

In Search of Kashubia, Part I: Overview

Our Kashubian-Polish ancestors were part of the largest trans-oceanic immigration event ever. In the latter half of the 19th century, approximately 12 million people, mostly from poor communities across Europe, flooded to America for unending acres of land, jobs spawned by the industrial revolution, transportation available by railroad and steamship, and a government that held to the idea that all men are created equal with certain unalienable rights. Our ancestors followed the dream of achieving a prosperous and free life in America. Hieronim Derdowski, editor of the Polish language newspaper, *Wiarus*, in Winona, estimated that more than 130,000 Kashubians were living in America at the end of the 19th century.

Our ancestors emigrated because they faced intolerable living conditions. Chancellor Otto Von Bismark was turning the Kashubian region annexed by Prussia into an integral part of Prussia. The peasants had been released from their bondage to the local lords, but in turn they lost their rights to protection from the lords and the use of communal land. Farmland was inexorably being taken over by settlers from Prussia. And the little farms on poor land that remained for our ancestors could no longer support their large families. Unfortunately, there were no jobs available for the young men who had to leave the family farm. Education in the newly-formed schools was only in German, and Bismark sought to reduce religious education in public schools.

Having arrived in Winona, our Kashubian-Polish ancestors were never going to sail back across the ocean to visit the homeland they had left. Their focus was to establish their own Polish-American community in the East End of Winona. Over the years, the immigrants and their descendants lost touch with the families that they left behind. Then they stopped using the Kashubian language, and finally they lost all knowledge of the culture and history of Kashubia.

This article attempts to shed some light on the history and culture - the way of life - that our ancestors left behind in Kashubia. Part I presents a historical overview. Parts II and III provide additional details about the way of life of our Kashubian ancestors.

If you search a map of Europe to find the country of Kashubia, you won't find it. Kashubia, refers to a small region in Poland west of Gdańsk where the Kashubian language is spoken. Over the centuries, neighboring political entities in modern-day Denmark, Sweden, and Germany invaded or annexed parts of Kashubia. In spite of these withering attacks, Kashubians to this day maintain their hold on their language and culture. The map below is one example of the region where Kashubian is currently spoken .



J. Treder: Język, piśmiennictwo i kultura duchowa Kaszubów

Kashubia can be explained from many perspectives. Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński gives a good starting point for a discussion of the aspects that define Kashubia. He says that Kashubians today identify themselves in terms of their connection to the land that they have inhabited as a people, their language, their religion, and the cultural values that they share (Obracht-Prondzyński, 2007, 179).

From a geographical point of view, it is a region bordering the Baltic Sea, and its sandy soil, huge forested areas, many lakes and rivers were products of the glaciers that once covered the land, much like the Great Lakes region of the United States. When our ancestors emigrated in the 19th century, Kashubia was filled with small villages and towns that were relatively isolated from each other. One's circle of friendships and families was limited to the villages one could comfortably walk to.

Kashubia's two traditional industries were fishing and farming. The northern climate and relatively poor soil produced mostly crops of wheat, rye, and potatoes. Typical farm animals included horses, hogs, geese, chickens, and ducks. The produce from vegetable gardens was supplemented by mushrooms and berries from nearby woods. Abundant fish from ponds, lakes, rivers and the sea provided a valuable supplement to the diet.

From a linguistic point of view, the language spoken by Kashubians is a West Slavic language as is Polish, and it has descended from Proto Slavic, the ancestor of all contemporary Slavic languages. Its grammar and vocabulary are similar to Polish, but many words are adopted from German.

Our ancestors enjoyed a rich cultural heritage. Kashubia had long traditions in folk music and folk literature, which often involved myths, legends and superstitions dating back to the pre-Christian era. Folk art was connected to the self-sufficient peasant and village households and included embroidering, elaborate paper cuttings used for decorations, pottery, basket weaving and wood carving. Except for some religious publications, there was no written literature, no newspapers, no dictionaries. Most Kashubians did not learn to read and write Kashubian.

The acceptance of Christianity in Poland dates from 966 when Duke Mieszko of the Piast dynasty was baptized. Kashubians were converted during the 11th and 12th centuries, and they have remained faithful to Catholicism ever since.

Kashubia was a feudal society from the Middle Ages until the 19th Century. Prussia took control of western Kashubia during the late Middle Ages. In the late 18th Century, Prussia annexed eastern Kashubia and inexorably Germanized the entire region. Prussian reforms released the duties of peasants to the local lords and granted land ownership and voting rights starting with the richest peasants. But, as a result, Kashubians had to pay taxes to Prussia, military service was compulsory, and German was the official language for government transaction and eventually public education. After World Wars I and II, Germany had to give up some of the formerly Kashubian territory that it controlled, and Poland acquired it.

However, in the 19th century, Prussian oppression awakened a patriotic reaction in Kashubia. Florian Ceynowa (1817-1881) was the first great Kashubian activist to recognize that the Prussian oppression in Kashubia would eventually lead to the extinction of the Kashubian language and culture. Kashubian for the most part was the language used by poor illiterate farmers and the people who provided them goods and services in the surrounding small towns. If an enterprising young person sought upward mobility, his language of choice would have to be the language spoken by those with wealth and power – German or Polish. Ceynowa began the movement to establish Kashubian as a written language with its own distinct literature. He created an alphabet and a spelling system and introduced standards for Kashubian grammar and pronunciation. He published works in Kashubian, translated them into other languages and translated Russian works into Kashubian. He advocated for the independence of Kashubia in a Pan-Slavic federation under Russian leadership.

The two writers who exerted the earliest and most powerful influence to elevate the use of the Kashubian language were Hieronim Derdowski and Alexander Majkowski. Kashubians now revere them as the first writers to produce outstanding literary works in the Kashubian language (Obracht-Prondzyński and Wicherkiewicz, *The Kashubs: Past and Present*).

Derdowski's most important literary work is a long poem entitled, About Mr. Czorlinski, Who Went to Puck to Buy Nets. Majkowski's most important work is entitled, The Life and Adventures of Remus. The setting of both of these works is in Kashubia during the time our ancestors were preparing to emigrate. In effect, these publications provide a window into the daily life of Kashubians in the 19th century. Exactly what specific details they reveal about daily life in Kashubia is the subject of Parts II and III.

Works Cited

Obracht-Prondzyński, Cezary. The Kashubs: Past and Present, Peter Lang, 2007