



Dretel, C L 2022 The Gift of Happy Memories: A World War II Christmas Puppet Play in Ravensbrück. *Open Library of Humanities*, 8(2), pp. 1–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.6379>



Open Library of Humanities

## The Gift of Happy Memories: A World War II Christmas Puppet Play in Ravensbrück

Cynthia Lisa Dretel, Hochschule für Musik FRANZ LISZT, Weimar, DE; Art and Soul of Ukraine, fiscally sponsored by the 501(c)3 nonprofit International Foundation for Education, Research, and Scholarship, [cydretelmusic@gmail.com](mailto:cydretelmusic@gmail.com)

---

*Szopki*, Polish musical nativity puppet plays, were a widespread but relatively unstudied artistic response to Nazi occupation among Polish Catholics in Nazi concentration camps. As the nativity story is only a small portion of a *szopka* production, the Polish inmates had opportunities to subvert censorship during the rest of the performance. The artist Maja Berezowska and the actress Jadwiga Kopijowska wrote and performed *Szopka Polska* in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in 1942, 1943, and 1944. This article examines the adaptation of traditional carols and puppets in the context of social ritual to facilitate a purposeful recreation of happy and comforting prewar memories in the play. Building on scholarship that focuses on less visible forms and sites of resistance, the present article's approach frames the sharing of positive memories as a form of caretaking. These activities, especially communal activities led by women, are often overlooked in scholarship in favor of more overt or dramatic actions.

The *Szopka Polska* writers drew strength from representations of childhood and motherhood. Parodied traditional songs and altered stock *szopki* scenes promoted Polish heritage and normalcy, using Poland's past triumphs as hope for future liberation. Three modern puppets, the Soldier, Polish Mother, and a Häftling (inmate), attend the nativity and directly address the inmates' World War II experiences, a phenomenon that rarely occurred in other forms of concentration camp theater. In the play, these three puppets, the 19th-century folk character Wiarus, and a skit for two children promote survival and resistance by modeling productive reactions to oppression.

---



## Introduction

In the Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück, where the Nazis almost exclusively interned women, Polish political prisoners organized Christmas activities for the women and children in their barracks (Wińska, 2006: 113–14). They marked the holiday by singing carols, exchanging small handmade gifts, and performing a *szopka* (plural, *szopki*). Denoting a musical Polish puppet play centered on the birth of Christ, the term *szopka* encompasses both the Nativity play and the folk art of colorful sets where plays are performed. *Szopki* are performed during the Christmas season and function as a social ritual with inverted world themes and social commentary. Interned actress Jadwiga Kopijowska (1910–2000) and artist Maja Berezowska (1893–1978) wrote and performed *Szopka Polska [Polish Szopka]* for the Ravensbrück inmates in December 1942, 1943, and 1944.<sup>1</sup>

Both women were a vital part of the cultural life in Ravensbrück: they led regular discussions on art and literature, and organized poetry readings and singing activities (Jaiser, 2000: 36). Kopijowska was a theater actress in the 1930s, and she participated in a puppet theater company under the *Robotnicze Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Dzieci* [Workers' Society of Friends to Children] in Warsaw. She may have adapted those prewar plays for her camp production. After the Nazi occupation in 1939, Kopijowska participated in the resistance efforts led by the *Związek Walki Zbrojnej* [Union of Armed Struggle], a Polish underground army. She was arrested in the spring of 1941, when she gave the fake name Szałanka that she used in the camp, and was interrogated in Pawiak prison before her internment to Ravensbrück (Czyńska, 2018: 117). Kopijowska became a journalist after the war. Berezowska was interned in 1942 as retaliation for her racy caricatures mocking Hitler, published in 1934 in *ICI Paris* when she lived in the French capital (Nowakowska-Sito, 2013: 27). Berezowska reported that Kopijowska saved her life several times by hiding the women who could not work in their barrack's attic during searches (Czyńska, 2018: 117). Berezowska continued her work as an illustrator after the war.

The Nazi concentration camp Ravensbrück was located near Berlin. It operated from 1939 until its liberation by Soviet forces in 1945. Intended initially to consolidate the Third Reich's female political prisoners, women from occupied territories were sent there as the war progressed (Saidel, 2009). The inmate population was primarily

---

<sup>1</sup> Berezowska's biographer Małgorzata Czyńska (2018) collected valuable resources, such as Berezowska's postwar report on the camp to the Red Cross, a few quotes from published interviews regarding her Ravensbrück experience, and interviews with the performers' surviving relatives. General information on Ravensbrück from postwar recollections, including inmates' Christmas activities, were gathered in Polish-language monographs on the camp by survivors Urszula Wińska (2006) and Wanda Kiedrzyńska (1965).

female, but some of the women were interned with their children, and there were a few hundred men in satellite work camps. According to Bernhard Strebel, the estimated number of inmates incarcerated was 123,000 people, and over 40,000 Polish women were interned as political prisoners. While Jewish inmates who were interned at Ravensbrück also strived to maintain a small part of their cultural lives, this article focuses on the cultural activities of Polish political prisoners and their Catholic Christmas observances. Though categorized as a labor camp, there was a high fatality rate; the Schutzstaffel (SS) used the inmates for medical experiments and slave labor for factory work. The inmates were forced to work in poor conditions until death, and limited resources exacerbated the death rate (Strebel, 2009: 1190–1).

Ravensbrück's Polish political prisoners participated in a mix of permitted and clandestine cultural activities, such as creating artwork, organizing poetry readings, and performing small plays. *Szopki* blend Catholicism with folklore and secular culture, featuring additional scenes unrelated to the Nativity. The plays are associated with the Polish caroling tradition and, beginning in 1937, the annual *szopka* set competition in Kraków. The fanciful multi-tiered Cracovian *szopki* sets only emerged at the end of the 19th century; historically, the sets were fashioned after barns or caves. The plays performed in these structures have a long tradition; this article focuses on *szopki* as a theater tradition with regional variants, not on the Cracovian sets.

The development of modern *szopki* was not linear and was influenced by Polish artistic movements and other forms of theater in Europe, such as French cabaret and satirical Varsovian Yiddish theater. *Szopki* stem from the mystery plays popular in Europe in the Late Middle Ages, and other Eastern European puppet play traditions, such as the Ukrainian *vertep*, a mobile puppet show. While early *szopki* dramatized the Nativity scene in churches, the Polish clergy expelled the plays in the mid-18th century due to increasingly secular and satirical additions.<sup>2</sup> Nativity plays that remained faithful to the biblical narrative are historically referred to as *jaselki* (singular *jaselka*). Freed from the restraints of liturgical accuracy, *szopka* writers placed Polish life on stage, transplanting the manger from Bethlehem to the Tatra mountains in Poland, with Polish shepherds, locals, and folklore characters paying homage to the Christ Child. By the end of the 19th century, the plays existed in three traditions: domestic productions in homes or for caroling, public spectacles, and professional works in exclusive spaces such as parties and salons. The puppets ranged from small rod puppets with inert limbs in simple sets to marionettes in elaborate tiered stages.

---

<sup>2</sup> L R Lewitter (1950) gathered documentation on *szopki*, including descriptions of portable sets for carolers in the 17th century and accounts such as Jędrzej Kitowicz's (1728–1804) description of an 'undignified' Nativity play that was barred by a Bishop from dioceses in Poznań (Lewitter, 1950: 79).

Satirical New Year's *szopki*, which abandon the manger scene, are still included in the genre as they are performed during the Christmas season and retain the ritual function in society.

To an audience not immersed in the genre's traditions, the puppets in a *szopka*, and the selection of *kolędy* [Polish carols] (singular *kolęda*) they sing, seem innocuous. However, since the 17th century, Poles have used cultural associations embedded in *kolędy* and the deceptively lowbrow puppet plays to voice dissent, satirically address community concerns, and strengthen a sense of national identity. While the plays have received scant scholarly attention, *szopki* were a widespread artistic and ritualistic response to Nazi occupation among Polish Catholics. Only a few manuscripts survived, but fragments, artistic renditions, and survivors' accounts of the performances contribute to the overall picture of wartime *szopki* practices.

Kopijowska and Berezowska's *Szopka Polska* adapts the traditional *szopka* framework, blending the Nativity scene and *kolędy* with historical material and folk culture. Kopijowska additionally reinterpreted elements of Lucjan Rydel's *Betlejem Polskie* [Polish Bethlehem] (1904), the first literary *szopka* that influenced 20th-century political *szopki*. *Szopka Polska* consists of two acts with a comedic interlude in the middle of the first act. Berezowska's watercolors show a small stage with blue curtains and a roof made of grass or hay. The play begins with the shepherds hearing the news of Christ's birth. On their way to Bethlehem, they meet a collection of Biblical and secular *szopki* characters: the Three Kings, the veteran Wiarus, and a Polish worker. In the second act, the characters arrive at the manger scene to pay homage to the Christ Child and beseech the Holy Family with prayers for salvation. Three World War II-themed puppets arrive, including a Ravensbrück Häftling [prisoner or camp inmate]. In 1944, Kopijowska added an ending scene for two actual interned children to perform.

For the performances in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, Kopijowska engaged inmates' collective memory by layering newly written material inspired by their concentration camp and World War II experiences onto 18th- and 19th-century traditional scenes and stock characters, such as the beggar Dziad and the old veteran Wiarus. Aural and visual references to shared experiences, heritage, and knowledge served as coded signifiers to create a private Polish space in the camp, providing the inmates with a rare opportunity to communicate subversive ideas. As the creators designed the play for a relatively small audience who shared specific cultural codes and experiences of war and internment, some references and allusions remain opaque to readers today. Still, the present study's analysis reveals that the comforting and painful cultural memories in *Szopka Polska* could be tools of transformation in the

liminal space of a *szopka* performance, with a lasting impact on the participants after they sang the final carol.

