

Polish Roma history and culture

Time of the Gypsies



Lech Mróz unearths the oldest surviving references to the Roma in Polish archives

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Studying the long history of the Gypsies on Polish territory refutes the commonly-held stereotypes about this ethnic minority, and can aid in overcoming them

The Roma (Gypsies) are a European minority whose history has been very little studied – a fact that has given rise to much false information and many stereotypes about them. Although the fact that the Gypsies originally came to Europe from India has been known for more than 200 years, their history still involves many question marks, especially as regards the earliest stages. Essentially the entire period before their arrival to Europe

is completely obscure. There are no written sources about this period of their history, and we do not know when they left India, or why they lost the culture of their ancestors en route to Europe. Aside from their language and preserved racial and anthropological features (which can be explained in terms of the Gypsies' isolation from their surroundings, as well as their principle of marital endogamy), nothing suggestive of their Indian homeland has survived.

From the Polish archives

The European history of the Roma also still conceals many secrets. Who were their earliest ancestors? The first European records, from Wallachia in the 1380s, speak of them as craftsmen who lived in tents. But this is not equivalent to saying that they were nomads: the document that mentions them states that they were the property of a monastery. Even



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Routes across national boundaries

more surprising are the records from Dubrovnik and Zagreb – here the Gypsies are spoken of as working mainly as craftsmen, but also as living in the city itself. Moreover it seems that they did not live in separate enclaves, but rather in among the other townspeople. This reference attests to the Gypsies' long urban settlement, something not at all consistent with the widespread image of them present in European literature, or with their stereotypical association as wanderers.

The oldest references in Polish archival documents speak of the Gypsies in connection with payments made for leased land, or even the granting of municipal rights – facts that are completely at odds with the image of the Gypsy-nomad, the romantic wanderer. The earliest Polish reference, a record made in 1401 in the ledgers of the city of Kazimierz (today a district of Kraków), reads as follows: *Item percepta in Zaplocze feria quarta ante festum Martini [...] item Micolay Czigan 1/2 marcam dedit. 1 fert. dedit* (Next the income in Zaplocze, on Wednesday before the feast of Martin (...) Next Nicolas the Gypsy gave half a marcam – an ancient monetary unit. He gave one ferton). (*Acta consul. Casimir., vol. IV, p. 548*). Four years later, in April 1405, the ledger of revenue and expenditure in the city of Łódź records that taxes were paid by a certain Piotr the Gypsy, whose property was situated in the very center of the city, along the market square. Most of the references dating from the 15th century speak of Gypsies living in cities. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult for historians to agree that these reports really do refer to Gypsies, since nomads are only attested as being present in the Republic of Poland several decades later, although sources from Western Europe do speak of Gypsy nomads as early as at the start of the 15th century. The Gypsies themselves never produced any written history of their own, and all we know about them comes from records made by non-Gypsies – who obviously portray them from the perspective of non-Gypsy culture and lifestyle, in terms of non-Gypsy ethical principles.

Beginning in the mid 16th century, there is increasingly more frequent evidence of nomadic groups, especially in the Polish state's eastern areas (lying today in Belarus and Ukraine). It is particularly interesting that records from this time point to close contacts

between the nomads and the local population, primarily involving trade, but also including social contacts. Although provisions of Polish law were established to prohibit Gypsies from being allowed onto estates or given shelter, thereby effectively forcing them to leave the territory of the Republic of Poland, these regulations were widely ignored. This can be seen even more clearly in documents from the 17th century, which show that land owners in southern Poland



and in the east of the Polish state frequently utilized the services of Gypsy craftsmen, providing them with shelter and protection.

Bear training was a traditional speciality of Polish Gypsies, as is shown by this 18th century woodcut

Gypsy Kings

As a result of conflicts involving the Gypsies, especially the nomadic ones, and due to complaints lodged against them, Poland adopted a solution that was unique in Europe, as well as within the entire history of Gypsies in Europe: the royal chancellery appointed individuals to act as overseers of the Gypsy community, or "Gypsy kings." The first known document making such an appointment was issued by King Jan Casimir in 1652. Its contents are preserved in a record made in the Sanok ledgers, currently held in the Lvov Archives. Matias Karolowicz was granted the privilege of "the office of seniority over all Gypsies who are or will be located in the Crown and neighboring states" (*Castr. Sanoc. Ind. Rel., v. 165, p. 1191-1193*); this document allows us to surmise that this office had existed even earlier. Most importantly, the individual appointed to

