



Przyjaciel ludu Kaszubskiego

(Friend of the Kashubian People)

Newsletter of the Kashubian Association of North America

-KANA-



Vol. II

Summer 1998

No. III

"Purteks"

- Not Just a Pretty Word for Some "Little Stinkers"

by Shirley Mask Connolly

It seems to be a common trend today to create a "family" vocabulary to name bodily functions or body parts that might cause embarrassment - or maybe the correct word just sounds too explicit.

One such word in my family's vocabulary was the verb "to purt", meaning to break wind. We always used this description at home, popularly expounded in the exclamation: "Who purted?!?" I always thought this was just a cutesy way of saying "to fart", sort of equivalent to saying "to toot" etc., but just recently I learned that "to purt" was not in this category at all, and had much deeper significance!

The true meaning was revealed in an article entitled *"WITCHES, PURTEKS AND VAMPIRES - Kaszuby at Night"*, written by Violetta Skrzypinska for the Polish magazine *Wielkociepota*, Gdansk, Sopot, Gdynia, July/August 1995. Ms. Skrzypinska reveals that a "Purtek" is a Kashubian Devil - the name which comes from the Kashubian verb "purtac", i.e. "purt", meaning "to break wind"!

Of course, this is the true explanation of why this word is in my vocabulary - for although I do not speak the Kashubian language of my ancestors, I have incorporated some of these words unknowingly into my personal English! It is after all, not the typical vocabulary of a little kid, but a word that links me to my roots in Kashubian Poland.

The Kashubes are a Polish ethnic group of Slavic origins. They live in the Northern section of Poland, south of Gdansk, and there they have lived for centuries. The first Kashubes came to Canada in 1858 and within a few years, they established their own settlement near the present day villages of Barry's Bay and Wilno. For the Kashubes in their homeland, there once were devils of many descriptions and types, but the most popular were the Smetek (Melancholic

Devil) and the Purtek. The Purtek could easily be recognized because he was hairy and had little horns. Particular signs included a long tail. He usually dwelled in desolate areas. He busied himself with petty mischief of every description. If you could not find something, Purtek covered it with his tail. Generally, however, Purtek was not of any danger to people.

With Smetek, however, the matter was entirely different. He was a malevolent spirit, mysterious and harmful. His origins went back to Viking times.



Drawing of a Purtek playing a Devil's Fiddle
by Shirley Mask Connolly

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All Kashubian devils had their own special instrument - "the Devil's fiddle" which looks like a broom, topped by a mask, slightly demonic in appearance. Recently we had a personal experience with this instrument and came to understand some of its devilish nature. Myself, my husband and father visited Poland in May of 1997 and while there spent a considerable time in the Kashubian area, home to my ancestors and to most of the other Polish people of Renfrew and Renfrew County in Canada. In the village of Kartuzy, there was a wonderful Kashubian museum (Muzeum Kaszubskie) and the old caretaker of the Museum played us a Kashubian song on the Devil's fiddle.

When we visited the Kashubian village (Skansen) at Wdzydze, we found a shop that sold handmade devil's fiddles. Our hosts, Jim and Lynne Visutskie (Polish spelling Wysocki) collect folk art pieces and so we decided to buy one as a gift to them. Unfortunately, the Visutskies live in Warsaw, which is a couple of hundred miles south of the Kashubian region. The Devil's fiddle would not be relegated to the trunk - being about five feet tall, when one included his tasseled hat. And so the devilish fellow sat in the back with my dad, who grew to regret our decision to purchase this gift. It clinked and clanged and clattered for the entire trip, despite my dad's attempts to silence it. However, it did not bring us any bad luck, although it was definitely a nuisance - probably had more of the nature of a Purtek than a Smetek. Still we can only hope that it has not created a "stink" in its new home, at the Visutskies!!

What do Kashubes and Pomeranians have in common?

by Keith A. Kaszubik

Who's never been asked: "What nationality are you?" I imagine that most Kashubes would answer: "Polish-American/Canadian" or "American/Canadian of Polish descent." But nothing is ever that simple. In Polonia, I sometimes answer: "Jestem Kaszuba" [I am a Kashub]. Unfortunately in the general public we sometimes need to conform because of some people who regard anything not simple as being abnormal (i.e., can't even pronounce our names). Even some so-called educated people I have met are under the impression that the Kashubes are half-Polish and half-German.

In regard to my nationality I answer that I am Polish, German and Kashubian. Immediately I am looked at as if I just fell out of a tree. What's a Kashub? After all, as a very intelligent man once pointed out, the average American wouldn't know the difference between a Kashub and a Cashew! I try to explain: "The Kashubes are the last remnant of the ancient Slavic Pomeranians." Then the

