

JERZY FICOWSKI

# The Gypsies in Poland

HISTORY AND CUSTOMS



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# Introduction

*Of all the ethnic groups that have lived in Poland over the centuries, the Gypsies are the most exotic and intriguing, and are at the same time the least well known to their fellow citizens and to folklore experts. Their closed tribal and clan communities, cultivating their traditional customs, ruled according to their own laws, and speaking a language known only to themselves, prevent the initiation of outsiders into their secrets. Their contacts with members of the outside world are limited to the area of employment and other money-making activities. This Gypsy apartness is guarded, as it were, from two sides: by their own distrust, borne out by experience, and by the antipathy frequently shown by society at large, which is in turn the product of fears both superstitious and justified, and also of downright xenophobia.*

*This state of affairs has developed over the centuries. We shall discuss below in more detail the historical and social factors that have magnified this mutual feeling of distance over the span of many generations, and have given deeper root to mutual animosities. The last decades, after the Gypsies ceased travelling around Poland, have begun here and there to show some softening of contrasts and in certain spheres some lessening of the social isolation of these ex-nomads. These developments can be discerned, but they as yet in no way represent a turning point; they are only the first symptoms, and there is no way of knowing to what extent they are signs of permanent and irreversible change; they are by no means generalized and they are meeting with a great deal of opposition. Gypsy social structures and the laws that govern them are still maintained, despite the changes in their way of life, and their settling in permanent homes.*

*The imperviousness of the Gypsy way of life, guarded by a system of taboos practiced by the members of the community, together with the language barrier, have effectively prevented Polish ethnographers from working in this little-known and highly attractive branch of folklore. The relatively small number of Polish studies of the Gypsies published over the past two centuries have on the whole been limited to historical information and some attempts to describe this people from the outside, without real familiarity with their life and customs. There have also occasionally been some more significant studies of the Romany language in the form of the dialects of settled groups, and a few transcriptions of Romany texts. The first to take up the subject of the Gypsies and pay some attention to them was Tadeusz Czacki, the distinguished historian, who wrote two treatises on the Gypsies, and was co-author of the beautiful *Uniwersał względem Cyganów* (Proclamation on the Gypsies) of 1791, issued shortly after the proclamation of the May 3rd Constitution. Later, Ignacy Daniłowicz in 1824 and Teodor Narbutt in 1830 also published treatises on the subject. In the 20th century, apart from a series of minor historical contributions published before the Second World War, the main studies have been on linguistics: by Izydor Kopernicki (posthumously), Jan Michał Rozwadowski, and Edward Klich; and after the war, by Tadeusz Pobożniak, the present author and other authors.*

*Only the latest studies attempted to go deeper and penetrate previously unfamiliar areas of Gypsy life and lore. The present author first turned his attention to Gypsy spiritual culture, which had not previously been examined, and found in the archives a wealth of documents on the history of the Gypsies in Poland. It was only possible to investigate living folklore by taking part in Gypsy life, and by going along with the Gypsies on their travels, for the Gypsies still maintained their nomadic lifestyle in Poland for almost twenty years after the war. It was by taking part in this way in their everyday life that observations could be built up on the Gypsy customs handed down from generation to generation, and still real, alive and practiced.*

*Traces of Gypsy history can only be found in Polish personal names, and in the attempts of the state authorities over the centuries to drive these nomads out of the country, or, later, in the nomination of certain members of the gentry as Gypsy overlords in what was called the Office of the Gypsy Kingdom in Poland. The task of writing the history of the Gypsies in Poland, even in part, is therefore a difficult one. It can only be an outline history of, in a sense, the official relations of the state with these wandering incomers. There is no Gypsy account of their own history, for it took place almost outside time, on the margins of major events, and – never having been written down – has fallen into oblivion. Even though, in the absence of Romany writing, something of this has been handed down in oral tradition, in legends, few of*

the events and facts that form the stuff of history can be found there. Perhaps there are some names of some of the early rulers of the Gypsy hordes, or some memories of the great migrations from country to country. But apart from this the Gypsy past differed little from the Gypsy present; it contains all the same elements: the cold winterings and roving summers.