### Sources and Broader Scholarship

This article is the first in-depth analysis of the unpublished *Szopka Polska* (1942) manuscript, the accompanying skit (1944) and watercolor renditions of the puppets, dated 1942. It is part of a broader study that approaches *szopki* performed across the camp network as social rituals, rather than divertissement. While the location of Berezowska's original watercolors is unknown, a copy of the documents is located in the Aleksander Kulisiewicz collection in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum archives (USHMM). Kulisiewicz (1918–82) was interned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and, after the war, he assembled an invaluable collection of documentation on cultural life in the camps.

There is no record of the audience's reaction or the number of children in the audience, only postwar accounts of the play in the descriptions of Christmas activities (Wińska, 2006: 113–14). Due to our knowledge of camp conditions—death, deportation to other camps, and the growing inmate population—we can extrapolate that many attendees would have changed year-to-year. Performance details are provided by information accompanying the archival files housed at the National Library in Warsaw, Ravensbrück Memorial Archive, and the USHMM. Krystyna Szczepanek made the stick puppets according to Berezowska's designs. Kopijowska directed the production and voiced some of the puppets. The other parts were voiced by Wanda Dreszerowa, Wacka Wójcik, Jadwiga Ujazdowska, and Maria Kuleczko. The surviving manuscript for this play does not include musical scores as this practice does not necessarily require scores or instrumental accompaniment. However, there is a part for Iza Sicińska's choir, meant to be sung offstage. In *szopka* performance practice, depending on the number of characters in a scene, only one to four performers move and voice the puppets.

Mnemonic techniques were used across camp demographics to commit new poems and lyrics to memory by singing new words to a popular tune (Gilbert, 2005: 124). However, when writing the *Szopka Polska*, Kopijowska considered each tune's original lyrics and historical associations, rather than a song's popularity. The present analysis, complemented by the surviving visuals of the puppets, considers the songs' existing cultural associations and social functions in addition to how Kopijowska arranged, shortened, and altered some lyrics. The manuscript indicates some song titles, but a few songs could only be identified through painstaking extrapolation from the altered lyrics or lyric fragments.

The lack of scholarship on this play is further complicated by the uneven representation of World War II music and theater in musicology, partially due to difficulties in accessing former camps and archives located in territories under the postwar control of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, camp cultural activities are difficult to compare due to wide variations in content and intended functions. Most of the musical and theatrical works revived for audiences today were open to a broad cross-section of the camp population and rarely reflected the experiences of any specific group, making these productions more accessible for contemporary audiences lacking in-depth knowledge of the widely varied and complex prisoner cultures present in World War II concentration camps. These well-known works include the revivals of Hans Krása's children's opera *Brundibár* and Viktor Ullmann's satirical opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* [Emperor of Atlantis] (rehearsed but not performed in Terezín due to camp censorship), as well as other works from Terezín, a 'model camp' where Jewish artists were interned. While coded musical borrowing bypassed censorship—such as Gideon Klein's reference to dying children in Terezín through a musical quotation from Gustav Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* [Songs on the Death of Children] in his 1944 *String Trio* (Beckerman and Tadmor, 2016)—these works are still accessible to audiences beyond the camp itself as they borrow material from the musical canon rather than regional traditions.

Shirli Gilbert (2004) challenges the pervasive postwar narrative that cultural activities initiated by camp inmates were keys to survival, demonstrating that inmates had both positive and negative experiences with music and theater. She examines thematic variations in songs sung or written by various prisoner nationalities and the role of identity formation that singing held before the war, revealing a complex relationship between music and memory. German political prisoners in the Sachsenhausen camp promoted solidarity by singing prewar songs affiliated with their political movements or workers' societies (Gilbert, 2004: 291–3). By contrast, Polish political prisoners wrote and sang melancholy songs that detailed their traumatic experiences. While inmates from other nationalities were disturbed by their macabre and bleak lyrics, Gilbert recognizes that the Polish songs met that community's needs as a medium for testimony and provided the community with a way to process trauma (2004: 297).

While *Szopka Polska* is not grim, the song selection indicates a similar vein of cultural continuity. The performance tailored the play to the small community in the barracks, as the Polish practice of writing songs about their oppression originated during the Partitions of Poland. The suffering under Russian Tsarist rule – which led to the 1830–31 November Uprising, the first of several unsuccessful uprisings – was

immortalized in the nineteenth-century carols that Kopijowska selected. To the inmates, the Nazi occupation echoed Polish Catholics' maltreatment under Austrian, Prussian, and Russian rule a century earlier. The Nazi invasion at the start of World War II, which ended the Second Polish Republic (1918–39), recalled earlier colonial efforts.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1800s, some *szopki* were infused with coded nationalistic aspirations for Polish independence in defiance of the partitions, mirroring the calls for independence that flourished in Polish music, theater, and literature of the period. During the last decades of the Partition era, the performances were subjected to varying degrees of censorship. Polish theater scholar Harold B. Segel notes that the audiences were expected to make 'mental transitions' to decode veiled political messages; Varsovian Poles, in Russian-controlled territory, could indirectly mock their occupiers by using puppets that resembled Austrians or older enemies, such as the Ottoman invaders (Segel, 2002: 76–7). The audience in Ravensbrück could engage in passive resistance by making the same 'mental transitions' through allusions to historical events.

The censorship protocols across the Ravensbrück camp network dictated that scripts required advanced approval by the guards or the Kapos (inmate functionaries who supervised other prisoners in exchange for certain privileges). Nazi policy toward ethnic Poles primarily targeted well-educated and influential members of society for deportation and murder to gain swift control of Polish territory (Stibbe, 2012: 166). The writers of *Szopka Polska* were careful not to include material that mentioned guards, Reich officials, or overt references to the camp or war in the play. Yet, Kopijowska could access a vast base of cultural material to evade censorship, as the majority of the Polish inmates in Ravensbrück could easily recognize allusions to Polish history, literature, and the 19th-century loss of nationhood. The Polish inmates were, moreover, accustomed to the *szopka*'s role as a satirical and moralizing force in prewar society and could expect a transformative experience through the carnivalesque release of societal tensions.

By building on the emphasis that recent scholarship places on the importance of continuity in prewar practices and the transformation of cultural symbols in the camps, this article challenges the misconception that the extraordinary acts of violence compelled extraordinary responses from the victims. Moreover, it resists the tendency to superficially categorize music and theater productions created by victims of the Nazi regime as forms of resistance or solace without a nuanced exploration of the performers' and artists' motivations.

---

<sup>3</sup> On the Partitions of Poland as a colonial project, see Healy (2014) and Kettler (2019).

## Plot Overview and Analysis

### List of Characters

Pasterze-	Shepherds-
Maciek	Maciek
Szymon	Szymon
Bartosz	Bartosz
Gwiazda Betlejemska	Star of Bethlehem
Dziad	A Grandpa/old beggar
Trzy Królowie	The Three Kings
Szczepan	Szczepan
Wiarus	Wiarus
Robotnik	A Worker
Matka Boska	Holy Mother
Matka Polska	A Polish mother
Häftling	An Inmate
Żołnierz polski	A Polish Soldier
Chór	Chorus

The plot of *Szopka Polska* is relatively simple, but this production showcases the genre's mix of folk and elite entertainment. Kopijowska consciously used 16th- through 18th-century carols and traditional characters to frame the more modern music and characters in the middle of each act. These comparatively newer carols from the mid-19th century consider the Nativity story in light of the Partition era struggles and include calls for restored nationhood.

*Kolędy* are an essential feature of Polish Christmas celebrations and *szopki*. Polish linguist and ethnologist Jerzy Bartmiński describes carols as 'a legacy of the culture of past ages and a powerful link between the present and the past' (1990: 84). His article examines the Polish ritual of caroling, noting the differences between carols intended for church and domestic carols that often include secular material. In a *szopka*, the puppets use both types of carols to speak, dramatizing the action described in the verses. *Szopka Polska* includes select *kolędy* verses, repeated sections of the chorus, or fragments of carol verses spliced with new material. As carols have a narrative function in a *szopka*, verses are often cut to avoid repetition. Kopijowska also excised verses with explicit references to Polish nationalism and calls for independence to avoid trouble from the camp censors.



In Act I of *Szopka Polska*, the chorus and the Star of Bethlehem announce the birth of Christ: first to the Polish shepherds, then to the Three Kings, and finally to a collection of non-Biblical characters. Berezowska's painting depicts a stationary star placed on top of the set. The choir begins with the first verse of the carol '*Gdy się Chrystus rodzi*' ['When Christ is born'], setting the scene with lyrics about a brightness appearing during the night as the angels announce the birth of Christ. The curtain rises on the chorus, '*Gloria, Gloria in Excelsis Deo*'. The angels' lines in Latin are sung off stage, casting an otherworldly quality to their role. The first part of this act features the oldest carols in the repertoire, aurally anchoring this *szopka* in the centuries-old practice.

The choir sings fragments of the 16th-century carol '*Anioł pasterzom mówił*' ['The Angel told shepherds']. This carol describes how the Lord of all creation was born in 'poor Bethlehem', highlighting the Christmas miracle. This inverted world trope is also associated with the young shepherd Maciek, who has a prominent role in several carols and older *szopki* as he hears the news before the older shepherds. The Shepherds plan to bring the Christ Child fresh butter, bread, and cheese for his health. In Cracovian *szopki*, the Polish Shepherds offer regional dairy products, emphasizing pride in the Polish highlander fare. In *Szopka Polska*, these lines do not strictly follow a particular older script, but the Shepherds' dialogue rhymes to fit into the traditional material.

