

Alicja GONTAREK* (UMCS, Lublin, Poland)

The attitude presented in the press published by the Polish Socialist Party towards Gypsies in the interwar period – social and political issues

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Abstract: *The publication discusses the Polish Socialist Party's (PPS) attitude to Gypsies and the Gypsy question in the interwar period from 1918 to 1939. An extensive search of the PPS press, including around 1600 articles on the Gypsy population, has shown that this issue also interested the PPS. However, the socialists had a decidedly negative attitude to Gypsies. This was conditioned by the fact that the party found itself in opposition to the government camp, which supported the aspirations of Gypsy kings from the Kwiek clan, and it was with them that the PPS identified Gypsies. Secondly, the strong ideologization of the party's press, based among other things on the cult of work, led to a rejection of the lifestyle of the majority of Gypsies, who represented a nomadic and semi-nomadic culture of life.*

Key words: Gypsies, Polish Socialist Party, Roma people, Socialist Press, The Second Polish Republic

Introduction

The Gypsy issues¹ in the Second Polish Republic have only recently become a topic of interest for historians. This is due to a number of reasons which have delayed the analysis of this problem by historians, although the most serious obstacle has been the scarcity of archival sources and their extreme dispersion and fragmentation. The situation is similar in the case of the printed press material, although it provides much more varied content than the legacy of records. For this reason, Gypsy/Romani studies has been strongly limited to discussions of an ethnological, sociological or cultural science nature, while the historical knowledge of the Gypsies and their relationship with the political world and most of society has remained in the background, particularly as regards the 19th century and the interwar period. As a result, there were ‘white gaps’ which even Jerzy Ficowski, the most outstanding Polish Gypsy researcher of the twentieth century, was unable to fill.²

* ORCID iD 0000-0003-1556-1954. alicja.gontarek@mail.umcs.pl; Maria Curie-Skłodowska University.

¹ In this paper the historical term Gypsies is used. On the need to preserve historical nomenclature see: BARTOSZ, 2004: 89-90; MARUSHIAKOVA, POPOV, 2020: 31-32. See this problem from a different, sociological perspective: KAPRALSKI, 2012: 78-84.

² More widely on FICOWSKI (1985: 88-107); GONTAREK, 2016c: 145-158.

One of the ‘blank spots’ mentioned, albeit systematically remedied, is the issue of the attitude of individual political currents to the Gypsy population and to the Gypsy question in general in the interwar period. So far, the question of cooperation of the Sanacja political group with Gypsies in the years 1926-1935 and after 1935 has been analysed as well as the attitude of the National Party (SN) to this minority.³ A collection of sources documenting the activities of the Gypsy elite of the Kwiek clan has also been published.⁴

The issues raised are reflected above all in the press of the period. We are, in a way, condemned to the press because information on these topics almost only appeared in the press. We cannot find it in political party prints or memoirs of politicians, etc. This is due to the fact that the Gypsy community in Poland, which was small (about 40,000 people), mainly led a nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyle and represented an oral culture. For these reasons, the Gypsies were placed on the margins of political discussion only as a certain addition to the heated political debates about other minorities, such as Ukrainians or Jews.⁵ So far, however, there is no evidence that Gypsies in general were taken into account as a national group and could be the subject of Polish national policy. There are many indications that they were classified as a social problem rather than a *strictly* political one.

Members of the Polish Socialist Party also participated in the not very animated discourse on Gypsy issues, which was pending, so to say, in the background of the great discussions on other minorities. That party was the only significant political force representing the socialist ideas in the Second Republic of Poland – in the parliamentary elections of 1928, it was supported by about 13% of the citizens who were eligible to vote, which proved the relative popularity of the party and the power of PPS’ political communication, although it must be admitted that the party was, as Jerzy Holcer expressed it, “a key link in a much wider socialist movement than it”.⁶

Of great importance, from the point of view of the subject matter under discussion, was the crisis and split in 1928, after which the party found itself in opposition to the government camp, and from 1929 onwards, it became the largest party of the opposition (*Centrolew*), which in turn was decisive for its attitude towards the Kwieks, who closely cooperated with the sanacja (i.e. government) authorities.⁷ Other important factors influencing the attitudes towards the Gypsies and their elite were, of course, the socialist ideology, and even communist influences, which became more pronounced under the influence of, among other things, the economic crisis (1929-1933), creating a substrate for criticism of the nomadic population, which eluded the so-called civilised norms.⁸ It is also noteworthy that, since socialism opposed all

³ The author refers to her works, which for the first time reconstruct the chronology of events relating to the activities of the Gypsy elite in the Second Republic. Together with the present work, they form a series discussing the attitude of political activists representing the most important political currents in Polish politics, and at the same time provide an excellent opportunity to learn about the level of interaction between Gypsy leaders and Polish political representatives. See: GONTAREK, 2017c: 170-189; GONTAREK, 2017b: 1-21; GONTAREK, 2020: 336-345.

⁴ BARTOSZ, GANCARZ, GONTAREK, 2020: 599-650.

⁵ In the only publication so far discussing the concepts of national policy of the Polish state there is no reference to the Gypsy question. CHOJNOWSKI, 1979.

⁶ HOLZER, 1974: 222; *Statystyka wyborów do Sejmu i Senatu*, 1930: 10, 9.

⁷ STĘBOROWSKI, 1963: 137-156.

⁸ PAWŁOWSKI, 1990: 160; TYMIENIECKA, 1969: 252-293; SACEWICZ 2019.

forms of government based on the power of the strong hand, especially that which was of conservative origin, the blade of criticism against this type of power was also aimed at the royal institution developed among the Gypsies. The general judgement of this community was also to some extent influenced by *stricte* worldview issues, such as the great respect for work or even its cult, which dictated the stigmatisation of idleness of which the Gypsies were accused by the majority community.⁹ These themes will be developed further in this thesis.

Research sources

The PPS had an extensive press base, although not to the same extent as the Catholic-national circles. These were mainly titles appearing in big industrial centres or in big cities like Warsaw, Łódź, Lwów, Katowice, Kraków.¹⁰ An extensive study on socialist work was prepared by Notkowski.¹¹

The party's most important press organ was the *Robotnik* [Worker] daily, published from 1919 to 1939. In the 1930s, it had a circulation of 60,000. A feature of the PPS press was its strong centralisation, but from 1936 the party authorities decided to centralise its press organs even more closely. In 1936, under Zygmunt Zaremba's direction, a PPS Periodicals Team was set up, encompassing all the party's periodicals and transforming their regional editions into mutations of *Robotnik*. These changes included the leading periodicals: *Naprzód* [Ahead] in Kraków, *Dziennik Ludowy* [People's Daily] in Lwów, *Gazeta Robotnicza* [Workers Daily] in Katowice, *Łodzianin* [Łódź Inhabitant] in Łódź and *Życie Robotnicze* [Worker Life] in Radom.¹²

The author searched the most important party periodicals (dailies) of the PPS published in the above mentioned major urban centres (Katowice, Kraków, Lwów, Łódź, Warsaw), i.e. in those cities where the political significance of the party was relatively high. It is characteristic that the search yielded no results in the case of the press from Poznań. Apparently, Roma issues did not arouse any interest among socialists in those areas. In addition, they reached for sensational titles, which in Łódź and Warsaw were published by socialists (*Głos Stolicy* [The Voice of the Capital City] and *Głos Poranny* [Morning Voice]).¹³

In numerical terms, of the most important headings, 531 articles and notes on the topic of our interest were found in *Robotnik*, 481 in *Gazeta Robotnicza*, 381 in *Naprzód* and 262 in *Dziennik Ludowy*, i.e. 1,655 in total. The high position of *Gazeta Robotnicza* is noteworthy. The relatively large collection is due to the fact that, for centuries, Upper Silesia was an area of marches of Gypsy caravans from the countries neighbouring with Poland to the south, although Katowice was not among the strong centres of the PPS.¹⁴ Generally, although the whole collection constitutes substantial research material, it must be remembered that it consists mainly of small, sometimes

⁹ KARNIOL, 1938: 23-24.

¹⁰ ŻARNOWSKI, 1965: 71.

¹¹ NOTKOWSKI, 1997.

¹² NOTKOWSKI, 1997: 69.