The Gypsies are a singular people, continuing their age-old nomadic way of life in the midst of civilized Europe and through the industrial revolution. And not only the Gypsy people themselves have forgotten their past. History itself has overlooked the Gypsies, and has not even provided us with answers to such fundamental questions as what the original homeland of the Gypsies was, or when and how they came to Poland. The Gypsies themselves, shortly after their arrival in these hitherto foreign lands, tried to dispel this general ignorance in some way by telling a legend about their origin in Egypt. And although much later, comparative linguistics came to the aid of history and definitively established the original homeland of these peoples in quite a different place on the map of the world, and traced the path of their migrations, nonetheless there is a permanent relic of this Egyptian legend in their name: for example in English "Gypsies", in Spanish "Gitanos" and in French "Gitanes" – all words of which the etymology is clear.

Broadly based Gypsy studies, covering the results of ethnographic, philological, sociological and historical research, developed in Western Europe in the 19th century, and work in this field is still continuing and has already produced a considerable body of academic writing. However, the fact that the Gypsies were dispersed and created over the centuries specific varieties of their folk culture in individual, separate territorial groupings has meant that for example the lore of highland Gypsies, who arrived in Poland from the early 15th century, and that of the lowland Gypsies who arrived in the mid-16th century, require separate research, and abound in aspects which are unknown elsewhere or which appear here in varied form. Thus studies by foreign researchers cannot relieve Polish students of Gypsy lore of the task of carrying out their own investigations, for they are dealing with a separate field of research. Even so, the results of academic research are in the nature of things available mainly to specialists and a generally narrow audience, while in the world at large false and hackneyed views of the Gypsies are frequently held; three versions of these views are particularly stubbornly maintained: the "demonic", "criminal" and "operetta".

The "demonic" view arose from fear of the Devil, and sees in the Gypsies a tribe of sorcerers with supernatural powers, arousing superstitious fear. The "criminal" view treats Gypsy society as a collective of organized professional criminal groups. The mawkish and sentimental "operetta" view holds the Gypsies to be romantic nomads living by music and love of nature. Usually we are confronted by a mixture of all three of these views in varied proportions but usually marked by an absolute ignorance of the real nature of this people. It is therefore worth giving a wider account of their history and culture – not only to satisfy curiosity and fill a gap in our knowledge of the Gypsies, but also to prevent an acquiescence by silence in prejudice and superstition, and to allow the grimace of animosity that often still greets them to be replaced by a rational, although critical, approach. I should like this book to make a contribution here.

This is not my first publication on this complicated and fascinating subject, but it is in a sense a pioneering work, at least in Poland, in that it is planned as an album with a wide selection of Polish iconography on the subject of Gypsies, beginning with old engravings and paintings, through early photography, to contemporary photographs, some of which are in colour. These illustrations are historical documents in themselves: the majority date from the era of the Gypsy travels, which is a thing of the past, before the settlement campaign was carried out in Poland.

I should like to express my gratitude to the director of the District Museum in Tarnów, Adam Bartosz, who is an ethnographer and Gypsy specialist and who has set up the first permanent museum exhibition in Poland dealing with the Gypsies. He kindly made available to me his lists and files of iconographic material, compiled following research conducted by the Tarnów Museum, and this has made my selection of illustrations for the present book a much easier task. I should also like to thank the family of the late Jerzy Dorożyński, a photographer who died in 1972, for allowing me to use his pictures, which are undoubtedly the best black and white photographs in this book.

## The First Migrations to Poland: Origins and Traces

We owe our present knowledge of the origins of the Gypsies to research carried out several hundred years after the first appearance of this people in Europe. These exotic newcomers, supposed to have been driven out of Egypt, made their appearance unexpectedly centuries ago, taking by surprise both the authorities and peoples of the countries where the first large caravans appeared. They travelled to the North and West from the East and South. Europe was long thereafter inclined to accept the version that they had originated in Egypt. And there were no completely reliable historical sources on the matter.

A pure accident provided the starting point for widescale and profitable research into Gypsy life and lore. In 1763, a Hungarian named Istvan Valyi, discovered when he came into contact in Europe with Indian students from Malabar, that there were many striking similarities between their language and that of the Gypsies. The Gypsies understood some words in the language of these foreign visitors. This discovery provided the basis for philological studies carried out initially by J.C.C. Rüdiger (1782) which confirmed and documented Istvan Valyi's observations, and discovered many more cases, by comparing particular Gypsy words with a Hindustani dialect. Rüdiger's work was taken up and continued by A. F. Pott in his study, *Die Zigeuner in Europa und Asien* (1844-45), which compared Gypsy expressions with Sanskrit and New Indian languages. The idea that the Gypsies had originated in India ceased to be an academic hypothesis and became an accepted fact, backed by a great deal of evidence. The great philologist F. Miklosich carried the research further, by compiling extensive lexical materials and attempting to locate the Indian aboriginal abode of the Gypsies more precisely. Since he discovered many similarities, mainly phonetic, between the European Gypsy dialects and the dialects of the Kafir and Dardic tribes in the North-West of East India, Miklosich put forward the thesis that this was the area that the Gypsies must have migrated from originally in about 1000 A.D., in a period after the individual New Indian languages had already developed.