Before the Shepherds meet others en route to the manger scene at the end of the first act, there is a short comedic skit between the puppets Dziad and Szczepan, likely performed in front of the curtain to facilitate a scene change. After the interlude, the Three Kings join the Shepherds and discuss their excitement through selected verses of the carol '*Mędrcy świata, monarchowie*' ['Wise men of the world, monarchs']. The Three Kings proclaim that their fear of Herod's evil plots will not deter them from visiting the manger, the only mention of Herod in this play. The Three Kings only have a small role, but they acknowledge their fears through this line, possibly demonstrating a method for coping with the frightening camp environment. Their carol facilitates the transition from the traditional *szopka* section to the more subversive characters.

The secular puppets Wiarus and the *Robotnik* [Worker] join the procession. Wiarus, a stock character of a wise old veteran, sings the patriotic military carol '*Idzie stary wiarus*' ['There goes the old soldier']. The *Robotnik* puppet sings an altered version of '*Dalej chłopcy do tej szopy*' ['Come, boys, to the manger'] (music by Jan Maklakiewicz (1899–1954), and words by Stanisław Młodożeniec (1895–1959), the founder of Polish Futurism). This political workers' carol elevated the working class and their social

struggles. In older *szopki*, these puppets were called *Prowniki* (workers) as they represented tradesmen. Kopijowska may have used the term *Robotnik*, usually reserved for factory workers and manual laborers, due to the forced inmate labor.

The Star returns to lead the procession with traditional carols, beginning with the 17th-century carol ‘*W żłobie leży*’ [‘He lies in the manger’]. This carol represents Polish heritage as it is set to the tune of a courtly *polonaise* and the lyrics describe caroling, such as ‘*Kolędować małemu Jezusowie, Chrystusowi*’ [‘Caroling for the little Jesus, Christ’] (Bartmiński, 1990: 85). The choir blends the boundaries between performance and ritual by encouraging audience participation through singing complete and unaltered verses of the carols ‘*Dzisiaj w Betlejem*’ [‘Today in Bethlehem’] and ‘*Jezus malusieńki*’ [‘Jesus, tiny one’], as opposed to the fragments of older carols shared between multiple characters.

In Act Two, the shepherds are the first to arrive at the manger scene and trade the first two verses and chorus of the lively Baroque carol ‘*Przybieżeli do Betlejem pasterze*’ [‘The shepherds came to Bethlehem’] with the choir. The carol describes the arrival of the shepherds, who play on their lyres and bow to pay their respects. This act has several particularly poignant moments in which various puppets sing carol verses that address the Holy Family, building on the 19th-century practice of subtly asking for aid and independence. Wiarus arrives and sings ‘*Wśród nocnej ciszy*’ [‘The silence of the night’]. The Three Kings sing the lines from ‘*Ach ubogi żłobie*’ [‘Ah, Poor Manger’] about the wickedness of men—a subtle reference to the Nazis—before the World War II puppets sing about their trials.

Three modern puppets join the manger scene: *Matka Polska* [Polish Mother], *Häftling* [Inmate], and *Żołnierz polski* [Polish Soldier]. The *szopka* ends with the first, third, and fifth verses from the carol ‘*Bóg się rodzi*’ [‘God is born’]. This older carol, written by Franciszek Karpiński in 1792, is associated with the Golden Age of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as the lyrics are set to the melody of the coronation *polonaise*. For centuries, this carol served as a Polish national anthem, even when Poland did not exist on the map of Europe. The verses highlight the upside-down world concept of the manger scene, emphasizing a changing world order. The lyrics were unchanged so everyone could join in the carol’s final call for salvation.

### **Ritual Framework in the *Szopka Polska***

Kopijowska relies on ritualistic storytelling techniques to guide her audience, including introductions, symbolic characters, and frequent invocations in archaic, rhyming, or biblically stylized language. These features create an immersive experience through soundscapes, an aural landscape composed of auditory references to homeland and



**Figure 1: Josef.** Copy of watercolor by Maja Berezowska. *Szopka Polska* 1942–44, Reel 14, Series 2, *Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection*, 1992.A.0034.1, USHMM, Washington, DC. Reproduced by permission.

heritage. References include familiar texts, tunes with specific cultural associations, and manners of speech that infused the camp soundscape with layered historical invocations. The carol or melody used for a puppet's voice was as crucial to the portrayal of the character as their physical features. The puppets with biblical origins wore old-fashioned robes (see **Figure 1**) and spoke through fragments of centuries-old carols, featuring archaic-sounding Polish and Latin lyrics, visually and aurally

contrasting with the music and costumes of the young Szczepan and the three modern puppets.

Kopijowska states in her introduction, which does not have an indicated tune or lyric quotations, that their *szopka* was a gift to cheer and encourage the inmates, especially the children, with a fond childhood staple, and to “move them emotionally” in a camp environment that had caused many inmates to become numb.

*Zrobiliśmy dla was szopkę polską,  
 żeby was trochę rozweselić,  
 trochę może rozrzewnić,  
 ale przede wszystkim,  
 żebyście przez tę starą szopkę polską  
 zapomnieć o rzeczywistości,  
 O tem co was otacza,  
 A przeniosły się w świat inny,  
 lepszy, drogi sercu każdej z nas,  
 w świat naszego dzieciństwa,  
 w którym któż z nas szopki nie widział.*

*Szopka nasza jest b. [bardzo] skromna,  
 ale skromne też były i trudne warunki w których powstawała.  
 Wybaczcie jeśli [jeżeli] będzie miała braki i usterki  
 Wiedźcie jedno, zrobiona była dla  
 Was całym sercem i tak też ją przyjmijcie.*

We made a Polish crib for you,  
 in order to cheer you up a little bit  
 maybe move you emotionally a little,  
 but above all,  
 that through this old Polish nativity  
 [you] forget about reality  
 about this which surrounds you  
 and move into another world,  
 a better [world], dear to the heart of each of us,  
 into the world of our childhood  
 in which none of us have not seen a *szopka*.

Our nativity scene is very humble,  
 but the difficult conditions it was created in were also modest.  
 Be forgiving if it has faults and defects

know one thing, it was made for  
you with our whole heart, and you should accept it [with your whole heart].

The line ‘*żebyście przez tę starą szopkę polską*’ [‘through this old Polish nativity’] acknowledges the traditional play elements that the performers incorporated and adapted. For one night, these elements directly link the audience to the past, celebrating a communal identity with Polish folk traditions at its center. The lines describing a better world, one with clear appeal to concentration camp inmates, represent Kopijowska’s desire to reshape reality. Approaching this play as a social ritual highlights the *szopka*’s function as a tool for caretaking and resistance in the camp. A social ritual can create a liminal space where a ritualistic transformation can occur (Muir, 2009: 4–5). Kopijowska’s introduction invites the audience into the liminal space of the performance where the inmates could collectively express hope for a new reality. The *szopka* elevates the inmates at the manger scene and emphasizes pride in Polish culture, which the Nazis suppressed.

In 1830s Polish Romantic literature, writers referred to their country as *Polska Chrystusem narodów* [Christ of Nations] (Chrostowski, 1991: 1–14). This messianic role implied that Poland would not only rise again but save other nations through its martyrdom. This interpretation of theology is reflected in carols from this era, as their lyrics dramatize the poor manger conditions and depict an impoverished Holy Family. The *kolędy* ‘*Jezus malusieńki*’, the final song in the first act, embellishes the plight of the Holy family with depictions of suffering in the cold, alluding to the suffering of the stateless Poles in the 19th century. The Polish inmates related to these dramatic carols and altered the lyrics across the camp network. Poet and teacher Halina Golczowa wrote a new version of ‘*Jezus malusieńki*’, titled ‘*Kolęda łagrowa*’ [‘Labor Camp Carol’], in Ravensbrück in 1942 (Kiedrzyńska, 1961: 68, 77). Golczowa’s lyrics express her anger, and she relates to Mary’s inability to properly clothe her baby, as the inmates similarly could not care for their children due to lack of proper clothing and resources. Golczowa mentions the murder of Polish men, the internment of Polish women in Ravensbrück, family separation, and the frustration and helplessness experienced by the women over not being able to care for their families.

It is difficult to compare single songs, such as Golczowa’s reinterpretation of ‘*Jezus malusieńki*’, to the collection of songs in the *szopka*, as the SS did not subject songs for personal use to the same level of censorship as works performed for large gatherings. Kopijowska’s works for other inmates, such as her chorus for a Ravensbrück hymn, are more uplifting than her personal poetry, in which, like Golczowa, she explored painful war experiences. Indeed, the *szopka* was intended to be a positive experience that addressed the women’s concerns without the level of cynicism and pain expressed

in Golczowa's version of the carol, but other women in the barrack might have shared Golczowa's cynical interpretation.

### ***Borrowing from Lucjan Rydel's Betlejem Polskie***

Kopijowska anchored her play in tradition by incorporating parts of Lucjan Rydel's first satirical literary *szopka*, *Betlejem Polskie* (1904).<sup>4</sup> She follows the structure in Rydel's first act and uses some aspects of the open-ended format from the third act for *Szopka Polska's* second act. This play used human actors instead of puppets, but Rydel incorporated traditional motifs from Cracovian peasant *szopki* (Segel, 1960: 90–1). Rydel believed the *szopka* framework created the potential for a perfect artistic medium (Moroz, 2019: 59). By combining peasant and bourgeois theater forms with the *Młoda Polska* [Young Poland] art movement's experimental theater elements and neo-romantic views on history, Rydel created a uniquely popular production that resonated with all classes. However, some scholars, such as Katarzyna Siwiec (2018), erroneously claim that Rydel's *szopka* started the genre's function as a social ritual; he merely recognized its potential and modified the social ritual for an exclusive venue.