¹³ The PPS was late to modernise its press in the direction of sensationalism, which was potentially easier to read. These attempts were not always successful, as evidenced by the low readership of *Głos Stolicy*. PISKAŁA, 2017: 146.

¹⁴ FICOWSKI, 1953: 29-30.

very laconic notes, most often placed in criminal chronicles, and most of them have no author.¹⁵ The fact that the Gypsy theme in the socialist press is related to crime shows that this narrative is part of the majority stereotypical perception of the Gypsy community, which is why the author did not discuss the content of the crime columns because they appeared in almost every newspaper and their analysis adds nothing to the picture of this minority.¹⁶ Let us emphasise, however, that of all the PPS periodicals analysed by the author, *Naprzód* (Kraków) proved to be the most saturated with stereotypical images of Gypsies.¹⁷ A lot of attention in the Roma context was also devoted to events in the field of entertainment culture, most often these themes appeared in the form of advertisements for trivial revues, small cabarets, theatres and other municipal events with the participation of Gypsies. This subject matter has also been omitted. Both types of descriptors fit into the binary scheme of the image of Gypsies – a negative one, let's call it criminal, and a positive one (romantic), that is, referring to banal entertainment.¹⁸

In this situation, the key issue was to determine what other aspects of Gypsy life was covered in that press, and how, under the influence of specific circumstances, the description of Gypsies in the pages of that press evolved.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that information on Gypsies from individual journals often repeat, so in reality the substantive material is far more meagre than the number of notes indicated above would suggest.

¹⁵ See, for example, the discussion of the trial of the 9-person 'gang from Miedźna' (the Pszczyna district), which drew the attention of the PPS press in Silesia. This topic was reported in years 1934-1936. It aroused interest because the criminals committed a robbery, during which a postman, a constable and a gamekeeper were killed. Gypsies were also interested in it, drawing them to Pszczyna, where the trial took place. It should be noted that one of the accused complained in the courtroom that during the investigation he was tortured and given vodka. The case gained nationwide publicity also because it took an unexpected turn – the main accused named Szeterlok was finally acquitted by the decision of the Court of Appeal in Katowice. 'Aresztowanie morderców listonosza z Miedźnej', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 216/1934: 6; 'Sprawcy trzech morderstw', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 152/1935: 7; 'Wiadomości różne', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 155/1935: 6; 'Wiadomości różne', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 182/1935: 6; 'Mordercy z Miedźnej przed sądem', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 213/1935: 8; 'Dalszy ciąg procesu cyganów', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 216/1935: 6; 'Z procesu band cyganów w Pszczynie', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 219/1935: 6; 'Wyrok na cyganów – morderców', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 221/1935: 4; 'O napad na listonosza', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 107/1936: 5; 'O napad rabunkowy na listonosza', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 123/1936: 5; 'Wiadomości różne', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 344/1936: 6. For another trial of this type see, for example: 'Skazanie 12 cyganów za zabójstwo proboszcza i napad na plebanię', *Robotnik* 167/1939: 5.

¹⁶ The problem of images of Gypsies in the Polish press in the 19th and 20th centuries (until 1939) has not yet been presented in the historical studies. Some periodicals in 19th, including dailies, although generally transmitting many harmful stereotypes about gypsies, at the same time discussed the life of this minority in a multifaceted way, going beyond the images of the gypsy-criminal or the gypsy-perpetual wanderer. Certainly, however, in the nineteenth century the gypsy population was primarily seen as a problem because of accusations of thieving practices. GONTAREK, 2016b: 81-108; GONTAREK, 2017b: 125-160.

¹⁷ In this journal most of the articles portray Gypsies as criminals. The newspaper seems to have taken the least interest in the fate of this minority, as evidenced by the very large number of reprints from *Robotnik*.

¹⁸ BARTOSZ, 2008: 98.

The origins of the Gypsy presence in the socialist press up to 1926

Until 1926, i.e. until the moment when the Sanacja camp decided not to cooperate with the Gypsy elite, the Polish press had dealt sporadically with Gypsies, and the description of them was decidedly negative. They were referred to as a problematic but also mysterious immigrant element, or the *strictly* criminal nature of Gypsy groups was emphasised. They were seen as charlatans, swindlers and thieves, while warning of the ‘gypsy trickery’ associated with fortune-telling.¹⁹ Accounts of this kind appeared most frequently in Upper Silesia. There, people were urged to report to the police the mere appearance of Gypsy caravans, which was a result of Prussian law.²⁰ In 1921, 1922 and 1923, the term ‘gypsy plague’ was used freely, noting the sudden presence of larger migrant groups that had fled to the central lands from the eastern Borderlands because the latter had become the scene of fierce fighting with the Bolsheviks. The fact that some Gypsies organised themselves into dangerous gangs, engaged in criminal activities such as horse-stealing, was strongly emphasised.²¹

Despite their generally hostile attitude to members of itinerant groups in the first years of the Second Republic, socialists coldly and curtly responded to the initiative of the National Populist Union in 1924, which wanted to curb the Gypsies’ lawlessness and force them to settle down and give up fortune-telling, begging, etc. At the time, the socialist press described such ideas as a ‘war of the National Democrats against the Gypsies’ without, however, adding any further comments.²²

The narrative about criminal Gypsies underwent some significant modification in the second half of the 1920s. No longer were all the representatives of this community accused of belonging to criminal groups, but it was noted that only some of them were of this nature. They were called ‘demoralised criminal gypsy gangs’ who moved quite freely between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Reports on the consequences of their activity complemented the local crime chronicle, for example in *Gazeta Robotnicza*. It should be noted that the newspaper emphasised that these Gypsies destabilised the security situation in the region. It was stressed that they were dangerous and well-organised into criminal groups that was dealing not only with theft, but above all robbery. The group operating in the area of Pszczyna and Katowice proved to be particularly dangerous. Other reported cases came from Racibórz, Rybnik and Wodzisław.²³

When it was possible to bring some of the members of these groups to justice, *Gazeta Robotnicza* highlighted their young age and exceptional bestiality and cruelty:

“(…) During the summer months of last year, the population (...) was troubled by a dangerous gang of gypsies who attacked people on the roads and

¹⁹ ‘Pomysły Cyganów’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 288/1921: 5.

²⁰ JANICKA, 2019: 472.

²¹ ‘Napad Cyganów’, *Robotnik* 329/1921: 4; ‘Cyganie bandytami i złodziejami’, *Robotnik* 209/1922: 6; ‘Cygani-koniokradzy’, *Robotnik* 76/1922: 7; ‘Tajemnice obozu cygańskiego’, *Robotnik* 213/1922: 4.

²² ‘Wojna endeków przeciwko cyganom’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 247/1924: 5.

²³ ‘Racibórz’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 32/1919: 4; ‘Wodzisław’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 18/1925: 4; ‘Rybnik’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 239/1926: 6; ‘Rybnik’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 272/1926: 3; ‘Kraszewo. Zabójstwo popełnione przez bandę cyganów’, *Robotnik* 235/1929: 4.

committed numerous burglaries. (...) The accused were juvenile gypsies Karol Ferenc, Boncio and Augustym Kwiatkowski. (...) The defendants have been in the investigative prison since July 15 and despite their young age they seem to be extremely savage. (...) The course of the trial showed that they committed their robberies with extreme insolence. After robbing their victims, the accused abused them in a bestial way. (...) The bandits also committed numerous rapes of women. The total punishment due for each case of assault should have been 180 years in a penal house.”²⁴

According to the press, the inhabitants of Upper Silesia also suffered from the intrusive begging of Gypsy women, who extorted gifts for themselves in exchange for fortune-telling, sometimes scaring the housewives. On the other hand, the ‘city folk’ were accused of being superstitious: “Gypsies, especially Gypsy women, are engaged in divination. This practice is successful, as a large number of superstitious people make their way to the gypsy camp every day. How much foolishness, so many gypsies”.²⁵

Villagers were just as superstitious. An example was given of a peasant from the village of Raszczyce (in the Rybnik district) who believed that a Gypsy was able to make a cow give cream. Having paid for the ‘service’, he allowed himself to be persuaded to hold the animal by the tail until the desired cream flowed. *Gazeta Robotnicza* emphasised the malice of the ‘sorcerers’, who made fun of the peasants by ordering them to perform humiliating actions, as in this case, for example, because at the urging of a Gypsy, the farmer had to kneel in manure. In the village of Łędziny, on the other hand: “One of the gypsies showed off with fortune-telling and used it to extort various valuable things from gullible women, after which he ran away, having previously threatened the women that if they made any noise they would be killed on the spot. We are warning gullible villagers against Gypsy tricks.”²⁶

After 1926, thanks to the alliance of the Sanacja camp with the Gypsy elite, accounts of the type discussed above, i.e. based on a negative stereotype, although still forming the core of the narrative about the Gypsies in the Second Polish Republic, were supplemented by other themes, this time very positive. Thanks to this, Gypsy life became less and less repulsive and/or mysterious from the point of view of the average city dweller, being from then on an element of the collective existence of Polish society. Before this happened, however, Poland, as well as other European countries, had witnessed a discussion about alleged cases of cannibalism among Gypsy groups living in Czechoslovakia, which was accompanied by the introduction of a law in Poland prohibiting vagrancy and begging. Comments on these two phenomena also appeared in the socialist press.