It was not until 1927 that R. L. Turner proved that the phonetics of the Gypsy language had earlier been linked with the central group of Hindi languages, and that the Gypsies had only later migrated towards the North-West where the Dardic and Kafir tribes were to be found. It was from there that for unknown reasons they set out into the world and were over the centuries to wander into almost all its regions.

Miklosich not only pointed to the aboriginal abode of the Gypsies in India – a version somewhat corrected later by Turner – but also indicated the routes by which the Gypsies travelled from India right to the North and West of Europe. These conclusions were based on investigation of Gypsy dialects and lexical borrowings made along their way. He showed that almost all the European Gypsies initially followed a common route from India through Persia, Armenia and Greece, since all Gypsy dialects contained loan words from Persian, Armenian and Greek. Greek loan words are particularly numerous, which would indicate that the Gypsies spent a longer period of time in

There is no similar evidence from Polish territories and so we must rely on these descriptions from abroad to provide an impression of the unarmed Gypsy invasion which must also at that time have affected Polish territories. We are told in other European accounts that the leaders of the travelling hordes rode on horseback and were dressed very colourfully, in red and green clothes decorated with large silver bosses. The leaders were followed by caravans of light carts drawn by donkeys or old nags; the women rode in ox-carts. Some of the Gypsies were leading bears or performing monkeys.

They claimed to be penitential pilgrims who had renounced the church. Sigismund of Luxemburg, King of Hungary and later Holy Roman Emperor, had, according to their story, occupied their country, forcing them to be baptized on pain of death. They told that this king had imposed a penance upon them: they were to wander the face of the earth for seven years, and seek absolution from the Pope himself. He had given them a safe conduct for this penitential journey, wherever they might wander. In this safe conduct dating from 1423 he had guaranteed not only freedom of movement and protection, but had also recognised their own Gypsy legal system: they were not to be brought before the courts of countries in which they committed crimes. Therefore at the beginning of their wanderings in Central and Western Europe they may have felt themselves immune from punishment as long as their story of the holy and penitential nature of their journey was taken in good faith. Their poverty, and the rags which the majority wore seemed to the local population to be attributes of penitents, and sometimes inclined them to help these alleged pilgrims. Nonetheless, the way of life of these visitors, and the thefts by which they tried to keep themselves, meant that five years after their first appearance at Bologna they were proclaimed unwelcome in that city.

At first, however, city gates were not closed to them. The fantastic version of their origins and the motivations for their travels, which they themselves had dreamed up, skilfully appealed to the ideas of contemporary Europe. We can see that this people which dabbled in fortune telling, and thus in meeting the needs and hopes of those who asked them what tomorrow might bring, were equally able to use their knowledge of psychology to create a past of their own for the consumption of the outside world. The titles of count or prince which these newcomers used were not an expression of Gypsy values but showed that the Gypsies were able deliberately to adapt to local and contemporary social hierarchies in order to add to their own prestige.

In this same period, if not a little earlier, the Gypsies must have arrived in Polish territories, although an absence of any written evidence makes it impossible to provide dates or details for this. The only traces to be found of this first migration come in personal or place name data linked with the word *Cygan* – Gypsy. The first piece of evidence of this kind dated from 1419, when the name of a settler at Trześniów in the Sanok region is given as Petrus Cygan; in 1428 the same name appears at Królikowa; at Berezówka in 1429, we find the name Nicolaus Czygan; in 1434, Mikołaj Czygan appears at Świerczów; and in 1436, Jan and Jakub Cygan at Królikowa.

In Długosz's *Liber beneficiorum* and in court records we can also find early traces of the presence of Gypsies in Poland in place and personal names. In 1487, a place called Cyhanowa Łuka existed in the Halicz region; in 1503