There are three acts in the *Betlejem Polskie*: I. *Pasterze*, II. *Heród*, and III. *Żłóbek* [Shepherds, Herod, Manger]. A few scenes at the end of the second act and the entire third act were changeable to facilitate new characters and stories for future performances, reflecting a Cracovian folk practice intended to keep the plays topical. The first act depicts the shepherds hearing the news of Christ's birth from the Star and Angels. The second act dramatizes the story of Herod and, after Herod's demise, features short comical scenes with folk characters. The third act emphasizes the importance of unity between the classes. Rydel featured several groups representing different classes, ethnicities, artisans from various guilds, and military war heroes singing carols at the manger and praying for independence.

While Kopijowska's *szopka* is significantly shorter than Rydel's *Betlejem Polskie*, she used several of the same carols, especially for the choir, Star, and Shepherds. The carols that appear in both plays were used in traditional *szopki*, stemming from the origins of *szopki* as small portable sets that accompanied carolers. One significant difference between *Szopka Polska* and older productions, such as *Betlejem Polskie*, is the lack of a villain puppet, such as Herod. For example, the second act of Rydel's *szopka* deviates slightly from the Biblical narrative to compare Herod to the foreign monarchs who ruled Polish lands (McCormick and Pratasik, 2004: 116). In addition to ordering the murder of male children, as in the Biblical narrative, Rydel's version of Herod oppresses the Polish peasants and gives their land to Prussian colonizers.

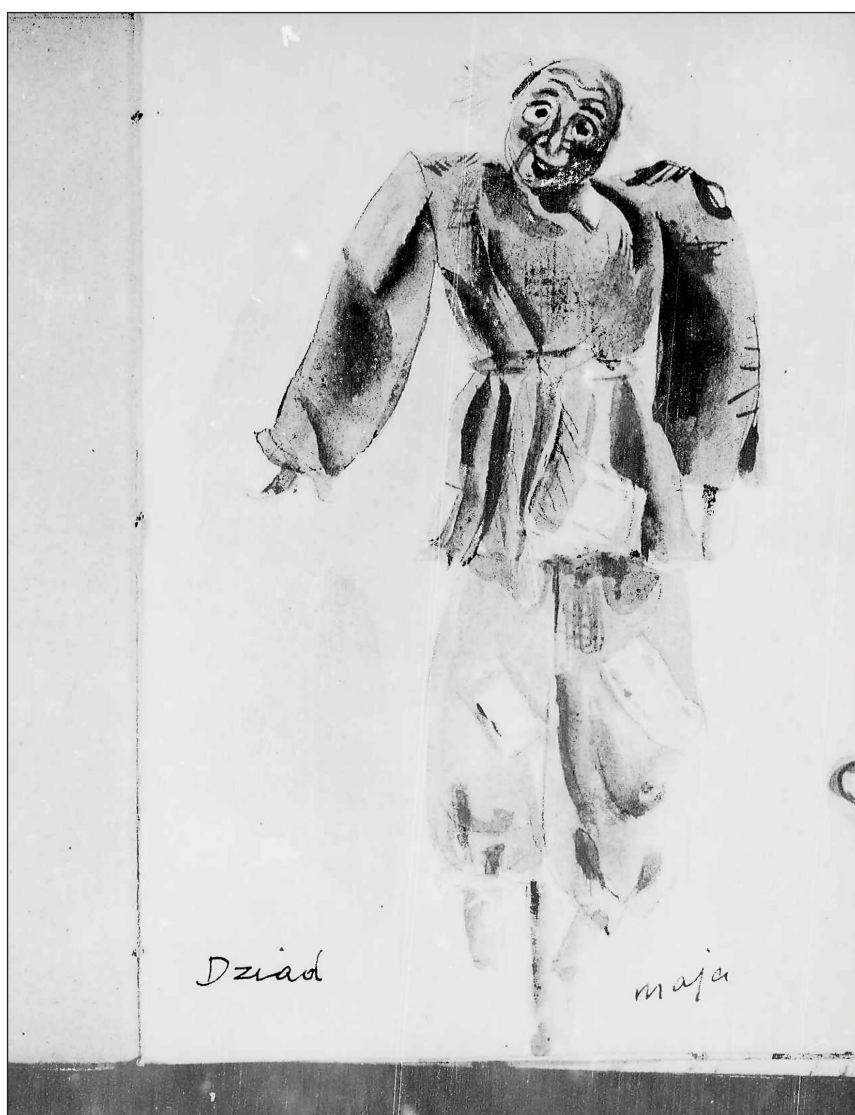
---

<sup>4</sup> For the version of this play used for analysis, see Rydel (1906).

*Szopka Polska* does not include Herod's scenes. The writers allude to past struggles under foreign rule to stand in for the Third Reich, but this vague enemy is not defeated. Instead of providing hope through defeating Hitler in allegory, Kopijowska, like Rydel, promotes unity and prays for future independence.

### ***Dziad and Szczepan***

A customary comical folk interlude in the middle of Act 1 of *Szopka Polska* facilitates the scene change from the shepherds' mountains to the procession. The Dziad puppet (Figure 2) sings a shortened version of his traditional begging song and then interacts



**Figure 2: Dziad.** Copy of watercolor by Maja Berezowska. *Szopka Polska* 1942–44, Reel 14, Series 2, Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection, 1992.A.0034.1, USHMM, Washington, DC. Reproduced by permission.

with a comical puppet called Szczepan, a younger character from a cheerful, early 1900s Polish carol. Dziad is a stock character of an old beggar, more commonly known as Dziadek, a diminutive form of the word, which has origins in 16th- and 17th-century *ribatts* [burgher comedic plays] (Segel, 1958: 73). In his 1874 ethnographic survey, Polish ethnographer and composer Oskar Kolberg identified this character, whom he specified as ‘*dziadek proszalny*’ [‘begging old man’], in three folk *szopki* (1874: 207, 226). The word *dziad* can refer positively to a grandfather, grandfatherly figure, or ancestor. The term can also have pejorative associations, describing a lout or a beggar, providing a source of comedic context in the lyrics.

Iłona Gumowska’s survey on the collection of *szopki* from several Polish regions published in *Wisła* (a Polish ethnographic journal that ran from 1887–1905) observes that, despite other differences in themes and scale, Dziadek typically ended the performances. Ending a *szopka* with this character harkens back to the caroling ritual, when the carolers expected small gifts and often offered a blessing to the gift giver for a good year. This puppet, or the narrator, sang a comedically lamenting beggar’s song to encourage giving money or food to the puppeteers or, in some instances, alms to charity. In several regions of Poland, this stock character would go to the audience with a bag and a bell at the end of a *szopka* performance, often with humorous lines about needing to bring something home for his wife. In the concluding material in the second act of Rydel’s play featuring Herod’s storyline, Pan Twardowski, a Polish Faustian character, interacts with several puppets of varying trades and nationalities (portraying comedic stereotypes) before giving Dziadek money, after which Dziadek sings his traditional song.<sup>5</sup> As Rydel designed his production to be a stylized version of the folk genre, it would have been inappropriate to solicit donations at the theaters and private salons. The camp environment also prompted alterations to the Ravensbrück version of Dziad’s character. Kopijowska likely moved his scene to the middle of the first act of *Szopka Polska* because her audience would have had little to offer the performers.

The Dziadek scene is a staple of traditional *szopki*, and thus part of a normal Polish childhood experience that the women wanted to recreate. Berezowska depicted the balding puppet in patched clothes with a silly smile and clownish features such as painted cheeks. Kopijowska likely used the traditional Cracovian tune for the beggar’s song featured in Rydel’s *szopka* for her shortened version. Dziad enters with the memorable refrain, ‘*O ja biedny dziad. Co ja będę jadł*’ [‘Oh, I am a poor grandfather. What will I eat?’], rather than the first verse. The simple folk melody in G minor is plaintive

---

<sup>5</sup> Many versions of Pan Twardowski exist in Polish myth and literature, and ‘Pan’ is equivalent to the English ‘Sir’.



and comically dramatizes his begging. Dziad's lines feature outdated Polish terms and phrases, highlighting his antiquated folkish quality. Dziad then interacts with Szczepan, who sings a song that was popular with children in the early 20th century, 'A na gwiazdkę przy święcie, dostał Szczepan w prezencie' ['And for Christmas, Szczepan received a gift']. Most of the lyrics match a recorded version preserved on Radio Polski's website. While the site provides no precise date or additional information on the album or singer, the recording can be dated to the interwar period by the other songs on the same record, many of which were penned by composers active between the late 1910s and the 1930s (Radio Polski, n.d.). All of the songs are for children and would have been used in primary school education. This humorous secular carol describes how the young Szczepan receives a clay whistle in the shape of a cockerel for Christmas and plays the shrieking whistle all over the village before meeting his friends. His bouncy melody and lyrics are silly and light-hearted, a change from the more reverent carols in *Szopka Polska*.

As Kopijowska did not include heavier thematic material or the scenes that feature Herod's decrees and demise, this playful interlude visually and aurally contrasted with the environment itself, serving as a moment of levity in the camp. Szczepan and Dziad have elements of historical fool characters, and they try to make the audience laugh, invoking comedy associated with street puppet shows. The second verse describes how whoever hears Szczepan whistle his toy will smile from ear to ear, and the refrain features musical laughter, 'Hi-hi-hi-hi-ha-ha-ha'. The scene, which relies on comical folk motifs, serves to cheer the audience before the politically themed carols in the rest of the first act and the emotional second act where the characters beseech Jesus for deliverance at the manger.