²⁴ ‘Pszczyna’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 183/1925: 4; ‘Pszczyna’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 190/1925: 3; ‘Murki w Pszczyńskim’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 196/1925: 4; ‘Katowice’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 27/1926: 3.

²⁵ ‘Siemianowice’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 157/1923: 3; ‘Rybnik’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 209/1923: 6. See also: ‘Ukarana ciemnota’, *Naprzód* 234/1929: 6; ‘Zabobon i ciemnota sięją spustoszenie’, *Naprzód* 369/1938: 2.

²⁶ ‘Łędziny. Baczność przed cyganami’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 266/1923: 4; ‘Raszczyce’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 288/1926: 3.

Facing the Vagrancy Prohibition Act and the Problem of Gypsy-People (1927-1929)

In the Second Republic of Poland, non-aboratory legal regulations concerning vagrancy and begging were in force until 1927, some until 1932 and some until the end of the existence of the 2nd Polish Republic. In 1927, a decree was issued by the President of the Republic of Poland on combating both phenomena. In the early 1930s, criminal law and misdemeanour law were unified.²⁷ The new legislation thus comprehensively covered all aspects of the life of itinerant Gypsies, *de facto* banning the practice. In reality, the bans were not enforced and Gypsy nomadism continued to flourish in Polish territory, although the fight against both phenomena gained momentum in the form of the establishment of anti-begging societies and the carrying out of intensive, ad hoc actions of this nature to eradicate social pathologies or criminal behaviour among underclass groups.²⁸ The Gypsy leaders of the Kwiek clan were also highly involved, and in cooperation with the police pursued all manifestations of dishonesty among their compatriots. Their actions, above all their denunciations to the law enforcement authorities, were received sceptically by the socialist press, which quipped, for example: “Apparently, the gypsies have become decent today, as if to spite the gypsies”.²⁹

It is significant that the Socialists did not relate the Act to the Gypsy problem at all but were interested in the national context of the new legislation. In *Robotnik*, for example, there was a brief reference to the problem of the definition of beggar and vagrant. The newspaper indicated that the Act covered “those categories of persons who, although they are not beggars and vagrants in the strict sense of the term, have motives analogous to those of beggars and vagrants”.³⁰ *Robotnik* put the main emphasis on the liquidation of begging as a manifestation of poverty and exclusion. It also believed that the Act had a civilisational significance – instead of being arrested for vagrancy, beggars and vagrants were to be offered workhouses and shelters. Of course, the PPS joined the active fight against begging, supporting manhunts for the marginalised people and urging people to stop giving alms to beggars. Citizens of Katowice, on the advice of *Gazeta Robotnicza*, were to report to the police if they saw beggars in the Katowice area. It should be remembered that the Silesian PPS recommended the same course of action in the first half of the 1920s in the case of detecting the presence of caravans, so it was all the same coherent message to catch all

²⁷ See: JANICKA, 2019: 474.

²⁸ DYDUSIAK: 32-27. In the introduction to this study, significant mottos on the subject of begging appeared, which allow for a better understanding of what society’s attitude to gypsy begging was – one is an excerpt from the statute of the Borislav society ‘Opatrzność’ [Providence], and the other is the words spoken by the Lviv voivode Alfred Bilyak. In the order given, they read as follows: “One must distinguish between begging as a state of poverty and begging practised as a craft”; “We complain too much about intrusive begging and take too little interest in combating this habit. And that is why we have so many beggars”.

²⁹ ‘Świadczył się cygan’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 148/1927: 9. See other examples of denunciations: ‘Najazd Cyganów na policję’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 88/1923: 4; ‘Cyganie między sobą’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 263/1927: 7.

³⁰ ‘Walka z żebractwem i włóczęgostwem’, *Robotnik* 208/1927: 7.

groups living on the margins of social life and bring them to the appropriate authorities.³¹

It should also be mentioned that the PPS used the issues of begging and vagrancy, as elements of social pathology, for political struggle against the Sanacja. For this reason, these issues were sometimes treated instrumentally.³² The Warsaw authorities were accused, for example, of not allocating subsidies for anti-begging activities, by fictitiously entering items concerning these matters in the capital's budget.³³

The actions of the Polish authorities coincided with the beginning of the fight against vagrancy and begging in Czechoslovakia. In Czechoslovakia, the decision was made to implement harsher solutions, i.e. forced settlement. *Gazeta Robotnicza*, which was the most interested of all periodicals in the policy of Poland's southern neighbour, pointed out that along with the plans for permanent settlement, the Ministry of the Interior had set up a school for Roma children in the town of Uzhorod. It is true that they were sent there forcibly, forcibly clothed and shod as well as forced to be clean, but their traditions and language were respected, the newspaper wrote. An important part of the curriculum at this institution was learning the craft of cauldronmaking and playing the violin. It can, therefore, be concluded that such activities in Poland, if they had been undertaken, would have met with the approval of the PPS.³⁴ However, no such attempt was ever made in our country.

In late 1920s, more attention was devoted to commenting on the trial in Košice, during which the theme of alleged cannibalism among a group of Gypsies living in the forest was revealed and widely commented on. The trial, which was pending from 1927 to 1929,³⁵ contributed to the growth of resentment against this minority as a savage people, especially since it was quoted, also in the PPS press, what the persons concerned had said during the trial. For example: "The meat was very good (...), only it had a sweetish taste," etc.³⁶ When confronted with such revelations,

³¹ 'Ci, którym smakuje ludzkie mięso', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 67/1927: 4; 'Żebracy i żebractwo', *Robotnik* 216/1927: 2; 'Walka z żebractwem w Katowicach', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 227/1929: 3. One of the publicists of *Robotnik* created a seven-point programme for fighting begging in the capital. It included, among other things, strict registration of marginal people, a division into able-bodied and unable-bodied, and the construction of workhouses and shelters. However, there was no mention of Gypsies. See more in detail: 'W sprawie żebractwa ulicznego w stolicy', *Robotnik* 220/1930: 5.

³² 'Powszechnie żebractwo', *Robotnik* 451/1933: 3.

³³ 'Samorząd stolicy. Wydatki miasta na schroniska dla bezdomnych', *Robotnik* 116/1928: 4; 'Na marginesie miejskiego budżetu. Głośny dzwon', *Robotnik* 91/1929: 3.

³⁴ 'Szkoła dla cyganów', *Dziennik Ludowy* 81/1927: 7; 'Szkoła dla cyganów', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 84/1927: 4; 'Plaga cyganów w Czechosłowacji', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 142/1927: 6. See also the article on the origins of the Gypsies: 'Skąd pochodzą cyganie?', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 203/1927: 8.

³⁵ See articles on the subject in a sensationalist tone: 'Cyganie ludożercami?', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 62/1927:12; 'Cyganie-ludożercy', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 64/1927: 6; 'Straszne szczegóły ludożerstwa uprawiane przez cyganów', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 65/1927: 12; 'Mięso rudego dziecka przynosi szczęście', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 66/1927: 10; 'Ludożercy z Mołdawji', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 67/1927: 4; 'Ludożercy z nad Wełtawy', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 69/1927: 4; 'Nowe zbrodnie ludożerców z Koszyc', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 70/1927: 4; 'Dalsze szczegóły o ludożercach z Koszyc', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 71/1927: 5; 'Nie znają Boga, nie boją się szatana', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 74/1927: 4-5; 'Kanibalizm cyganów z Mołdawji udowodniony', *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* 314/1927: 5.

