

# PAPUSZA

In recent decades, new relations between the majority population and Roma have been developing in Poland. This has partly been a result of normal assimilation processes, but there has also been a shrinking distance between Roma and non-Roma, as well as a growing mobilization and sense of agency within Roma society. The Roma people have entered the spheres of media, education, and popular culture on an unprecedented scale.<sup>1</sup> The film *Papusza* can be seen as a result of these processes.

*Papusza* was first screened in autumn 2013. The film offers interpretations of several phenomena: the fate of the Roma community in Poland from the interwar period to the 1970s; the personal fate of the renowned Romani poet “Papusza”<sup>2</sup> (Bronisława Wajs); and the poet’s relationship with her husband, Dionizy Wajs. In addition to *Papusza*, Jerzy Ficowski, a student on the run from Communist repression – who, for a time, shared the couple’s life of traveling in the late 1940s – is in focus. He translated what *Papusza* viewed as her “songs” into Polish. The idea of someone calling her songs “poetry” seemed outlandish to her. The screenplay seems to be based on *Papusza*’s own account of



“Papusza” (Bronisława Wajs).

her life – the events before the early 1950s in particular.

Born around 1910 in Lublin, she was declared to be fated to bring either pride or shame to her family. The next scene takes the viewer to a prison somewhere in Poland where *Papusza* is serving a sentence for repeated theft (due to her husband’s love of stolen rather than bought poultry); she is put in a ministerial car and taken straight to the premiere of a bombastic piece of music to which her poems were set. She and her husband are seated along ministers, Party fat cats, and the cream of the Polish cultural establishment. Afterwards, she and her husband Dionizy, 24 years her senior, return to their miserable quarters in Gorzów Wielkopolski in western Poland, where they have been living since their tabor stopped traveling in 1954. One witness

the degradation faced by the community prevented from traveling, forced to live in houses where the men, in particular, unable to practice their traditional trade as musicians, sink into despair, passing time drinking and chatting about the old times. In a particularly dramatic scene, a delirious Dionizy Wajs chops his former pride, the family wagon, into pieces. This is

## Tears of Blood: How we Suffered under the German Soldiers in Volhynia from 1943 to 1944

In the woods. No water, no fire – great hunger.  
Where could the children sleep? No tent.  
We could not light the fire at night.  
By day, the smoke would alert the Germans.  
How to live with children in the cold of winter?  
All are barefoot...  
When they wanted to murder us,  
first they forced us to hard labor.  
A German came to see us.  
– I have bad news for you.  
They want to kill you tonight.  
Don’t tell anybody.  
I too am a dark Gypsy,

of your blood – a true one.  
God help you  
in the black forest...  
Having said these words,  
he embraced us all...  
  
For two three days no food.  
All go to sleep hungry.  
Unable to sleep,  
they stare at the stars...  
God, how beautiful it is to live!  
The Germans will not let us...  
  
Ah, you, my little star!  
At dawn you are large!  
Blind the Germans!

Confuse them,  
lead them astray,  
so the Jewish and Gypsy child can live!  
When big winter comes,  
what will the Gypsy woman with a small child do?  
Where will she find clothing?  
Everything is turning to rags.  
One wants to die.  
No one knows, only the sky,  
only the river hears our lament.  
Whose eyes saw us as enemies?  
Whose mouth cursed us?  
Do not hear them, God.  
Hear us!  
A cold night came,

# THE STORY OF A POLISH ROMA POET

by **Piotr Wawrzeniuk**

not merely an act of blind despair, but a way of keeping the flat warm for the family weakling, Papusza's and Dionizy's adopted son Tarzan.

The fame won by the publication of Papusza's poetry proves problematic. Romani elders hold her responsible for revealing Romani secrets to the general public, and she is banished from the society of *Polska Roma*,<sup>3</sup> suffers a nervous breakdown, and spends some time at a mental institution. Her kin abandon her. Papusza continues on alone in a run-down flat, with her husband staying by her side.

We learn that Papusza found Tarzan in Volhynia, minutes after a Nazi German detachment massacred a group of Roma in a barn, leaving Tarzan the only survivor. The genocide of the Roma constitutes a short story within the film, containing the scene of the massacre and Papusza's group hiding in the woods. Traditionally roaming through Volhynia and Polesia, many among *Polska Roma* headed for the woods once it became clear they were becoming targets of the Nazis' genocidal policies.