The Dziad and Szczepan scene was tailored to the needs of the children in the camp. The lack of Herod's plotline or a traditional folklore character that features a darker storyline, such as Pan Twardowski, were conscious changes. Not all types of humor found in prewar productions were well received in the camp environment. For example, a marionette production of *Punch* (from the Punch and Judy plays), which was a popular type of puppet theater before the war, was performed in the German-speaking barracks and upset the children (Helm, 2016: 521). The performance recreated a popular experience of childhood and evoked the adults' childhood memories, but the violence took on a new context in the barracks because it was not humorous when the guards' unpredictable violence permeated daily life.

### **Wiarus**

Wiarus, the archetypal character of an older military veteran, is a figure from the Partition era which embodies the soldiers who faithfully fought for Poland's freedom.

Unfortunately, the watercolor of this puppet did not survive or was not created. His presence in the play invokes several layers of Polish history and ideology, and his character functions as a quasi-prophetic sage, singing an altered version of the 19th-century political carol by poet Mieczysław Romanowski (1833–63), ‘*Idzie stary Wiarus*’ [‘Old Wiarus goes’] in the first act. This military carol uses contrafacta (new lyrics for an existing tune) for the traditional carol tune ‘*Hej kolęda, kolęda*’ [‘Hey, Christmas Carol’]. Wiarus begins with the politically tinged third verse, ‘*Oj przybędzie do nas, niebieska dziecina, / Zyska wolność Polska, Litwa, Ukraina*’ [‘Oh come to us, heavenly child, / Win freedom for Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine’]. By listing the territories that comprised the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Wiarus invokes the Golden Age of Poland (late 15th century to 1572).

Kopijowska altered this carol due to censorship, leaving out lines that overtly mention liberation, such as the second verse ‘*Małe dziecko, Jezus, w stajence się rodzi. Wszystkich wyswobodził—Polskę oswobodził*’ [‘The little child, Jesus, is born in a manger. He liberated them all—he liberated Poland’], but the popularity of this carol would have ensured that those verses were in the minds of the audience when they heard the tune. Kopijowska rewrote the carol’s sixth verse for the puppet’s third verse. Rather than appealing to God, her version appeals to Mary. The language that describes ropes falling off ‘Mary’s [chosen] people’ would have been a safer way to say Poles need aid, rather than the lyrics that directly reference Polish nationhood and ‘breaking chains’.

In the second act, Wiarus pushes the action forward by singing the third verse of ‘*Wśród nocnej ciszy*’ that describes humans singing with angels, encouraging the puppets and the audience to give the infant Jesus the gift of Polish music. This verse is from the version of this carol sung in midnight Mass liturgy after the Gloria. In the ritual context, as the second verse describes the arrival of the long-awaited savior, the tension resolves when everyone arrives at the manger scene and sings together, creating an emotional high point in the spectacle.

Wiarus addresses the audience to encourage the inmates to sing along and participate in the social ritual. Bartmiński (1990: 88) observes that several Polish carols reference the gift of song as a form of ‘adoration akin to offering the heart’. The shepherds’ earthly gift of cheese is superseded by their gift of Polish highlander carols and folk dances when they arrive at the manger. Wiarus used the carol to encourage the inmates who would otherwise have nothing to give the Christ Child to offer their voices with the gift of Polish music. Bartmiński explains: ‘Singing carols means participation in the great Christmas mystery in which the limits of the Bethlehem creche are transcended, and the whole world is embraced by the event’ (1990: 86). In the camp environment, Wiarus’s scenes present rare moments in which the world

of the *szopka* embraces the camp reality and alters it for the better through Wiarus's vision of a unified, independent Poland.

### **Female Characters**

Kopijowska's most significant adaptation to the *szopka* medium is her inclusion of multiple speaking roles for female characters, drawing strength from domestic representations of motherhood and childhood. The gender of the puppeteers (and the majority of their audience) could be a consideration as to why more female characters were included, such as the Polish Mother and female Häftling. It is possible that other prewar *szopki* for children, or earlier productions in which Kopijowska participated, included more parts for women, reflecting Marian devotion among Polish women. Unfortunately, unlike the prewar satirical *szopki* written by men, works by women and *szopki* performed for children were rarely written down or published. *Szopka Polska* offers a unique view into *szopki* that women wrote for domestic settings and for children.

The voiced part for the puppet Matka Boska [Mary] is notable. At the beginning of the second act, set in the manger scene, Mary sings the lullaby-like carol 'Gdy śliczna Panna Syna kołysała' ['When the beautiful Virgin rocked her Son']. This 18th-century carol features a lilting and simple melody in binary form, with cheerful and comforting lyrics. This portrayal of the Holy Mother casts her as an accessible caretaking figure for the children, especially for the orphans, rather than the powerful militant figure featured in other carols.

Few *szopki* include a voiced part for Mary, and *Szopka Polska* is the only surviving camp *szopka* that gives Matka Boska a vocal role. This portrayal differs from Mary's role in Rydel's play as Poland's mother and guardian, where Matka Boska delivers the final prayer on behalf of Poland before the last carol. Since the Renaissance, Matka Boska held a powerful and occasionally militant role as the only woman in Polish history to be symbolically appointed as a *Hetmanka* [highest military commander]. She was crowned Queen of Poland in 1656 after Poland's successful defense of Swedish invaders was said to have resulted from her divine intervention near Częstochowa (Schultes, 2014: 264). Several of the traditional carols included in *Szopka Polska*, as well as Wiarus's and Matka Polska's [a Polish Mother, rather than the figure of the ideal Polish mother *Matka Polka*, which can also be translated as Mother of Poland] new lyrics, contain invocations to Mary for national salvation, which stem from her role as a militaristic protector and pseudo-partition-era monarch, in addition to a source of domestic strength for Polish mothers.



**Figure 3: Matka Polska.** Copy of watercolor by Maja Berezowska. *Szopka Polska* 1942–44, Reel 14, Series 2, Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection, 1992.A.0034.1, USHMM, Washington, DC. Reproduced by permission.

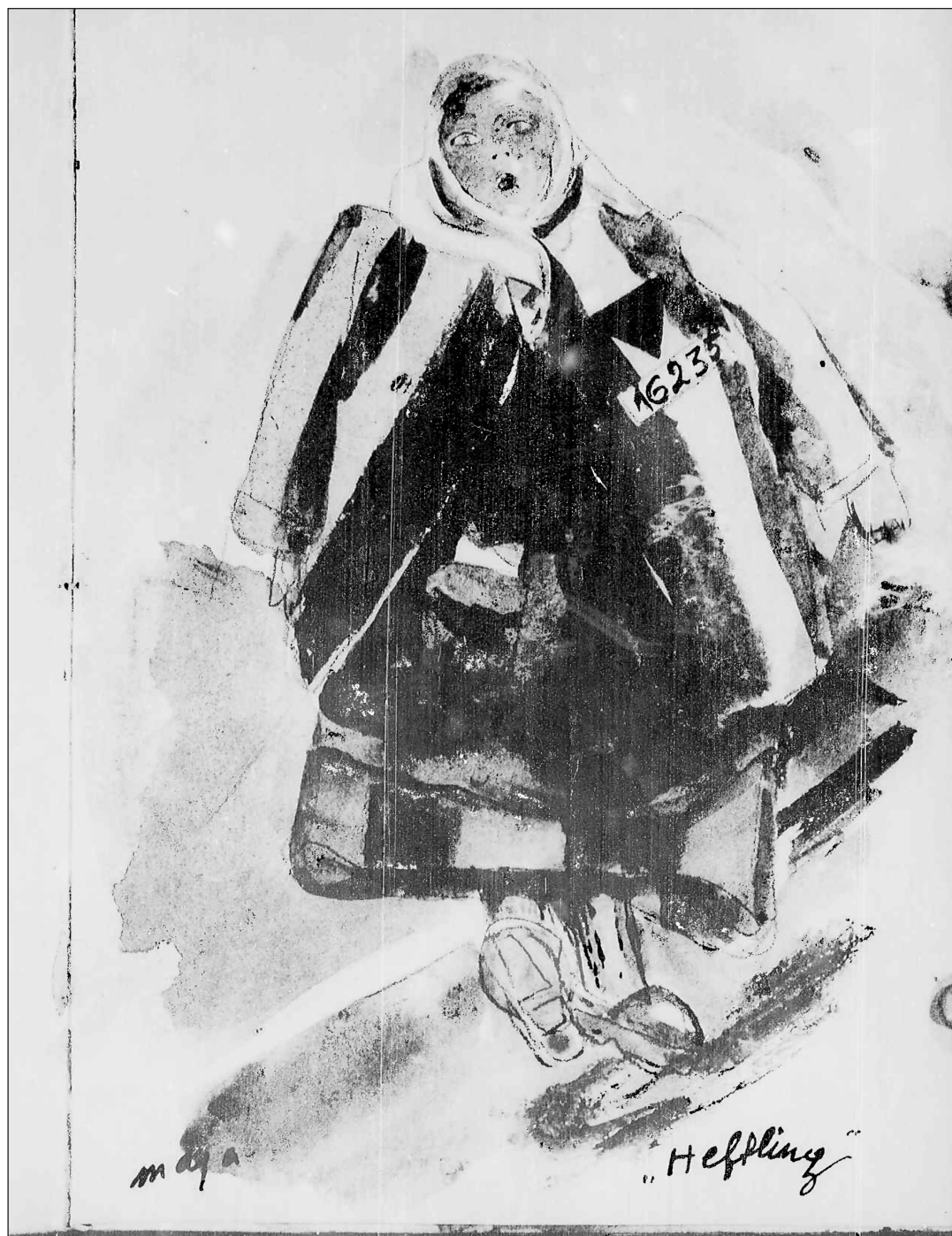
Brian Porter-Szucs uses the label ‘*Matka-Polka* Marianism’ to describe how the figure of *Matka Polka* [Polish Mother] became the domestic and secular manifestation of the multifaceted Mary (2011: 377). As a social construct, this 19th-century national allegory for domestic femininity is intertwined with deeply entrenched Marian devotion (Tieszen, 2007: 220). In the play, *Matka Polska*’s song resembles a prayer to Mary for her family’s suffering to end, as this interned Polish mother alludes to the *Matka Polka* social construct. The lyrics express her heartache over seeing her children suffer. The tune, indicated in the manuscript as the melody from an unidentified prelude by Frédéric Chopin, contributes to the play’s Polish soundscape. The melody was likely from one of the composer’s more plaintive preludes in a minor key, adding gravitas to this puppet’s lyrics. *Matka Polska* (**Figure 3**) asks Mary to shield Poland’s sons and daughters because they are innocent, a theme that runs through the play and challenges the Nazi charges against the inmates.