³⁶ 'Ludożercy w centrum Europy', *Dziennik Ludowy* 56/1927: 5.

the socialist press used harsh terms to describe the Gypsy population as, among other things, ‘an antediluvian gang’. It was also believed, making an unfair generalisation, that their “social and moral development stopped in the Stone Age” or even calling them “wild animals”.³⁷ In 1929, indignation was replaced by a cold analysis – Polish socialists only wondered whether the cases of cannibalism were plausible or not. The case became important again, as a new thread related to Poland appeared in the trial.³⁸

When, in the minds of the PPS press, it became clear that cannibalism had nevertheless occurred, despite the denials of the Czechoslovak authorities, the newspaper attempted to explain the shocking facts, seeing their cause in the extremely poor substantive conditions in which the accused lived. Such voices in the press, i.e. trying to focus on the cause of the phenomenon, were rare. They can be read as taking the defence of the Gypsies. Attention was also drawn to the inhumane treatment of the prisoners (beatings, torture) – one of the accused died because a gendarme blew out his kidneys, while for another the prison air “ate out his lungs”.³⁹

The long investigation in Košice also had its good sides, as it led to interest in the history of the Roma in Poland, albeit superficial. An article entitled *Where do Gypsies come from* cited the results of research by the Austrian scientist Felix Luschan, but people did not believe this researcher, stating that “the origin of the Gypsies has not ceased to be a mystery”.⁴⁰ It is significant that the title did not attempt to explain the history of Gypsies in Polish lands. Probably the editors did not know them at all.⁴¹

‘Polish gypsy’, ‘Polish gypsy woman’ or who? – attempts to define and describe

Conscious attempts to determine who the Gypsies living in Polish lands were did not appear in socialist circles until the 1930s, i.e. in the period when the law on vagrancy and begging was regulated and when closer cooperation between the Kwieks and the Sanacja camp began. However, the interest in them was not great and was rather occasional. It is significant that throughout the entire period of the Second Republic, no thought was given to the number of Gypsies living in Poland or temporarily residing there. It was not until 1938 that attention was drawn to the size of this minority, when the neighbouring countries, especially the Third Reich, began to pursue an anti-Gypsy policy or one that in other countries forced them to abandon their vagrancy. At that time, the socialist press reported that the number of Gypsies in

³⁷ ‘Ludożercy w centrum Europy’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 56/1927: 5.

³⁸ ‘Proces cygański w Koszycach’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 91/1929: 3; ‘Sensacyjny proces przeciwko 19 cyganom’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 115/1929: 9; ‘Jedli mięso ludzkie czy nie?’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 130/1929: 10.

³⁹ The Polish Socialists believed that despite the obvious evidence of the consumption of human bodies, the Czechoslovak state did not want to deal with these cases, which was explained as follows: “Research into this matter was not allowed by the Tribunal. Why not? It is understandable: the Czechoslovak Republic does not want the world to know that among its citizens in the second quarter of the 20th century there were ... cannibals!” ‘Proces morderców i ludożerców na Słowaczyźnie’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 137/1929: 11.

⁴⁰ Reference to study entitled *Völker, Rassen, Sprachen*, Berlin 1927.

⁴¹ ‘Skąd pochodzą cyganie?’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 203/1927: 8; ‘Skąd pochodzą cyganie’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 191/1927: 8.

the country had increased by 4,500 and was around 38,000⁴². Unfortunately, we do not know where this calculation came from, but we regard it as valuable data, since such information was not often given.

The most comprehensive article attempting to define who the Gypsies were was written by Julian Pruszyński, who, when discussing the worldwide history and customs of the Gypsies, emphatically stated that they were characterised by an 'untamed soul'. It is significant that, in his opinion, this influenced the bad relations of this group with the majority environment because the members of the caravans were themselves to blame for the fact that they were treated with dislike, mainly due to the fraud and theft they committed – “for centuries they have displayed an unparalleled inclination and aptitude for deception. They are spies in war, vodka and opium smugglers, pimps, thieves, robbers, etc. (...) If it is necessary, they do not hesitate to kill, and can even be cannibals,” wrote Pruszyński.⁴³ Although the author refers to the notion of the 'Gypsy soul' which he invented on the spot, his statement clearly echoes interpretations borrowed from Cesare Lambroso, who strongly associated Gypsies with crime.⁴⁴

Related to the issue of the 'soul' was the belief in the fieriness of the Gypsy character (“the gypsy has blood in his veins, not water”), which was attested to in press reports. The motif of Gypsy-Gypsy fights with whips, axes, rods, ploughshares, knives and other such tools and revolvers was constantly featured in socialist newspapers.⁴⁵ Battles also took place between Poles and Gypsies, but in the accounts it was always the latter who provoked them, even though Gypsies were often the victims of violence through no fault of their own.⁴⁶ This picture was complemented by the image of the Gypsies as alleged pagans, which was constantly being promoted by force. The proof of it was, among other things, their allegedly incomplete religiosity: “They are Christians, but their religious notions are pagan. They believe in the devil, which they call 'benk'; they wear amulets and lucky talismans and their religious practices are aimed at propitiating sinister forces”.⁴⁷

Attempts to define and describe Gypsies have relied heavily on the motif of wandering as their way of life. *Robotnik* shared their knowledge of the typology of Gypsy communities in Poland. Looking through from the perspective of the national interest, he reported that two main groups could be distinguished – Polish Gypsies, i.e. those with Polish citizenship, and foreign groups. These haunted, for example, Łódź (Bałuty and Chojnice), where their permanent, important places of concentration were located. They came mainly from Hungary and Romania.⁴⁸

⁴² ‘38 tysięcy cyganów w Polsce’, *Głos Poranny* 173/1938: 5; ‘Rocznica koronacji’, *Głos Poranny* 177/1938: 4; ‘Za mało im jednego króla’, *Robotnik* 187/1938: 5.

⁴³ ‘Bandy cyganów’, *Głos Poranny* 217/1930: 2. Let us mention that J. Pruszyński was a leading *Głos Poranny* journalist taking up controversial subjects, among others the subject of sexual minorities. See: ‘Mniejszości seksualne’, *Głos Poranny* 195/1931: 6.

⁴⁴ LAMBROSO, 1889.

⁴⁵ ‘Dwóch Cyganów padło od kul swego kolegi’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 149/1929: 5; ‘Cygan zabójcą cygana’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 245/1929: 12; ‘Krwawa bójka wśród Cyganów’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 143/1933: 9; ‘Śmiertelna bójka chłopów z cyganami’, *Naprzód* 125/1939: 5.

⁴⁶ ‘Krwawa bójka z cyganami’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 150/1928: 3; ‘Samosąd nad bandą cyganów’, *Naprzód* 14/1934: 5; ‘Śmiertelna bójka chłopów z cyganami’, *Łodzianin* 124/1939: 6.

⁴⁷ ‘Obyczaje i życie cyganów’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 164/1929: 15.

⁴⁸ ‘Wysiedlenie Cyganów’, *Głos Poranny* 256/1939: 6.

The newspaper also wrote: “As it often happens that gypsies endanger the safety of property, there is a need to reduce their numbers. Foreign gypsies are to be displaced on suspicion of forced theft, as nuisance aliens”.⁴⁹

According to the newspaper, those who could be described as ‘Polish Gypsies’ represented a more valuable group because they supposedly led a sedentary lifestyle, and this promised, according to the daily, a faster process of their assimilation into the rest of society. However, this conviction was wrong – the majority of Gypsies in Poland did not lead a sedentary life but wandered in caravans. They were represented, among others, by the Kwiek⁵⁰ family. It can, therefore, be seen that the socialists did not have a good understanding of the internal structure of the Gypsy population. The only certain thing was that the only way to ‘civilise’ them was through assimilation, although it was not specified what this would be or how far it would reach.