## The Polish Roma's shrinking space

Throughout the film, there is a sense that the walls, both perceived and real, are closing in on the Polish Roma. With the outbreak of the World War II their life space starts to shrink. While the viewer is not spared the hardships of nomadic life during the interwar

time, including animosities with the settled population, the outbreak of war shows the spiral into outright disaster. There was a lack of understanding of the approaching threat, then dispersal into the woods and swamps of Volhynia and Polesia. Then, once the war is over, vegetation in the backyards of the suburban tenement houses to which Papusza's group is confined, narrow, dirty, and grim. Papusza's solitary moments of solemn contemplation, cigarette in mouth, are accompanied by the ominous sounds of screeching crows or distant train whistles, or both. Those sounds forebode disintegration. Papusza becomes an outcast from *Polska Roma* society, but also keeps society at large at arm's length. Although a member of the Polish Society of Literature since 1962, she refuses most literary prizes she is offered, as well as a writer's pension. While suffering a nervous breakdown, she burns many poems and her correspondence. She has been an outsider all her life, from the moment she began to learn to read and write, supported by an old Jewish female shopkeeper. The letters of the Polish alphabet, which she used when painstakingly writing down her songs phonetically in Romani, distanced her from her community, yet they brought her no closer to Polish society. The former would not understand her striving to knowledge; the latter would not let her in anyway, beyond the expressions of support when she was showcased as an elevation of one humble person from masses in the People's Republic of Poland.

The scenery and nature in the film are painfully beautiful. The

the old Gypsy women sang  
a Gypsy fairy tale:  
Golden winter will come,  
snow, like little stars,  
will cover the earth, the hands.  
The black eyes will freeze,  
the hearts will die.

So much snow fell,  
it covered the road.  
One could only see the Milky Way  
in the sky.

On such night of frost  
a little daughter dies,  
and in four days  
mothers bury in the snow  
four little sons.  
Sun, without you,

see how a little Gypsy  
is dying from cold  
in the big forest.

Once, at home, the moon stood in the  
window,  
didn't let me sleep. Someone looked  
inside.

I asked – who is there?  
– Open the door, my dark Gypsy.  
I saw a beautiful young Jewish girl,  
shivering from cold,  
asking for food.

You poor thing, my little one.  
I gave her bread, whatever I had, a shirt.  
We both forgot that not far away  
were the police.  
But they didn't come that night.

All the birds  
are praying for our children,  
so the evil people, vipers, will not kill  
them.  
Ah, fate!  
My unlucky luck!

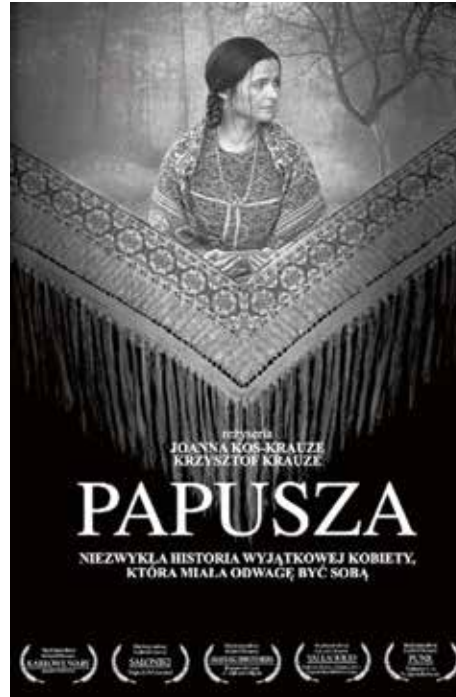
Snow fell as thick as leaves,  
barred our way,  
such heavy snow, it buried the cart-  
wheels.  
One had to trample a track,  
push the carts behind the horses.

How many miseries and hungers!  
How many sorrows and roads!  
How many sharp stones pierced our feet!  
How many bullets flew by our ears!

Translated from the Polish by Yala Korwin.



Scenes from the film *Papusza*.



The film poster.



Papusza as a bronze statue, in Gorzów Wielkopolski, where she settled in the 1950s.

story, shown in black and white, never turns into color. The tone remains muted. While the final text is scrolling, we witness a group of Roma wagons separating and leaving in unknown directions, disappearing. At the risk of over-interpreting, this scene can be viewed as the fate long faced by the four main groups of Roma in Poland: division between the groups, divisions within the groups, and physical remoteness from each other. Like the old Romani culture, the wagons disappear. One can wait a long time for a romantic streak from the directors Joanna Kos-Krauze and Krzysztof Krauze.