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the post was probably a Gypsy himself. It was only a few decades later that the "office of Gypsy kingship" began to be granted to the gentry as a reward for distinguished military service. The Polish kings' intention was for the lord of the Gypsies to protect them from injustice at the hands of the local population, but also to make sure that his subordinates did not break the law. In exchange, the "Gypsy king" had the right to collect a tax from his subjects and to appoint *viceroy*s, or assistant leaders, to help him watch over his subordinates. The institution of Gypsy lords appointed by the royal chancellor remained in existence for almost 150 years, until the demise of the Republic of Poland and the partitions. Nevertheless, we do not know how effective the established law was, or what the Gypsies' attitude was toward this leader that had been appointed for them. The surviving archive materials do not enable us to answer these questions (a large portion of Polish archival resources were destroyed during WWII, others ended up outside the modern borders of Poland, and many were also taken further eastward and have never been returned).

Surviving documents from the large private estates of the Radziwiłł and Sanguszkó fami-

lies allow us to conclude that they too appointed local overseers, responsible for supervising the Gypsies residing within the boundaries of their estates.

Bear Academy

The Gypsies living in Poland were distinguished from those residing in other regions of Europe in terms of an extraordinary peculiarity: the famous "Bear Academy," or bear-training school, located in Smorgonia, a town in the Radziwiłł estate (now in western Belarus). The academy existed from at least the 1680s until the 1830s (some 150 years). Gypsies came to Smorgonia in the winter and trained animals that they then traveled with throughout the summer, not only through the lands of the Republic of Poland. We know from the literature that they also wandered with their bears to neighboring countries. The chronicle records and autobiographic literature from the time bear many accounts of the Academy. As a result we know that Smorgonia bears were also trained-to-order for local landowners; they were taught to carry water in buckets and hold trays, mainly in order to astonish guests with such unusual table service. Karol Radziwiłł,

Gypsies want
to remain Gypsies



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Agra-Art

the owner of the Smorgnia estate at the end of the 18th century, sometimes rode to his summer castle in a carriage drawn by four trained bears.

In the 19th century, the romantic image of the Gypsies began to propagate. As in other countries of Europe, the Gypsies in Poland stimulated interest among artists – painters, writers, and musicians. They created the image of the Gypsy as a free wanderer, unfettered by conventions and unattached to any particular place. This romantic image still has a great impact upon how Gypsies are perceived to this very day.

Modern days

The WWII period changed the Gypsies' lives fundamentally, not just in Poland. Many of them lost their lives, and their families were scattered. Things would never again be as they had been before. In the mid-1960s, the Gypsies were prohibited from leading nomadic lives in many countries of Eastern Europe, including Poland. They were forced to settle down, while advances were made in technology and factory-produced products displaced traditional handicrafts. The use of horses for transportation and agriculture was superseded by mechanized equipment. All of this changed the lives of the Gypsies fundamentally. Despite retaining their ties, they became subject to ever stronger influence from the surrounding culture. The spread of television brought further changes. And so, what remains of the old Gypsy life in modern-day Poland?

For several years now, the term *Gypsy* has been every more widely replaced with the term *Roma*, the plural of *Rom*, the word for a male Gypsy in the language of the Gypsies. The use of the term *Gypsy* is now no longer considered politically correct. This has been an important victory for Roma leaders and the emerging stratum of Roma intelligentsia. Mixed marriages are becoming ever more frequent, and attending and graduating from school is becoming almost the rule for young people – whose only connection to the former nomadic way of life is through the stories told not by their parents, but rather by their grandparents. Despite their stationary lifestyle, a considerable portion of the Roma's life still takes place within their own community. Their fundamental ethical principles have been retained: respect for elders, and a clear division of social roles between women and men. As well as the principle of group organization – the most numerous community in Poland, the *Polska Roma*, continue to recognize the leadership of a so-called *Siero Roma*, considered to be the chief overseer and judge of the entire more than 15 000-strong group. They have retained many elements of their original culture, which is still intriguing for non-Gypsies. ■

Further reading:

- Ficowski J. (1984). *Cyganie na polskich drogach*. Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków.
- Mróz L. (2001). *Dzieje Cyganów-Romów w Rzeczypospolitej XV-XVIII w.*, Wydawnictwo DiG, Warszawa.
- Guy W. (2001). *Between past and future. The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe*. University of Hertfordshire Press.

Carriers of folk beliefs and practices.
Painting by F. Streit (before 1887)