Considering the lifestyle of Gypsies, it is also worth noting that when describing one of the best known Gypsy encampments in Marymont, which was the seat of King Bazyli Kwiek and had at the same time the status of the capital’s informal Gypsy district, the newspaper pointed out that the inhabitants lived there only from winter to spring. Although it was not explicitly mentioned, an important theme of the semi nomadic lifestyle of this community thus appeared. This observation should be counted as very significant. As a rule, Gypsies were depicted as perpetual wanderers, which did not correspond to the truth – during winter they moved to towns and suburban areas in order to wait out unfavourable climatic conditions.⁵¹

The seasonally used Gypsy quarter attracted attention not only as a certain curiosity, but also because of the extremely poor social conditions in it, indicating poverty among the Gypsy minority. They were, as the socialists wrote, an affront to the civilised world. After the Gypsies had left the place in the spring, it was inhabited as wild tenants by the poor and homeless, who used this accommodation during their absence:

“If I say that in Warsaw, in the big Warsaw, the heart of Poland, there live a few hundred people in huts made of single planks of wood, the so-called “half-inch planks”, someone might think: this is socialist demagogy and malicious looking for a hole in the whole. To those who do not believe me, I suggest taking tram No. 15 to Marymont and getting off in the middle of this wooden town. (...) Whoever goes there (...) will see sheds made of planks, two metres high, without windows, with holes which are supposed to imitate doors. People live in these sheds. Hundreds of people. Whole families. (...) Now that the Gypsies, taking advantage of the summer season, have emigrated from the big cities to the countryside, their wooden sheds have been taken over by the homeless, deprived of a roof over their heads and devoid of care (...). The sheds, three or four metres high, are cluttered with junk and rubbish – the only possessions left

⁴⁹ ‘Polozenie cyganów w Polsce’, *Robotnik* 454/1931: 6.

⁵⁰ ‘Polozenie cyganów w Polsce’, *Robotnik* 454/1931: 6.

⁵¹ BARANOWSKI (1986: 230-241) wrote about the seminomadism of Gypsies in the Polish lands in the 18th century. So far there are no studies devoted to the permanent settlement and semi-nomadism of Gypsies in the interwar period. The problem of permanent settlement in historical terms was considered for the lands of the Kingdom of Poland; GONTAREK, 2016a, 211-236.

to these wretched people, victims of the crisis (...). They are filled with dirt and stench, which does not leave the rooms, even though the so-called “doors” are open almost day and night.”⁵²

Poverty contrasted with the opulence of the Gypsy kings. For example, Basil Kwiek probably had a taste for luxury, which was evident in his residence: its interiors were decorated with Persian carpets, silks, ribbons and strings of beads, porcelain tableware, silver candlesticks and a huge samovar, golden bowls, jugs, spurs, expensive Turkish pipes, stone-encrusted pistols, as well as paintings of saints and oak chests wrought with bronze. The interior smelled of expensive rose oil brought from Adrianople.⁵³

This ‘wealth’ could be noticed because it was the representatives of the Gypsy elite who led a completely sedentary lifestyle in the capital. It was a small group that even demanded that the authorities designate certain quarters of the city for Gypsy settlement. Initiatives of this kind were welcomed with curiosity and treated by the socialists with the utmost seriousness, who supported them, although the Gypsy demands were never realised.⁵⁴

Elements related to the definition of Gypsy identity are also found in other articles and notes, but these are nevertheless rather incidental. In 1934, for example, the reporters of the *Głos Poranny* temporarily moved away from sensational reporting on the lives of the Gypsy kings and became interested in the formal requirements, according to Gypsy tradition, which had to be fulfilled when choosing a Gypsy leader.⁵⁵ The journalists also found out that some Gypsy women were interested in the royal elections and even indirectly chose the candidates, although it was not explained how. However, they asked, above all, what the organisation of the election was like, as it required many groups of Gypsies, who were hundreds of kilometres apart, to come together in one place. The Gypsies admitted that this was a major obstacle to the non-tribal organisation of Gypsy life, so that an election was only decided when there were very large gatherings of Gypsies in one place. The Gypsies themselves, however, were unable to specify how large a number it should be. It is also interesting to note that the king's powers included the mapping out of travel routes in such a way as to ensure that individual groups did not cross paths too often.⁵⁶

The question of the position of Gypsy women resurfaced before the most high-profile election of the Gypsy king in the Second Republic in 1937. Two extensive articles were devoted to this topic, reporting that also within the Gypsy community the issue of women’s equality was slowly becoming a reality. The following example illustrated this process: since Gypsy women did not have the right to vote, they tried to influence the course of events behind the scenes. One of them, Ilona, ‘the king’s favourite’, allegedly the mistress of the late king Matejusz Kwiek, lobbied for the candidacy of Richard, the underage son of a Gypsy chieftain, which showed that

⁵² ‘Dzielnica chińska w sercu Polski’, *Robotnik* 174/1934: 2. See also: ‘W obozie cygańskim’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 205/1933: 3.

⁵³ ‘Cyganie obwołali swego wójta królem’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 180/1928: 7.

⁵⁴ ‘Delegacja króla w magistracie warszawskim’, *Robotnik* 18/1931: 4.

⁵⁵ ‘Cyganie polscy wybierają króla!’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 174/1930: 7.

⁵⁶ ‘Wybory króla nie odbyły się!’, *Głos Poranny* 240/1934: 6; ‘M. Kwiek królem cyganów’, *Głos Poranny* 297/1934: 5.

her vote could make a difference. In return, he allegedly promised Gypsy women the right to vote. Although these reports were treated as unverified rumours, another more tangible example of the activity of a female Gypsy leader from Gorlice (The Małopolska region) was given, where for many years it was a woman who headed a camp comprising 2,000 members. Unfortunately, her name was not given.⁵⁷ Queen Chabo (Csabo), the wife of Michał Kwiek, also had a high position. As a Hungarian, she led a Hungarian group of her husband's supporters.⁵⁸ We should also mention that many of the Kwiek's children, including daughters, attended Polish grammar schools, e.g. those of Michał and Matejasz.⁵⁹

It is significant that the editors made almost no comment on the Gypsies' sources of livelihood, which after all seems to be the key issue. Apart from theft, including horse-stealing, fraudulent fortune-telling, begging and crime, little was known about the occupational structure of this minority, and even less about the problems it faced as a result of the modernising world which was depriving them of their livelihood.⁶⁰ When such themes appeared, they were presented in a mocking or derisive tone. For example, when the Kwiek's mentioned the threat which, in their opinion, was posed by motorisation replacing horses, on whose trade they lived, this problem was maliciously commented on in the following way: "The primitive man, such as the gypsy, is content to lead one horse out of the stable at night and has not yet reached that high state of culture which would require him to lead a 40-horse car out of the garage."⁶¹

Reading the socialist newspapers, it is difficult not to get the impression that they were hardly interested in the real lives of the Gypsies, and knew little about them, reinforcing stereotyped perceptions of them in the majority society, although it must be admitted that occasional attempts were made to find out something more that went beyond the perceptions and stereotypes. Such threads include, for example, the issue of the position of women in the Gypsy world raised by the socialists, a theme not to be found elsewhere. In 1939, *Gazeta Poranna* published an extensive article about a publication on the folklore of Latvian Gypsies written by Janis Leimanis. It was regarded as an interesting work and the Gypsies as a subject worthy of research, but, according to the editors, the study by the above author "is only a slight lifting of the veil hiding the secrets of Gypsy life". We can assume that the reflection on the impenetrable and yet unexplored Gypsy world applied equally to Gypsies living in Latvia and Poland.⁶²

The Kwiek family and their activities in the Gypsy society

The activity of the Kwieks as the leaders in charge of the Gypsy community is a separate issue. So we will now focus on how the relationship between the kings and their 'serfs' was discussed. This subject matter interested the press more than

⁵⁷ 'Kobieta na tronie cyganów', *Głos Poranny* 95/1937: 3; 'Wybory króla cyganów polskich', *Głos Poranny* 173/1937: 8.

⁵⁸ 'Michał Kwiek walczy o tron', *Głos Poranny* 307/1934: 7.

⁵⁹ 'Rejestracja Cyganów', *Dziennik Ludowy* 207/1929: 7.

⁶⁰ 'Położenie cyganów w Polsce', *Robotnik* 454/1931: 6.

