good, good and generous. It all

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depends on you. If you don't do anything stupid, then he's good to you. If you behave well, you've done something special, he appreciates that with money. Then you get a penny from him. A penny is something.

*About his mother, Florentine, whom everyone called "Frana," Florian recalled: that:*

She stands out everywhere, her skin is so dark.

And my mother... When my father is away on business, she is alone with us children. She comes from Reckeitschen [a town near Insterburg], where she was born on March 10, 1894, the daughter of an old-established Sinti family from East Prussia. Basically, she is a woman like any other woman. Not as tough as my father. She is responsible for the tender side of upbringing. She holds the family together, is the center of our home. As far as the children are concerned, the mother is always better than the father. At least that's how it is with us. Traditionally, the woman is responsible for ensuring that there is always food on the table, that everyday survival is guaranteed. Many Sinti women are therefore on the road as itinerant traders. The men's income is usually not continuous; a few times a year they earn a larger amount [via a horse trade, usually], but some of it is immediately reinvested or used for running costs. Then it can also be the case that they don't earn anything for a long time. As I said, we are doing very well, we are not suffering any hardship. But there are also really poor Sinti. Their women don't have the means to engage in itinerant trade. They can't afford the goods they need to resell. They are forced to beg so that their family can somehow make ends meet.

At the time of my birth, her fifth child, her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday was just around the corner. As a peddler, she earned her own money, but of course she was also responsible for the household and the children. She also walked to the farms and estates of the surrounding villages, where she sold haberdashery. Most of the farmers' wives knew her. She used a pannier—a woven basket that was carried on her back—to transport her goods. She often has her youngest child with her. This means that the radius of her sales trips is limited to a few kilometers. My parents also work for the farmer on whose farmstead they live. The rent is paid in the form of work.

*About his siblings:*

The two oldest, Selma, the oldest, and Emma, who is four years older than me, live with us. I only find out about the two younger ones, Hilde and Erna, who must have been born between 1919 and 1922, when I am six or seven years old. They live in an orphanage in Königsberg. There is a nurse in Karalene [a town to which they moved in 1923]. Apart from her, we have no medical staff nearby; the doctor is in Insterburg. Around 1930, she moves to a Königsberg orphanage as a children's nurse, but she still comes to Karalene from time to time. One day she tells us that she found the two girls there. After that, we occasionally received letters from them. At some point, however, contact was lost. I don't know why they lived in a children's home—whether my parents were unable to care for them after they were born and gave them up voluntarily, or whether the authorities took them away from them—nor what happened to them during the war.

*In 1923, just after Florian's birth, the family moved to the village of Karalene, where a type of sharecropping system enabled them to survive:*

Several other Sinti families already live in the house we move into. It belongs to a farmer. The building is nothing special, old and simple. Most of the residents don't have any money. They work off the rent with the farmer. He is, by the way, the only one in the area who allows a "gypsy" to work on his farm and for him. The other farmers don't do that. They prefer "Aryan" tenants and "Aryan" workers. There are more than enough of them, with the high unemployment. So they don't need to hire a "gypsy."

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*At the about the same time, his parents separated:*

My parents eventually separate. That is soon after we move to Karalene. My father quickly finds a new wife, Anna Ernst, my stepmother. She comes from Kelpin, where she was born on October 13, 1903. Like the Florians and Habedanks, the Ernst family is also a well-known Sinti family. Members of the Ernst family live in East and West Prussia. I have ten half-siblings from my father's marriage to Anna Ernst. Two girls, the rest boys, as I recently found out.

The oldest of them is my brother Bruno, who was born in 1926. In 1928, another boy was born, whom we call *Schönemann* [pretty boy] because he is a strikingly handsome little fellow. His real name is the same as mine and our father's—Reinhard. Later, until 1943, eight more children were born, but I no longer remember all their names and years of birth. In total, I have 14 siblings: the four girls from my father's marriage to my mother and the ten children my father had with his second wife. All of them, except for my brother Bruno, were murdered by the Nazis or their helpers, as were my mother and my stepmother. For decades, I did not know when and where they died. The last time I see them is in 1937. After my parents separate, I live most of the time with my father and his new family. My mother, who has no new husband, moves in with her brother Samuel Florian in Stettin.

*Florian described the culture of horse trading in East Prussia, in which his father remained active until 1937, when the Nazi regime's increasing persecution of Sinti forced him out of the profession. His father owned up to 20 horses at a time and did much of his business at the horse market in Wehlau, one of the biggest in Europe. The haggling between farmer and trader took hours, but it always end with:*

“And Magrietsch!” “Agreed!” A handshake seals the deal. The handshake is just as important at the horse market as a sales contract elsewhere. “Magrietsch” is the name given to a shared schnapps at the buyer's expense after the agreement has been reached. The schnapps makes the deal legally valid, so to speak.

The horses are mainly animals that can be used in agriculture. Trakehner riding and carriage horses [a breed of Prussian riding horse] are not in great demand here, but working horses are. The tough, small farm horses, farm horses without a pedigree, which are excellent as draft horses, are of particular interest. Therefore, mostly middle-class customers visit the market. Expensive luxury horses are usually bought in Königsberg.

Many owners bring their eldest, unmarried daughters with them. The market days offer good opportunities for marriage. There are quite a few Jews among the traders. Then there are the “gypsies,” who have flocked together from all directions. Some of them have their wives with them, who work as fortune-tellers. Many marketgoers find it exciting to have their fortune told by such an exotic beauty.

The main trade of the “gypsies” is in the not particularly valuable working horses. As a rule, my father buys animals that are no longer considered to be of any real use and takes care of them. Sometimes a horse stays with us for up to a year. It is fed—well fed—and cared for with a lot of love, so it is pampered all round. After that, it is round as a ball, well put together and content, and can be used in the field again without further ado. Such weak, nervous horses are usually cheap to buy from the previous owners. These fools have no idea about horses. They look at them as if they were machines. Many mistreat their animals when they start to flag. Among Sinti, that would be unthinkable. As I mentioned, we consider horses to be sacred animals. If you invest enough love, time and patience in such an animal, you can still get a good price on the market. With a bit of luck, you can even make a considerable profit. Some people do not feed the horses they offer for sale properly. They are only interested in making a quick profit. These animals may look quite good at first glance, but later it turns out that they are not much good. This kind of behavior brings the “gypsies” as a whole into disrepute as crooks or fraudsters. A stupid generalization, because there are dishonest people among the non-gypsies as well.

*Florian described his own childhood appearance as “a little East Prussian, but with a black face,” and he*

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*concluded his recollections of his youth in the Weimar Republic by talking about schooling:*

My memory starts around the time I started school in 1929. I still remember that well. I went to school in Karalene. The school had been founded as a teacher training college by Queen Luise. However, the college had ceased to exist in 1924. There were about ten or fifteen of us “gypsies” at the school. At that time, the world still seemed to be alright for us. We didn’t have any particular difficulties. That was under the governments of Hindenburg’s time. Overall, none of us were discriminated against. We were treated like all Germans. At least it wasn’t that bad yet, in a way we were already being disadvantaged. After the National Socialists came to power, it was no longer like it was under Hindenburg. In the first few years after 1933, when Hitler came to power, it wasn’t too bad, but about two years later the persecution began, at first on a small scale.

Source of original German text: *Ich wollte nach Hause, nach Ostpreussen! Das Überleben eines deutschen Sinto*, Reinhard Florian, ed. Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi and Uwe Neumärker. Berlin: Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas, 2013.

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