After the tragic aftermath of the 1863 uprising against Russian rule, *Matka Polka* became the feminine ideal that sustained ‘home and hearth’. This figure became the archetypal Polish Mother who ensured Poland’s physical, cultural, and religious survival under partition rule (Schultes, 2014: 264). Anna Titkow explains the complications that stem from this conflation of gender and nation:

Losing independence and statehood created the cultural ideal of the Polish woman as hero, capable of dealing with any pressures [...]. On her shoulders rested the responsibility of maintaining national heritage: language, culture, faith. It is this difficult time of loss of independence which created the social genotype of the ideal woman, who is capable of taking on the most difficult of circumstances which exist to this day (Schultes, 2014: 265).

*Szopka Polska* promotes all three of *Matka Polka*’s causes: patriotism, caretaking, and education. Invoking this figure reminded the inmates that they carried the torch of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers who shouldered many responsibilities to ensure the survival of their families.

While *Szopka Polska*’s *Matka Polska* seeks strength from Mary, Kopijowska acknowledges the dark undercurrents and unspoken strains of this social ideal by deviating from the 19th-century portrayal for this figure. Poland’s trials overshadowed the grief, exhaustion, and concerns experienced by real mothers. Society directed Polish women to be the ‘self-sacrificing’ figure who finds ‘nobility in suffering’, as lauded in Adam Mickiewicz’s poem ‘*Oda do Matki Polki*’ [‘Ode to Mother Poland’] (1830) (Tieszen, 2007: 220). The puppet in the painting is gaunt, pale, and has a weary look on her face, a striking visual departure from Berezowska’s painting of the *Häftling*



**Figure 4: Häftling.** Copy of watercolor by Maja Berezowska. *Szopka Polska* 1942–44, Reel 14, Series 2, Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection, 1992.A.0034.1, USHMM, Washington, DC. Reproduced by permission.

puppet (Figure 4) and her inmate portraits, which depict healthy and happy women (Gajewski, n.d.). In dark funeral garb, Berezowska's depiction of the Polish Mother is at odds with the cultural image of a poised, patriotic, and strong figure. The distortion of reality found in Berezowska's other artworks would not have adequately portrayed the women's experiences during the war and in the camp.

This purposeful deviation from the *Matka Polka* ideal shows the extent of this character's difficulty in continuing to fulfill her traditional societal roles in the concentration camp.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on *Matka Polka*'s burdens is not a new interpretation in the 20th century, but Kopijowska's character is a radical departure from tradition. Dramatist Stanisław Wyspiański (1869–1907)—Rydel's close friend in the Young Poland Movement whose famous work *Wesele* [*The Wedding*] was inspired by Rydel's marriage to a peasant woman and the *szopka* tradition—frequently portrayed pitiful versions of Polish female allegories and personifications to illustrate strain under foreign rule. For example, the *Matka Boska* crowned as Queen of Poland in Wyspiański's play *Królowa Polskiej Korony* [*The Coronation of Poland's Queen*] is sickly and faints (Wyspiański, 1964). Kopijowska portrays grace rather than bitterness, but she builds on Wyspiański's more cynical perspectives on Polish history and culture in her portrayals of *Matka Polska* and the Polish Soldier.

The Polish Mother sings her song to a melody from a Chopin prelude:

*Ja polska matka w wielkiej żałości  
Do tych ubogich przybiegam włości  
Do Matki Syna Bożego.  
By w dobroci serca swego,  
Matki rozpacz pojąć chciała  
I dzieciątko ubłagała.  
By nasze córki i syny.  
Co bez żadnej cierpicy winy  
Ręką swoją ostoniło  
I żeby się już skończyło  
Cierpień naszych wielkie morze  
O to Ciebie proszę Boże.*

I am a polish mother in intense sorrow  
To these poor estates, I run  
To the Mother of the Son of God  
So that in the goodness of one's heart

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilbert observes that several Polish songs in other camps invoke religious imagery, such as crucifixion and Mary's anguish. See Gilbert (2005: 130).

She wanted to understand the Mother's despair, and she begged the child.  
 Would they shelter our sons and daughters.  
 Which without any guilt  
 With her hand  
 And in order to already end  
 Our great sea of suffering.  
 O to you, please, God.

This puppet expresses the women's prayers and comforts the children by showing that someone is praying on their behalf. In the first line, Matka Polska describes her intense grief. In the second line, Kopijowska uses *włości*, an antiquated word for estates, to refer to the traditionally male responsibilities many women adopted during the Partition era. These lines imply that Matka Polska, as a mother, understands Mary's pain upon witnessing Christ's death, honoring the depth of the pain and grief shared by the women in the camp.

The Häftling puppet (**Figure 4**) was painted in the style Berezowska used for the camp inmates. Her face looks healthier than the gaunt painting of the Polish Mother. When Berezowska painted portraits of the inmates that were sent to families outside the camp, she did not paint the harsh camp reality. Instead, she painted the women as if they were happy and healthy, with color in their cheeks, reminding them of the individuals they were before they became a number in the camp system (Czyńska, 2018: 120).

Despite Berezowska's visual subversion of reality, this puppet is the most overt example of camp life in the play. The Häftling puppet wears the camp uniform, including the headscarf commonly used in Ravensbrück (unlike in other camps, where prisoners' heads were typically shaved) and an inverted triangle identifying her as a political prisoner, with the number 16235 on the puppet's chest. The Häftling rejects the SS's label of criminal and asserts her innocence; her song is an example of subtle resistance against the Nazis' use of assigned numbers and symbols as a form of ritual humiliation.

*Boże mój*  
*ocal mnie*  
*od nieprzyjaciół moich*  
*wybaw mnie*  
*od przeciwników mych*  
*wyrywaj mnie*  
*z rąk złoczyńców.*

*Od mężów krwawych ocal mnie*  
*Bo oto nastają na życie moje*



*I podli uderzają na mnie  
 Jednak niewinna jestem Panie  
 I wolna od grzechu,  
 Kroczę bez winy prawą drogą.*

*Powstań na spotkanie me i zobacz  
 Jestem bosy Häftling  
 Przecierpiałam swoje.*

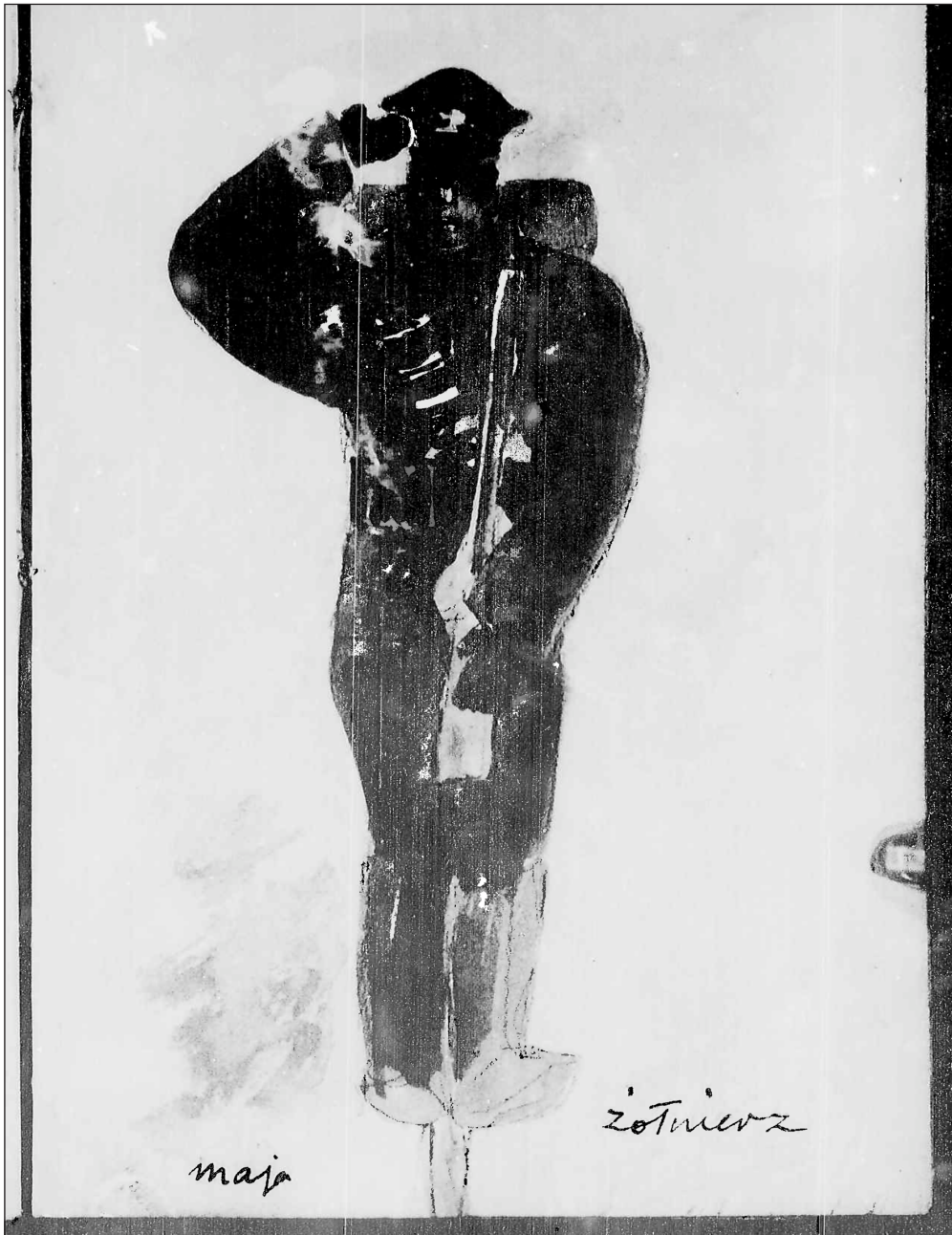
My God  
 save me  
     from my enemies  
 rescue me  
     from my adversaries  
 tear me away  
     from the hands of the villains.