⁶¹ 'Elekcja', *Robotnik* 194/1937: 3.

⁶² 'Cyganie', *Głos Poranny* 125/1939: 28.

an attempt to penetrate the Gypsy culture. For, they perceived the rich world of the Gypsy elite, in which, however, there was a struggle for domination and leadership in the Gypsy society.

Above all, socialists were put off by the type of power the Gypsy kings maintained (monarchy⁶³) because it did not correspond with the socialist worldview – it was claimed that any Gypsy leader with strong power, be it a king, a chieftain or even a village headman, “will oppress them with taxes as other monarchs and lords used to do, living off the exploitation of the lower classes of Polish society”.⁶⁴ Negative assessments were reinforced by the alliance of Gypsy leaders with the Sanacja government, which will be discussed as a separate issue.

Despite their distance from or even dislike of Gypsy leaders, socialist newspapers, but mainly those with a sensational (i.e. tabloid) profile, were able to correctly identify the most important figures from the Gypsy world, such as the kings Michał, Bazyli or Matejasz Kwiek, or those from the background who were adherents of the royal courts (e.g. Goli, Paweł, Rudolf and Jorgi Kwiek or Albin Siwak).⁶⁵ However, due to their antipathies, PPS papers did not report on the activities of probably the most influential Matejasz Kwiek at all, boycotting it in this way.⁶⁶ In their opinion, this king represented fascist and leaderist traditions, so they only reported on his tragic death and funeral.⁶⁷ In contrast, pro-government newspapers devoted much space to this figure.

Generally, PPS newspapers did not focus on the extensive coverage of royal life, but highlighted improper court practices, such as abuses in the collection of tributes.⁶⁸ Negative reference was also made, above all, to the vehemence and violence of disputes among Gypsies, which ended in brawls, fights with the use of even bombs – however, usually “weapons were frying pans, saucepans, iron pots, later knives and daggers”.⁶⁹ Violence also affected the kings themselves – for example, it was noticed that their residences were demolished and destroyed (Basil) or they were robbed⁷⁰. These observations were correct because in fact the Kwiek’s and their supporters in

⁶³ The theme of promoting monarchism among the Roma people returned after the Second World War – see SIERRA, 2019: 272-292.

⁶⁴ ‘Nawet cyganie nie chcą dyktatury’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 112/1938: 4.

⁶⁵ ‘Krwawy bój między cyganami’, *Robotnik* 168/1930: 6; ‘Ośmiu królów cygańskich przyjeżdża do Polski’, *Głos Poranny* 52/1936: 5; ‘Król cygański zmarł’, *Głos Poranny* 85/1937: 5; ‘Nie ma króla, ani baronów’, *Głos Poranny* 54/1935: 13.

⁶⁶ Matejasz was promoted in the pro-government press. GONTAREK, 2020: 336-345.

⁶⁷ ‘Cyganie nie mają już króla’, *Głos Poranny* 42/1935: 8; ‘Król Michał II rozpisuje wybory’, *Głos Poranny* 56/1935: 5; ‘Zgon króla cyganów’, *Robotnik* 90/1937: 6; ‘Pogrzeb króla cyganów’, *Robotnik* 95/1937: 5.

⁶⁸ ‘Skąd pochodzą futra i brylanty skradzione przez współplemieńców wójtowi cygańskiemu’, *Głos Poranny* 229/1930: 7; ‘Kuzyn królewski okradziony przez córkę’, *Głos Poranny* 161/1932: 7; ‘Namiestnik króla aresztowany za brzydkie cygańskie sprawki’, *Głos Poranny* 174/1932: 8.

⁶⁹ ‘Krwawy bój między cyganami’, *Robotnik* 168/1930: 6; ‘Bitwa na Grochowiu’, *Robotnik* 184/1938: 6.

⁷⁰ ‘Rewolucja pałacowa na dworze króla Cyganów’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 195/1932: 7; ‘Król cyganów obrabowany przez swych poddanych’, *Dziennik Ludowy* 167/1933: 5; ‘Napad cyganów na “króla” Kwieka’, *Głos Poranny* 99/1935: 4; ‘Napad cyganów na “króla” Kwieka’, *Robotnik* 100/1935: 4; ‘Nowa awantura w rodzinie królewskiej’, *Lodzianin* 32/1939: 5; ‘Bójka wieśniaków z cyganami’, *Lodzianin* 111/1939: 5.

their struggle for position and influence in the Gypsy society did not disregard any means, which was already noted by Ficowski.⁷¹

Therefore, the descriptions of disputes and quarrels ending in spectacular hand-to-hand combat failed to offer an explanation of the causes of rivalry, although from time to time PPS editors were visited by Gypsy leaders who sought to articulate internal differences. For example, it could be the demand for lower taxes and lower fees charged for horses promoted by one king and fought by his opponent. This type of argument obviously appealed to journalists and they were eager to champion those groups who were disadvantaged by the royal power.⁷²

A feature that distinguished the socialist press from other press titles, such as those with a national or government/pro-government profile, was putting a strong emphasis on the opposition among Gypsies, who did not agree with royal rule. This was a real existing group, numbering, according to Gypsy estimates, around 10,000 people.⁷³ In the opinion of the socialist community, which followed the event closely, it became an opportunity to emphasise the total gap that existed between the democratic 'Gypsy people' and the dictatorial nature of the Kwiek⁷⁴ regime. No other milieu, apart from the socialists, emphasised the fact that the Gypsies enjoyed a democratic internal structure, although it is impossible to define more closely how this 'democracy', as the basis of Gypsy organisation, was understood. This is what the press wrote about Rudolf – one of the most influential leaders after the death of Matejasz Kwiek, who organised the election in 1937 and contested the new leader most strongly after the election of Janusz Kwiek as the king: "He declared to me that he would be the prime minister and the dictator of his king. It is clear that fashionable totalist views are also gnawing at the hitherto truly democratic gypsy society. This may also be the reason for the letter sent by the newly created dictator to Mr Mussolini. In a word, the totalisms of all countries should unite. It follows that, at least for once, totalizm will be a sincere gypsy".⁷⁵

It was, therefore, difficult for the socialists in general to choose any figure from the world of the Gypsy elite whose actions would not be contested, since they all wanted to uphold the rule of the strong hand. Włodzimierz Lencki, a correspondent for *Gazeta Poranna* perhaps most aptly discussed the attitude of the PPS and socialists to the 'Gypsy kingdom'. He pointed out the grotesqueness of the idea of a monarchy among Gypsies, adding that the very definition of this event as a coronation could only evoke laughter as a complete relic and anachronism, and a testimony to ancient times. He also called the electors a group of "a dozen or so raggedy men and vagabonds" and asked rhetorically who the newly elected Gypsy king (Janusz Kwiek) really was – "a ruler without land, with an unknown number of serfs"? In a way unmasking this character, he wrote about him as an ordinary, simple, 59-year-old Gypsy who came from Rembertów. He predicted that following his coronation, that the boiler-maker: "...will return to his Warsaw flat at 15 Dworska Street and will pound the hammer

⁷¹ FICOWSKI, 1985: 88-107.

⁷² 'Wysłannik króla w naszej redakcji', *Głos Poranny* 348/1931: 3; 'Szukamy króla cyganów', *Głos Poranny* 237/1934: 8.

⁷³ 'Nawet Cyganie nie chcą dyktatury', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 112/1938: 4.

⁷⁴ 'Kobieta na tronie cyganów', *Głos Poranny* 95/1937: 3; 'Wybory króla cyganów polskich', *Głos Poranny* 173/1937: 8.

