Papusza (Bronislawa Wajs)

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Comes from a group called Polish Romani Lowlands. For several centuries were travellers in Poland (thus: "Polish”), settled in 1950.

Bronislawa Wajs, whose Roma name is Papusza (Doll), is one of the world's first Roma authors. In contrast to Aleksander German, (1893, Russia), or Matéo Maximoff, (1917, Barcelona; later, France), who wrote, edited and managed to have their own works published, Papusza owes her "discovery" and publication of her books of verses to the famous Polish poet Julian Tuwim, but primarily to the outstanding Polish romist, Jerzy Ficowski.

Ficowski met Papusza in 1949. In her first bilingual collection of poetry, which Ficowski published under the title "Pieśni Papuszi", (Songs of Papusza, 1956), he is introduced as the person who opracował, (compiled and edited, including correcting spelling), and translated her verses from Romani. In addition, he provided an extensive preface and annotations.

Therefore, thanks to Jerzy Ficowski the Polish public could, for the first time, get to know the first Roma woman in Poland who didn’t sing her poetic improvisations into the anonymity of the ether, but wrote them down on paper.

In the book published by Ficowski there are facsimiles of the author's original manuscripts. Because Papusza had never encountered the written form of her mother tongue, and because she had never gone to school, (she did teach herself to read and write Polish), Ficowski made spelling corrections to her verses. Otherwise, in contrast to the approach of Wlislocki to Giňa Ranjičić's poetry, (died 1891), Ficowski did not encroach either linguistically or stylistically on Papusza’s work.

In his foreword to Papusza's poetry, Ficowski quotes an excerpt from the author's autobiography:

"My origin. My father came from the Warmiak clan, my mother from Galician Gypsies. On my father's side, we were a better family. I don't remember my father too well; I was five years old when he died in Siberia. Eight years later, my mother married Jan Wajs. I was my mother's only child… Until I was twelve, I couldn't read and write. I wanted to read and write so badly, but my family neglected me. My stepfather was a drunk and a gambler, and my mother had no idea what literacy was or that a child must learn. So how did I learn? I asked children who went to school to show me how to write letters. I always stole something and brought it to them so they would teach me, and so I learned a b c d, and so on."

"Not far from us lived a Jewish shopkeeper. I stole a chicken and took it to her, and she taught me how to read in return. And then I began to read various books and newspapers. I can read well, but my writing is awful because I read a lot and didn't write much. And that has lasted all my life till today. I'm very proud of my knowledge, even if I didn't get it in school. But life gave me education and knowledge. Then when I was thirteen years old, I was skinny and as nimble as a wood squirrel, only I was black. I read and Gypsies laughed at me for that and they spat at me. They gossiped about me and, in defiance, I would read more and more. How many times did I cry, but just the same I kept on doing what I wanted. I enrolled in the library and borrowed any
books I could lay my hands on because I didn't know what was good and what wasn't. I asked my family to enroll me in school, but they couldn't have been less interested."

" "Please, you a Gypsy girl and you want to be a teacher?" So I let them alone and just went on reading and reading."

"Once Gypsies were playing music on a farm by the river and my father took me with him. While they played, I read a book. Some woman came over to me and said, "A Gypsy – and she can read! Well, that's nice. " I burst out laughing but meanwhile I had tears in my eyes; she inquired what and how and I told her about myself. She kissed me and went away, and then I read some more."

Papusza married Dionýz Wajs. He came from the same clan as her stepfather. The Wajses traditionally earned money with their music; they were famous harp players. With their big, heavy harps they travelled in horse-drawn wagons and played wherever there was a demand for their music. Among their family possessions, Dionýz Wajs' family preserved a document showing that their ancestors played in the court of the noblewoman Marysienka Sobieska.

When the Second World War broke out, and Roma were being murdered in Poland both by the German Nazis and the Ukrainian fascists, they apparently chose to give up their carts and horses, but not their harps. With heavy harps on their backs, they looked for hiding places in the woods. Ficowski (1956) tells the story of how a harp saved the lives of Romani musicians from a group of Ukrainian fascists. One of the most daring Roma allegedly shouted, "We'll shoot all of you with this carbine". And apparently the bandits took fright and ran away.

Of course, it wasn't that idyllic. According to Kenrick's and Puxon's information, 35,000 Roma out of 50,000 were murdered during the war in Poland. ["The Final Solution"] The Wajs clan hid in the forest in Volyň, hungry, cold and terrified. A horrible experience inspired Papusza to write her longest poem "Ratfale jasfa – so pal sasendyr pšegijam upre Volyň 43 a 44 berša" ("Bloody tears – what we endured from German soldiers in Volyň in '43 and '44").

According to Ficovski's information, Papusza began to write down her "songs" after her relatives settled – in 1950.

As is evident from the author's autobiographical recording, her relatives did not wish her to partake in such "eccentric" activities as reading and writing. They made fun of her reading when she was a child and later they laughed at her writing. The position of the community in which Papusza lived was that she should not write. And so, despite all the encouragement of Jerzy Ficowski, there were times when the poet didn't take her pen in hand.

Even though Ficowski collected only thirty of Papusza's poems (some short, some epic and long), they are unique and enormously strong works of art in their authenticity, absolute honesty, sincerity and originality drawn from "nomadic life under the protection of nature".
References
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