

“Rom” or “Cygan”?

Over the last decade and a half, the Polish word “Cygan” (Gypsy) has come to be considered pejorative, with young leaders demanding that they be called “Rom” (Roma) instead. This is not just about swapping one word for another, but about a more profound, symbolic change, reflecting a nascent ethnic pride and ambition to be treated as a nation equal to others. Polish public officials, NGOs, and journalists now avoid the term “Cygan,” yet such political correctness nevertheless stands at odds with certain well-established customs and mental associations. The question arises, therefore, under what conditions it is justified to say “Rom” instead of “Cygan” and what connotations the two terms carry.

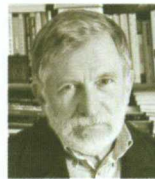
Essentially the only term we find in the archival records of this community’s long history in the Polish lands is the word “Cygan.” The first known written record, from what is now the Kazimierz district of Kraków in 1401, speaks of a certain Nicolai Czigan. The word “Rom” appears in old documents only once, in a court dispute of 1641, in which a certain Paweł Rom is the stepson of Hrycek Cyganik. The two surnames and the accompanying description “Cygan” are not coincidental.

“Rom, Roma” is the ethnonym used in the Romani language itself. The Polish word “Cygan,” on the other hand, has links to a certain negative stereotype, manifesting itself for instance in the Polish verb “cyganić” meaning “to cheat.”

We can glean something about how these terms actually function in the colloquial awareness, what connotations they conjure up, by looking at Wikipedia, Google search engine results, and the Polish auction site Allegro. Wikipedia informs us that the “Romowie” (or “Cyganie”) are “a non-territorial nation or ethnic group of Indian origin.” Its entry for “Cyganie,” in turn, is just a cross-reference pointing to “Romowie.”

But typing “Rom” into Google’s Polish portal turns up results for ROM semiconductor memory, a certain online shop, the Royal Ontario Museum, etc. Searching for “Romka” (the word for a Roma woman in Polish) primarily takes one to photographic collections. Only a search for the adjective “romski” succeeds in turning up more specifically Roma-related content, such as a Polish-Romani dictionary, the Roma Holocaust, etc. The search word “Cygan,” on the other hand, prompts Google to offer much richer information, all about Gypsy kings, the Gypsy language, the band “Cygański Tabor,” the operetta “Gypsy Love,” Gypsy music, Gypsy soup, and lots of references to people with the surname “Cygan.”

On the auction site Allegro, searching for “Rom” mostly digs up lots of wares having little to do with Roma/Gypsies, plus only a small number of music CDs and books – including an album by Jerzy Ficowski entitled “Cyganie,” first published long ago, but with the word “Romowie” now added to the title. Again, searching for “Cyganie” reaps a much richer harvest, evidence that the word is much more popular than “Romowie.” Many are selling popular-scientific books, novels, music CDs, bearing titles such as “When the Gypsies Rejoice,” “Play, Handsome Gypsy,” and “Gypsy Feast.” There are also Gypsy skillets, Gypsy earrings, Gypsy skirts and shawls, etc., and even a classical painting “The Gypsy Madonna” all on sale. The carpets, skirts, and earrings all reflect the stereotypical notion that Gypsies are noted for their colorful apparel. And a sizable share of Polish society obviously considers “Gypsy skillets” to be superior to other frying pans.



The Polish “*jestem Cyganem*” can be said to someone from outside the community, whereas the Romani “*me som Rom*” is reserved for insiders

Books published recently have the term “Rom” in their titles, whereas older ones, from before the politically correct “rage,” use the word “Cygan.” They are generally addressed to readers with a certain education, who, even if they use the word “Rom,” do associate it with the word “Cygan.” Comparing the wares on offer under the terms “Cygan” and “Rom” shows that the former term is the more “commercially viable” one: musicians who are themselves Romas (to use the politically correct term) still do not sell Roma music, but rather Gypsy music.

Within the Roma/Gypsy community itself, there are disagreements about what they should be called. The prominent artist Edward Dębicki from Gorzów Wielkopolski, author of the book “Bird of the Dead,” consistently describes himself as a “Cygan,” his community as “Cyganie.” He once said about himself: “I am a Gypsy, my grandfather was a Gypsy. I am no Roma.” His statement illustrates how the Polish phrase “*jestem Cyganem*” (I am a Gypsy) can suitably be said to someone who is not one, analogously to how the phrase “*me som Rom*” in Romani is addressed towards someone from the community itself.

Colloquial practice, habits, and the longstanding connotations felt by non-Gypsies, as well as the desire of older Gypsies to protect their own internal world from being linked, even by means of a name, with what is outside, are all factors conspiring to hamper the agenda of political correctness from coming to fruition in this particular case.

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