⁷⁵ 'Jeszcze jeden monarcha', *Głos Poranny* 183/1937: 5.

on the hard and shiny sheet metal of the boiler house, while his entourage will disperse around the city. Beautiful dancers will foretell a bright future to the naïve, and handsome singers will plague them in another way known only to them”.⁷⁶

The Kwiek family and Polish politics – attitude towards the activities of the Gypsy elite in the political arena

Apart from the increasing role of Gypsy kings within the community itself, their position in the political arena connected with Polish politics was strengthened. When in 1928, during the ongoing parliamentary election campaign, Gypsy representatives from the Kwiek clan suddenly and unexpectedly appeared in the political arena, declaring their willingness to run for parliament and cooperate with the Sanacja, this fact caused considerable surprise for socialists and aversion to the Gypsies as allies of the government. For the PPS circles, what was most surprising was the very fact that Sanacja recognised the Gypsy leaders as reliable partners, while they were [otherwise] being rejected because of their criminal behaviour and the fact that they represented an outdated type of representation referring to monarchist traditions (Gypsy kings). An opinion on the aspirations of the Gypsy leaders in 1928 as well as the relationship of the authorities with them, was voiced in the form of an ironic commentary in *Gazeta Robotnicza*:

“The king of the gypsies [Michał Kwiek] approached the general election commissioner, Dr Car, declaring that he would submit an official list of Gypsies including the names of his own candidates for deputies because the gypsies wanted to have their own representatives in the legislature at last. Suppose a few Gypsies get into the Sejm [Polish Parliament] - what then? Will they form their own club, or will they, as conservative nationalists, join forces with the National Democrats to work together on a national and class basis under the leadership of Tadeusz Dymowski? Dozens of ideas come to mind when you consider the presence of Gypsy MPs in the Sejm. Most probably, however, the Gypsies will cooperate with Korfanty or Father Okon, if «Piast» cannot scout them for his party. (...) It may happen that, after the opening of the Sejm, a PAT communiqué will soon be published reading as follows: «At a meeting of party leaders, the chairman of the gypsy club declared that he was resisting further cooperation with Witos, who had already bamboozled his club several times»*”.⁷⁷

Moreover, the Gypsy representatives, as alleged political allies, were, according to this title, not only fundamentally dishonest, but also ignorant of the arcane of politics. They were described as ‘poor gypsies’ and it was ridiculed that, from 1928 onwards, the *Sejm* would contain both ‘masked gypsies’, i.e. political opponents of the PPS, and confused ‘open real gypsies’. All such talk was intended to ridicule the Sanacja, and the subject of the Gypsy population itself was treated instrumentally,

⁷⁶ ‘Jeszcze jeden monarcha’, *Gazeta Poranna* 183/1937: 5.

⁷⁷ *[the above statement contains word play in Polish: Gypsy = Cygan, bamboozle = ocyganić] ‘Nowe stronnictwo’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 12/1928: 3. See also: ‘Cygańska lista wyborcza’, *Naprzód* 10/1928: 5.

as yet another argument in favour of the irresponsibility of the Sanacja, which had invited various circles to join it, some of them very distant from one another.⁷⁸

Thus, from 1928 onwards, the socialist press, taking advantage of the fact that the authorities were cooperating with the Gypsy representation, were fond of referring to it as ‘Gypsy’ and the sanators as ‘gypsies’ which directly suggested that they were cheating the voters by making themselves look like their Gypsy acolytes. For example, *Gazeta Robotnicza* called the pro-Piłsudski General Federation of Labour the “General Federation of Gypsies,” devoting an extensive article to mocking this project.⁷⁹

Socialists were further amused by the vision of a new parliament with elected Gypsy MPs. Imagining this new reality, “*Dziennik Ludowy*” mocked: “At a meeting of party leaders, the chairman of the gypsy club declared that he was renouncing further cooperation with Witos, who had already bamboozled his club several times”⁸⁰.

Characteristically enough, until 1930, the question of the Gypsies’ relationship with the authorities was not taken up by the most important of the titles, *Robotnik*. This, however, changed in 1930 in connection with the election campaign. On 10 October, in an attempt to discredit BBWR, the magazine pointed out that representatives of exotic – in the pejorative sense of the word – communities, including Gypsies, identified with it: “We wrote about how all these people support B.B.[WR] and we enumerated the Tatars, mandolinists and tzadiks. After the list was published, we found out that also Old Believers support B.B. Now, we find out (...) that the Gypsy King Kwiek, who is staying in Zagłębie, together with all Gypsies votes for B.B. What a company! What a company!”⁸¹

Gazeta Robotnicza wrote more bluntly about the government’s coalition partners and allies at the time: “Sanacja is an assemblage of all social and religious derailers. From the landed gentry who wiped the doorknobs in the anterooms of all kings, tsars and kaisers, through Old Believers, Orthodox Jews, revolver tailcoats, gypsies, all the way to the Mariavites, all this pushes its way into the Sanacja trough. However, this mixture of Calvinists, Jews, Orthodox-Catholics wants to appear very Catholic to the people”⁸².

During this campaign, however, *Gazeta Robotnicza* noted that, on the occasion of Kwiek’s tour of the camps, he was registering Gypsies by order of the government and bluntly informed: “Beware of gypsies – while they vote for the Sanacja they steal like a raven”.⁸³ By developing a negative campaign against this community, the newspaper also led Silesian workers to believe, for example, that the large and ‘troublesome’ gathering of Gypsies near Siemianowice, which had been observed there, was probably connected with the fact that they wanted to take part in a rally at

⁷⁸ ‘PPS to silny mur robotniczy’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 21/1928: 3.

⁷⁹ ‘Generalna Federacja Cyganów’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 290/1928: 1. For other enunciations to the gypsy allies of the Sanacja see: ‘Na tle strefki tramwajarzy’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 3/1929: 3; ‘Najnowsze prawo sanacji moralnej’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 8/1929: 2; ‘Robotnikom pod uwagę’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 70/1929: 6-7; ‘Nałogowi Cyganie’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 149/1929: 2.

⁸⁰ ‘Nowe stronnictwo’ *Dziennik Ludowy* 90/1928: 5.

⁸¹ ‘Małe, ale dobrane towarzystwo’, *Robotnik* 309/1930: 2. See also: ‘Każdy Cygan głosuje na B.B.’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 237/1930: 2; ‘Kto cygan, głosuje na BB’, *Naprzód* 235/1930: 6; ‘Hocki-klocki’, *Naprzód* 236/1930: 1.

⁸² ‘Wojujący książd i 135 rabinów’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 266/1930: 2.

⁸³ ‘Strzeżcie się cyganów’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 239/1930: 4.

which Minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski was to speak. However, when publishing information on criminal misdemeanours, after 1930, the newspaper sometimes referred to them as the ‘allies of the Sanacja’ in order to discredit the authorities.⁸⁴

The *Robotnik* did not focus solely on derision and virulent criticism, rightly noting that the Gypsy collective was also led by leaders other than the Sanacja-backed kings, as has already been written about. This group was said to have expressed dissatisfaction with King Michał Kwiek’s declaration of loyalty to Sanacja. According to *Robotnik*, this was due to several reasons: the Gypsy community believed that he did not have the authority to speak for the Gypsy community as a whole; the king had made the wrong decision, as the list with Gypsy support should have a monarchist face; he did not take care to have a truly Gypsy candidate (‘a pedigree Gypsy’) on the government list placed in a high position guaranteeing any election success. For these reasons, the journal concluded that there was a split among Gypsies over the election, stating that Gypsy sympathies were divided 50-50 – some supported the monarchist list, although this had not been formally confirmed anywhere, while others supported the Sanacja list.⁸⁵ Moreover, the opposition’s monarchist sympathies described by *Robotnik* contradict the thesis that the Gypsy opposition, which did not agree with the rule of the Sanacja henchman, had democratic inclinations.

It may have acquired such a bent later on, in the second half of the 1930s, although we do not know of any Gypsy representative of this political direction. What is interesting is how the Gypsies themselves understood the idea of democracy. Let us look at this issue more closely, especially since the socialist press gave an impetus to consider it. In 1935, Rudolf – one of the most important Gypsy leaders from the second row – presented himself as a representative of the democratic Gypsy faction, for which the most important figure on the Polish political scene and at the same time the patron was to be President Ignacy Mościcki. Matejasz, on the other hand, the *de facto* leader of the Gypsies, supported by the ruling camp, preferred a leader-based system, relying on Polish Marshal Edward Rydz Śmigły, but both Gypsy leaders were aware that the Polish politicians collaborated with each other without expanding the country’s democracy at all. Aware of their close cooperation, the Gypsy leaders did not, therefore, antagonise them between themselves.⁸⁶ It seems then that Rudolf did not understand the idea of democracy at all, using the concept only as a kind of slogan, referring to his title of Prime Minister. It is also paradoxical that he called himself a dictator, as has already been mentioned.