Save me from cruel men  
 Because here, they seek my life  
 And cruelly attack me  
 However, I am innocent, Lord  
 And free from sin  
 I walk on the right path without guilt.

Rise up to meet me  
 And see  
 I am a barefoot Häftling  
 I have suffered.

The manuscript indicates no tune, but it was likely sung to a melody used for Psalm 59 from a prewar mass. Several lines, such as *‘od nieprzyjaciół moich’* [‘save me from my enemies’] and *‘Bo oto nastają na życie moje’* [‘Because here, they seek my life’] are exact matches to the Polish translation of this psalm (Ps. 59: 1–3; Biblia Poznańska and Wujek, 1923). Other lines such as *‘Od mężów krwawych ocal mnie’* [‘Save me from cruel men’] (*krwawych* means ‘bloody’, but here it means violently cruel) are similar to the lines that describe how Saul sent men to kill David, David’s plea to be saved from persecution and violence, and his assertion of innocence. In Psalm 59, David pleads: ‘See how they lie in wait for me! Fierce men conspire against me for no offense or sin of mine, O Lord. I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me’ (Ps. 59: 3–4 NIV). The Häftling shares these sentiments: ‘However, I am innocent, Lord, and free from sin, I walk on the right

path without guilt'. This invocation of Psalm 59 could prompt the inmates to remember David's calls for vengeance later in the verse: 'O Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel, rouse yourself to punish all the nations; show no mercy to wicked traitors' (Ps. 59: 5-6 NIV).



**Figure 5: Polish Soldier.** Copy of watercolor by Maja Berezowska. *Szopka Polska* 1942-44, Reel 14, Series 2, Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection, 1992.A.0034.1, USHMM, Washington, DC. Reproduced by permission.

Berezowska and Kopijowska were among the many inmates interned for a political crime, involvement in resistance activities led by the Polish Underground, or a perceived slight against the Reich (Saidel, 1999). This message of their innocence, combined with the inmate puppet's portrayal of a healthy woman, models a powerful subversion of the circumstances forced upon the interned women. The portrayal of the Häftling choosing God's grace despite her suffering helps the audience cope with Nazi oppression and makes salvation, both spiritual and physical, more personal. This puppet subtly demonstrates that, no matter what the guards tell the children, the inmates' resistance activities before the internment were just, challenging the Nazis' portrayal of the war.

### **Polish Soldier**

The Polish Soldier's song, a reworking of 'Warszawianka' (1831), is linked thematically to the Polish Mother's and Häftling's songs through the theme of wartime hardship. Kopijowska adapted this penultimate song to the new context of the camp *szopka*. The two female puppets represent suffering in the camp, but the Soldier represents the Polish military's resistance. Berezowska painted the Soldier in uniform, saluting the Holy Family (Figure 5).

'Warszawianka' is not a carol and is categorized as a legionnaire song. The initially successful early battles against Russian rule during the November Uprising (1830–31) inspired the French poet Casimir François Delavigne to write 'La Varsovienne', and Karol Sienkiewicz translated the text into Polish. Delavigne borrowed sentiments and imagery from Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle's 'La Marseillaise' (1792). Delavigne's lyrics feature similar rallying cries, as the first line of his chorus, 'Polonais, à la baïonnette!' ['Poles, to your bayonettes!'], is reminiscent of the first line of the chorus of 'La Marseillaise', 'Aux armes, citoyens!' ['To arms, citizens!']. The lyrics of the Polish version were used in propaganda efforts surrounding the Polish–Russian War (1919–20), and the Polish women interned in Ravensbrück would have been familiar with the song and its significance.

The original lyrics of 'Warszawianka' glorify martyred soldiers, claiming that a soldier would earn glory if they died fighting for Polish independence. However, Kopijowska removed the overly nationalistic Romantic-era ideology and softened the angry and vengeful tone of the original song. The Polish Eagle's call to rise and fight for independence is a blatantly nationalistic symbol and would have been censored, prompting Kopijowska to change the Soldier's opening lines to describe being awoken by the Bethlehem Star. The original text describes taking up the Polish rifle in rebellion, but in the *Szopka Polska*, the act of taking up arms is done on behalf of the Infant Christ

rather than on behalf of Poland. These changes also situate the song in the context of the *szopka*.

The original version hails the battles fought by Polish legions in the Napoleonic wars (Jena, Dresden, Leipzig, and Waterloo). Kopijowska invokes Poland's military past to honor her compatriots who died during World War II battles, and incorporates elements from Wyspiański's dramatization of the song in his play *Warszawianka* (1898/9) (Wyspiański, 1901). Wyspiański weaves the lyrics through the play to dispel the song's original heroic notions and foreground the harsh and heartbreaking realities of battle. Additionally, Kopijowska's version of this song includes the grief experienced by the families of the soldiers highlighted in Wyspiański's play.

*Gdy w głębokim śnie leżałem  
Anioł boży mnie zbudził  
I o narodzinach Boga  
W Betlejemie objawił  
Więc polski karabrodziin wziąłem  
Żeby Dzieciątku służył  
By od wszystkich nieszczęść w życiu  
Polski oręż go bronił  
Polski oręż z pod Grunwaldu  
Płowiec, Wiednia i Głogowa  
I też dzielny z Wester Platte,  
Kutna, Warszawy i Lwowa.*

When I was lying in a deep sleep  
A divine Angel woke me  
And of the birth of God  
in Bethlehem, he revealed  
So, I took the Polish rifle  
in order to protect the [Christ] child.  
From all of the misfortunes in life.  
Polish weapons defended him.  
Polish weapons from under Grunwald  
Plovec, Vienna, and Glogow  
And also, bravery from Westerplatte,  
Kutno, Warsaw, and Lviv.

Kopijowska deviates from references to the Napoleonic wars, choosing four significantly older battles and four key clashes during the German invasion in September 1939. The first four battles represent Poland's military might during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The Polish forces won the first two battles mentioned in the Soldier's song (the Battle of Grunwald in 1410 and the Battle of Płowce in Plavėjai, Lithuania in 1331) against Germanic forces, the Teutonic Knights. In light of the Third Reich's assertion that they were reclaiming Polish land as part of their *Lebensraum* policy, thus reviving the Teutonic wars (Johnson, 1996: 44), these two battles had significance for the inmates. In the Battle in Vienna, Polish legions prevented the Ottoman armies from invading the West during the siege of Vienna in 1683. Finally, the Polish legions fought in the Siege of Głogów against the Imperial Roman army in 1109.

The second group of battles honors the early defense efforts against the Nazi invasion in September 1939, and memorializes those soldiers by comparing them to military heroes of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. 'Wester Platte' refers to when the Polish army defended the Gdańsk harbor station, which was a strategic location for the ammunition supply of the Polish military. The defense was against the German siege, 1–7 September 1939, that lasted several days longer than expected. 'Kutno' refers to the Battle of the Bzura, from 2–9 September 1939. This battle was significant because, while the army in Poznań had to surrender, the soldiers were able to delay the attack on Warsaw. Kopijowska also referenced the Siege of Warsaw in 8–28 September 1939. The Battle of Lwów (Lviv was a part of Poland in the interwar years) took place from 12–22 September 1939 against the Wehrmacht and, after 17 September, against the Red Army, until the Poles surrendered to Russian occupation. Through Kopijowska's interpretation of 'Warszawianka', she fostered national pride and sought to combat the feelings of helplessness created by internment. Referencing these battles in the Soldier's new lyrics honored the Polish resistance, and reminded the children that Poles were fighting in the war outside of the camp.

### ***Children of Warsaw (1944)***

During the last Christmas in the camp, conditions were deteriorating due to overcrowding and dwindling supplies. Kopijowska added a skit for two children, Maciek and Joasia, titled *Dzieci Warszawy* [*Children of Warsaw*], to the 1944 performance, although the text is not intact. These real interned children addressed the Holy Family on stage and the children in the audience, further embedding the inmates into the world of the *szopka* and blurring the line between audience and performers. The children model productive behavior as they tell the Christ Child that they, along with

the other Polish children in the audience, will guide him until they return to Warsaw. They ask him not to be sad when he sees how bad things are in the camp because, as Polish children, they can protect and enlighten him. These lines bestow the children with a divine purpose and motivate them to learn about Polish heritage.

There is no evidence to indicate that Kopijowska and Berezowska ascribed to the Bauhaus philosophy on empathy, but they used similar techniques. Linney Wix (2009), in her analysis of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis's Bauhaus derived teaching philosophy of art as a conduit for empathy, argues that the benefits of cultural activities for children in the camps and ghettos extended beyond distraction. Dicker-Brandeis taught art 'from a perspective designed to inspire creative work that would help children overcome their inevitable difficulties' and believed that inspiring creativity could teach children to '[see] beyond appearances' (Wix, 2009: 152-3). Combining Dicker-Brandeis's approach with ritual studies reveals how *Szopka Polska* promoted social participation, as sensory acts are similarly integral to the experiences of a *szopka* performance. Rather than drawing, the act of communal singing from a shared body of carols provided a similar grounding effect that aided in accessing the empathy and emotion needed to process Kopijowska's message. Through her play, Kopijowska teaches the children, and reminds the adults, to see beyond the Nazis' portrayal of the world.