The episodic treatment of the genocide (merely three to four minutes of the film) is not coincidental. The persecution and genocide of the Roma, symbolized mainly by the conditions of the *Zigeunerlager* in Birkenau, brought about the breakdown of the traditional Romani culture and society. The ritual purity was compromised; the community shaken and turned upside-down. To talk within the Romani groups about what happened would have been incomprehensible. Even many years after the war, non-Roma interviewers often turned out to be the first persons to whom Romani survivors communicated their experiences.<sup>4</sup> One such person was Jerzy Ficowski (1924–2006).

### The first testimonies collected among Roma

As a young student of sociology at the University of Warsaw, Jerzy Ficowski saw the value of collecting testimonies about the persecution of the Roma in the immediate postwar years. Soon,

on the run from the Security Service (*Służba Bezpieczeństwa*) for his Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*) activities during the war, he gained the opportunity to learn first-hand about Roma society. For almost two years starting in 1949, Ficowski roamed the countryside of northwestern Poland with a camp of *Polska Roma* to which Papusza belonged. Earlier research on Roma stereotyping and fragmentary in its approach, but his studies, based on everyday socializing and interaction, were free from those flaws. Ficowski was the first person to collect testimonies among Roma and others on what had happened during the war.

In *Cyganie na polskich drogach* [Gypsies on Polish roads], Ficowski summarized his experiences and observations of those two years. Published in 1953, the book still makes excellent and informative reading on the customs, beliefs, and lives of Polish Roma in the late 1940s. It includes several of Papusza's poems along with a short biography of her. Unfortunately, the Romani elders found the book highly provocative because of its description of Romani customs. Although Ficowski built the text on his own observations, Papusza was hastily identified as the culprit. This meant social death for Papusza and her husband, who stood by her. *Cyganie na polskich drogach* was reissued several times, and Ficowski continued his work and published several books on the subject, in addition to numerous scientific articles and texts written for the general public.<sup>5</sup>

The valuable testimonies gathered by Ficowski could have provided much more information. Some issues important to researchers working today are still veiled; maybe they would

**To tell people outside about life inside the Roma group. This was as a betrayal.**



Post-war photo, probably taken for an ID.



With her husband's Dionizy's harp.



Papusza and her son Tarzan.

have been clarified had he asked more questions. But he seldom did. Most of the testimonies seem to have been recorded in a single take without the interviewee being interrupted, which gives them a very vivid touch while to read, but leaves one with questions. Of course, it was hard for Ficowski to foresee the value his material would have in the decades to come. Nor was he a historian, nor trained in the art of interviewing, a craft that would start to develop among historians in the 1970s. Throughout his life, Professor Ficowski had the qualities of a Renaissance man, and, in addition to his Romani-related research, was known for his poetry, children's literature, lyrics to popular songs, and his research on the Polish-Jewish writer and painter Bruno Schulz, who was killed in the Drohobycz ghetto in 1943.

## A renewed interest in Romani Studies

While the film *Papusza* certainly represents part of a growing interest in and awareness of Romani matters among the Polish and international public, one should not overestimate its value as an eye-opener to Romani history. Rather, it constitutes a fascinating and beautiful story of a lifetime on the margins.

In 1984, Ficowski found that “Papusza does not bother the Gypsies any more”. However, they still did not enjoy her works. Given the amount of knowledge of Romani history that has been lost, the professor maintained, it might well be that Papusza's name and poetry, with reference to her contemporaries, will be

remembered as an “embellishment and pride of all Gypsy culture”. He may well be right.

Thanks to the recent surge in interest in Romani culture – not only in Poland – the wider international readership is now being offered glimpses into Papusza's lyric landscape, including a harrowing poem on the Volhynia events: Some sixty years after the first release of her famous oeuvre “Tears of Blood”, it has been translated into several languages and is once again being read widely. *Baltic Worlds* is contributing to this new presentation of her work by publishing the following poem, “How we Suffered under the German Soldiers in Volhynia from 1943 to 1944”. ❌

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## references

- 1 Slawomir Kapralski, “Jak Romowie pamietaja?”, *Studia Romologica* 3/2010, 227.
- 2 “Papusza” means “doll” in the Romani language.
- 3 One of the four main Romani groups in Poland.
- 4 Kapralski, “Jak Romowie pamietaja?”, 224–226.
- 5 Jerzy Ficowski, *Cyganie na polskich drogach* [Gypsies on Polish Roads], (Warsaw: Nisza, 2013) 6–8.

**Listen to the voices. They sing a song of shared sorrow.**