The next election campaign, held in 1934, brought a negative message about the Gypsy elite owing to their promoting King Michał Kwiek as a class-alien. To this end, *Gazeta Robotnicza* compared the Gypsy and the aristocratic weddings, proving that in the period just after the economic crisis, both of these circles were abounding in wealth and splendour. The daily took a closer look at the wedding of Michał Kwiek’s son, which took place in Chajduki Wielkie. Although the Silesian governor did not attend the ceremony, even though he had been officially asked to do so, the newspaper

⁸⁴ ‘Cygany za Piłsudskim’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 233/1930: 2; ‘Chmary cyganów ściągnęły do Siemianowic na wiec Kwiatkowskiego’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 244/1930: 3; ‘Sojusznicy sanacji’, *Gazeta Robotnicza* 23/1931: 2.

⁸⁵ ‘Rozłam wśród cyganów’, *Robotnik* 318/1930: 3.

⁸⁶ ‘Nie ma króla, ani baronów’, *Głos Poranny* 54/1935: 13.

emphasised the fact that the Sanacja authorities in Silesia fraternised with the Gypsy kings, considering this fact to be a sign of discredit to the ruling camp.⁸⁷

The culminating moment in the political history of the Gypsies in the Second Polish Republic, when almost all the attention of the Polish press focused on the Kwieks, was the coronation of the new king in 1937, during which the elite intended to raise many issues of importance to them, including political ones. On the wave of the pre-electoral atmosphere, the socialist press drew attention to Kwieks' complaints about the obstacles to importing bears from Kaunas, Lithuania, where a bear taming and training centre was reportedly still operating. These animals provided a source of livelihood for the Gypsy elite, while as a result of Poland's strained relations with the Lithuanian state, it was almost impossible to transport bears into Poland. In addition, the country's poor relations with Lithuania made it impossible for the Lithuanian Gypsies to reach the ingress. *Robotnik* stated that: "Lithuania cannot recognise the moral interference of a Gypsy citizen of Poland with the Lithuanian Gypsies". Unfortunately, newspapers did not take the issue seriously, calling it "political humourism".⁸⁸ They laughed at the problems of the Gypsy elite, reducing the coronation to an attraction with a bear in the lead role, if relations with Lithuania improve by then. It was mocked that the crowning moment of the coronation was to be a bear roar transmitted live across the ocean by the Polish radio.⁸⁹

Robotnik commented the coronation through the mouth of its respected journalist Ultimus (Roman Boski) and made it clear that the election of the king was prearranged, suggesting that a similar fiction also applied to the entire political situation in the country. Boski wrote: "Poland is as famous for its elections as Switzerland is for its cheese (...). This is our *specialite de la maison*. In Poland, the climate is electoral. The atmosphere is permeated with elections. Something electoral is in the air. The main thing is that Polish elections always have a successful outcome, i.e. the outcome is always in favour of the organisers. The principle of openness, which excludes in advance any electoral bamboozling, also speaks in favour of holding elections in Poland (...)"⁹⁰

He also mercilessly mocked the Gypsy elite and its political aspirations. He mocked the fact that, although a king had been elected, he had no problems with the territory of his country because, unlike other leaders, he did not have to defend its borders or maintain an army. In his view, the Gypsy people did not know the art of war, and, he claimed, did not know what diplomacy was all about either, solving any current problems by stealing – "they just take away, which is simpler and cheaper". From the king, on the other hand, the Gypsies were to demand only that "he should be

⁸⁷ 'Wśród arystokracji polskiej', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 71/1934: 2; 'Wśród arystokracji polskiej', *Robotnik* 201/1934: 3.

⁸⁸ 'Wybór króla cyganów', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 161/1937: 2; 'Koronacja króla cyganów', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 169/1937: 2; 'Szowinizm litewski', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 170/1937: 1.

⁸⁹ 'Koronacja króla cyganów', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 169/1937: 2.

⁹⁰ 'Elekcja', *Robotnik* 194/1937: 3; 'Za mało im jednego króla', *Robotnik* 187/1938: 2. Roman Boski, a.k.a. Ultimus, XYZ or poor Yorick, alongside Jan Maurycy Borski, a.k.a. Imbuś, was the leading 'humorous columnist' of *Robotnik*, as well as its parliamentary rapporteur. There was a saying among Warsaw socialists: "Boski, Borski dwa bratanki i do pióra, i do szklanki" (a paraphrase of a popular slogan: Boski, Borski two good friends whether to write or to drink). See: MIESZKOWSKI, 1971: 90.

not too expensive (...), that the upkeep of his court should not be prohibitively expensive and that the family should not steal more than every average gypsy”.⁹¹

Criticism of the Kwieks' policy persisted until the end of the Second Republic. In 1936, *Robotnik* called one of the Kwiek's a 'faithful soldier of BBWR', alluding to his lack of understanding of the world of politics. The term was a direct reference to the 'good soldier Szwejk', the hero of Jaroslav Hašek's novel. This character, a dog dealer in civilian life, is a naive idiot loser who overzealously obeys the orders of his superior.⁹² It seems that this comparison most accurately illustrates how socialists evaluated the political choices of the Kwiek family, which led the Gypsies into the arms of the sanacja.

Conclusions

In the socialist press, as in other party periodicals, Gypsy issues were of marginal importance, which was a result of the low status of Gypsies in the hierarchy of minority problems in the Second Republic. This is evidenced by the limited interest of the PPS milieu in them in the context of the regulations of the late 1920s, which banned vagrancy and begging.

In its basic message, the content of the PPS press on the Gypsy population fitted into the general and stereotypical narrative of majority society known for hundreds of years. Coinciding with other voices was in particular the treatment of the Gypsies as a community prone to habitual transgression of the law. In the case of socialists, an additional factor pushing the Gypsy population to the complete margin of social life and sharpening criticism of them was socialist ideology and values, which were in fundamental contradiction with the distinctive features of the Gypsies and their culture – both the real ones (nomadism) and those attributed to them (criminal character, idleness, moral degeneration, uncivilized social norms, etc.). In the opinion of PPS members, the nomadic lifestyle cut the Gypsy population off from the community so important to the socialist environment, leading to its separation at all levels and at the same time generating social pathologies. One journalist stated that Gypsies possessed 'untamed souls', which was to be their *differentia specifica* and at the same time a source of serious problems in their relations with the majority society. The presence of this supposedly irremovable trait at the spiritual-biological level, therefore, made it impossible to integrate this minority into society (assimilation) and hampered any efforts at reform aimed at the Gypsy population. In many socialist statements, one can find a contemptuous and derisive attitude to Gypsies, which should be treated as a symptom of helplessness.

What made the PPS press stand out from other political options was its decidedly hostile attitude to the Gypsy elite represented by the Kwiek clan. There were at least two reasons for this attitude: The Kwiek family represented the royal tradition, and this model of leadership was propagated by Sanacja. It is therefore not surprising that the Kwiek's monarchist inclinations aroused opposition from socialists, who perceived it not only as a ridiculous anachronism, but one of the worst ways of organizing the Gypsies' internal life. However, when in 1928 it turned out that

⁹¹ 'Nawet cyganie nie chcą dyktatury', *Gazeta Robotnicza* 112/1938: 4.

⁹² 'Przypadki "winnego wojaka" BBWR', *Robotnik* 30/1936: 5.

Gypsy leaders had supported the government camp, for the opposition PPS it became a perfect opportunity for a mindless, political attack on Sanacja, which the party accused of fraternizing with 'social derailleurs', i.e. Gypsies despised by everyone. For the same political reasons, *Stronnictwo Narodowe* [the National Party] also criticized the government camp. The reluctant attitude of both socialists and nationalists meant that the Piłsudski camp became the only political force which did not reject Gypsy aspirations to build a unified leadership, which with all the shortcomings of this power brought about the inclusion of Gypsies into the social and political life cycle so desirable at the time. Unfortunately, the PPS, as a political grouping, did not offer the Gypsies an alternative vision of development.

At the same time, the socialist narrative about the Gypsies carries a very important and original message, comparing the content of the Sanacja and national newspapers – the PPS press featured information about Gypsy opposition to Kwieks. Thanks to it, the picture of Kwieks' relations with the Gypsy society of the Second Republic can be more complete and closer to the truth.

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