## Conclusion

Returning to Kopijowska's introduction, her lines 'to forget about reality' and the 'world of our childhood', in context of the juxtapositions of camp life with traditional scenes and puppet characters, signifies her intention to provide the inmates with an experience that transcended daily life. The ritual transformation offered by the performances facilitated a shift in perspective that challenged the Third Reich's propaganda against the Poles. Old and new puppet characters demonstrate productive reactions to the threat of individual and communal extinction that escalated as the war progressed. The play responds to several levels of oppression under the Third Reich's policies, not just the horrible conditions and ritualized violence in Ravensbrück, and this context is vital for understanding the references in the script and the motivations of the performers.

Berezowska explained that Kopijowska sought to provide cultural events to 'save the minds tormented by the camp life' (Czyńska, 2018: 119). As with other cultural activities, the Polish women and children who attended the *Szopka Polska* were active participants due to the medium's ritual features, rather than a passive audience engaging in escapism. The archaic elements, traditional music and puppets, and brief humorous moments aurally and visually gave the inmates respite from the harsh camp

reality and helped them prepare for the ritual transformation. Additionally, the inmates could historicize, and thereby make sense of their experiences, which provided a sense of control.

The preservation of the script in 1942 by the inmates in the camp's art workshop demonstrates how vital this play was to the Polish community, as the manuscript would ensure that this social ritual could be repeated if the creators were killed or deported, a fate Berezowska narrowly avoided several times. Though neither as visible nor as easily classifiable as an armed revolt, the play benefited the Polish community as an act of resistance. Several of the performers were involved in other caretaking activities in the camp, such as clandestine education, childcare, and rudimentary medical aid; the *szopka* was an extension of these caretaking duties.

Naturally, a play performed in a concentration camp could not liberate the inmates, nor bring down the Nazi regime. Yet, the centuries-old *szopka* genre's inherent carnivalesque and ritual elements encouraged resistance and survival by promoting unity, caretaking, and productive behaviors. While Rydel and Wyspiański used tropes from the *szopki* genre to satirize a fractured Polish society, Kopijowska built on their interpretations to ensure community survival and peacefully undermined the SS guards. Just as Berezowska provided mental and emotional benefits through her portraits depicting healthy inmate women, Kopijowska offered a new perspective to help her fellow Poles process and endure Nazi occupation and internment.

---

### Acknowledgements

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material. Please get in touch with any inquiries or any information relating to these images or the rights holder. A sincere thank you to Dr Jascha Nemtsov, Dr Larry Lipkis, Dr Hilde Binford, Dr Halina Goldberg, Dr Joanna Piatek Swat, and Dr Julia Riegel, Dr Paul Fagan, and the wonderful staff at the USHMM archives and the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp Memorial for their assistance and guidance on this project.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

---

### References

#### Collections

Gajewski, J Ravensbrück Art, n.d. <http://individual.utoronto.ca/jarekg/Ravensbruck/Art.html>.

## Archival files

*Szopka Polska 1942–44*, Reel 14, Series 2, Alexander Kulisiewicz Collection, 1992.A.0034.1, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

*Jadwiga Kopijowska przemawiająca przed rozpoczęciem szopki noworocznej w obozie koncentracyjnym w Ravensbrück 1943*, R.20997/II, 8330210, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw. <http://polona.pl/item/8330210>

## Sources

**Bartmiński, J** 1990 Polish Christmas carols and their cultural context. *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 34(1): 83–97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/309314>

**Beckerman, M and Tadmor, N** 2016 'Lullaby': The story of a *niggun*. *Music and Politics*, 1: 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0010.101>

**Chrostowski, W** 1991 The suffering, chosenness and mission of the Polish nation. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*, 4: 1–14. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol11/iss4/1>

**Czyńska, M** 2018 *Berezowska: nagość dla wszystkich*. Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne.

**Gilbert, S** 2004 Songs confront the past: Music in KZ Sachsenhausen, 1936–1945. *Contemporary European History*, 13(3): 281–304. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777304001730>

**Gilbert, S** 2005 Music as a historical source: Social history and musical texts. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 36(1): 117–134.

**Gumowska, I** n.d. Etnografia Lubelszczyzny – szopka lubelska. *Teatr NN*. <http://teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/etnografia-lubelszczyzny-szopka-lubelska/> [Last Accessed 6 June 2019]

**Healy, R** 2014 From Commonwealth to colony? Poland under Prussia. In: Healy, R and Lago, E D (eds.) *The Shadow of colonialism on Europe's modern past*. Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 109–125. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137450753\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137450753_7)

**Helm, S** 2016 *Ohne Haar und ohne Namen: Im Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück*. Darmstadt: Theiss Verlag.

**Jaiser, C** 2000 *Poetische Zeugnisse: Gedichte aus dem Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-02746-7>

**Johnson, L** 1996 *Central Europe: Enemies, neighbors, friends*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Kettler, M** 2019 Designing empire for the civilized East: Colonialism, Polish nationhood, and German war aims in the First World War. *Nationalities Papers*, 47(6): 936–952. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.49>

**Kiedrzyńska, W** (ed.) 1961 *Ravensbrück Wiersze Obozowe, Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację*. Zarząd Główny Klub Ravensbrück.

**Kitowicz, Fr. Jędrzej** *Opis obyczajów za panowania Augusta III 1728*. <https://liturgia.wiara.pl/doc/419428.Szopka-betlejemka-Pomysl-sw-Franciszka>.

**Kolberg, O** 1874 *Lud: Jego zwyczaje, sposób życia, mowa, podania, przysłowia, obrzędy, gusła, zabawy, pieśni, muzyka i tańce przedstawił Oskar Kolberg*. Vol. 3. Kraków: W Drukarni Uniwersitetu.



**Lewitter, L R** 1950 The Polish 'Szopka'. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 29(72): 77–85.

**McCormick, J** and **Pratasik, B** 2004 *Popular puppet theatre in Europe, 1800–1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Moroz, A** 2019 Niechaj nam w Jasełkach nikt nie przedstawi, że Jezus urodził się w Palestynie – 'Betlejem polskie' Lucjana Rydla jako szopka literacka. *Studia Historicolitteraria*, 19: 58–65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24917/20811853.19.4>

**Muir, E** 2009 *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Nowakowska-Sito, K** 2013 Maja Berezowska – Szkic do Portretu. *Wiadomości Ziemiańskie*, 55: 25–29.

**Porter-Szucs, B** 2011 *Faith and fatherland: Catholicism, modernity, and Poland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195399059.001.0001>

**Radio Polski**, n.d. <https://www.polskieradio.pl/68/2461/Audio/303533,Piosenki-rozne> [Last Accessed 5 January 2019].

**Rydel, L** 1906 *Betleem Polskie*. D. E. Friedlein (ed.) Kraków: Drukarnia Literacka. <http://biblioteka.kijowski.pl/rydel%20lucjan/betlejem%20polskie.pdf>

**Saidel, R G** 1999 Ravensbruck Women's Concentration Camp. *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. Jewish Women's Archive. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ravensbruck-womens-concentration-camp> [Accessed 11 June 2022].

**Schultes, A K** 2014 On the margins of religion/On the forefront of culture: The image of the Matka Polka (Polish Mother) in contemporary Poland. *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement*, 5(1): 263–274.



- Segel, H B** 2002 Culture in Poland during World War I. In: Aviel, R et al. (ed.) *European culture in the Great War: The arts, entertainment and propaganda, 1914–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 58–88.
- Segel, H B** 1958 The beginnings of Polish comedy. *The Polish Review*, 3(3): 69–81.
- Segel, H B** 1960 'Young Poland,' Cracow and the 'Little Green Balloon.' *The Polish Review*, 5(2): 74–97.
- Siwiec, K** 2018 Lucjan Rydel. Miłośnik muz, poeta marzyciel, człowiek nad wyraz praktyczny. *Wyborcza Krakow*, 16 November 2018. <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,24171765,lucjan-rydel-milosnik-muz-poeta-marzyciel-czlowiek-nad-wyraz.html> [Last Accessed 6 June 2022].
- Stibbe, M** 2012 In and beyond the racial state: Gender and National Socialism, 1933–1955. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 13(2): 159–178. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2012.675712>
- Strebel, B** 2009 Ravensbruck. Gutmann, A and Pallavicini, S (trans.) In: Geoffrey, P M (ed.) *Encyclopedia of camps and ghettos, 1933–1945: Vol. 1, Early camps, youth camps, and concentration camps and subcamps under the SS-Business Administration Main Office (WVHA)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Tieszen, B** 2007 Matka Polka (Mother Poland) and the cult of the Virgin Mary: Linguistic analysis of the social roles and expectations of Polish women. In: Jule, A (ed.) *Language and religious identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 220–228. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230210943\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230210943_11)
- Wińska, U** 2006 *Zwyciężyły Wartości: Wspomnienia z Ravensbrück*. Gdańsk: Marpress.
- Wix, L** 2009 Aesthetic empathy in teaching art to children: The work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis in Terezin. *Art Therapy*, 26(4): 152–158. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2009.10129612>
- Wyspiański, S and Łempicka, A** (eds.) 1964. *Daniel Królowa Polskiej Korony; Legenda I; Warszawianka*. Collected Works Vol 1. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Wyspiański, S** 1901 *Warszawianka*. Kraków: Drukarnia Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

