

TOBAK - Chceme le so zazec! SNUFF - We want to take it!

by Lynne Visutskie

I recently read an article by Piotr Adamowicz in the *Rzeczpospolita* about a Health Act, passed in May 1966 in the Polish Sejm, which made illegal the production and selling of addictive substances which are inhaled or sniffed. One of the addictive substances was "snuff". The article said that in the Kaszuby region, Kashubs were suprised at the new Law, as they considered taking a pinch of snuff to be part of their culture, and there was a lot of concern and comment amongst the Kashubian old-timers. The article lead me to wonder if the early Kashub settlers in the Wilno, Ontario area had brought this tradition from Kaszuby to Wilno with them.

My chance to find out came sooner than I expected: I had invited Shirley and Tom Connolly of Ottawa to stop over in Warsaw on their way to visit the villages in Kaszuby covered in Shirley's book: *Polish Pioneer Families...*, and at the last minute Shirley's father, Louie Mask, decided to come along too. Louie turned out to be an excellent resource on old times, old songs and old sayings passed down to him from his grandparents. When I asked Louie if he knew of any of the old-timers who had used snuff, he told me that his great grandmother, Magdalena Maszk, had not only used snuff, but had a *rog* - a snuffbox made from a cow's horn.

I found his description of his grandmother's *rog* extremely interesting as I had visited the Kashubian museum in Kartuzy, and seen the collection of snuffboxes made from horn (*rog*), porcelain, metal, and amber. Some of these snuffboxes were very beautiful. The newspaper article said that there are still a few *rog* snuffbox craftsmen in Kaszuby, and that it is quite a skill to turn a horn into a container. Not just any horn can be used - for example, bull's horns are empty inside and are too thin. The best horns are from 7-8 year old cows, and they have to be chosen with care. They are boiled for 8-10 hours with potato peelings, which makes them soft. Then they are cooled. The top is warmed up again and the horn is bent into shape. It is left in a press for 2-3 days. Finally, it is polished and cut. The methods used to prepare the horn and make the box are almost the same as have been used for over a hundred years.

The guide at the Kashubian Museum in Kartuzy said that there used to be the tradition at the museum that all visitors tried snuff. The guide is an old man, 72, and he's

never smoked, but since he was 18 he has taken snuff. His father and his grandfather before him, also took it. He says that there is a saying that if a single woman doesn't try it, she will remain single!

The article also gives a few examples of how strong a part of the Kashub culture snuff taking is. One example is from an interview the writer had with an old retired Priest from the area who tells how his father took snuff, and in the seminary his friends took it, as did the Bishop and some professors. When the Priest went to his first parish, his parishioners gave him a snuffbox, and at another parish, the parishioners gave him a *rog*. He ended up with quite a collection of snuffboxes. He said in Kaszuby it was the tradition, in some churches, for the Priest to enter the pulpit and take a pinch of snuff and then offer it to the parishioners. At one mass for someone's dead soul, a parishioner came forward with a snuffbox for the soul of the dead man. You could often hear the tapping of snuff boxes against the pews during mass. He claims that a pinch of snuff clears the mind and helps you to concentrate!

The Kashubs are upset with the new law - they do not understand that snuff is addictive, even though some of the old-times say they get nervous without it - they say sneezing is a healthy thing to do. Some have resorted to buying cigarettes or making their own snuff. Some old-timers claim that smoking is bad for you, but taking snuff is OK.

Where did this snuff taking tradition come from? There is a Kashub folktale which explains it's introduction which I have translated into my own words...

The Devil made me do it!

The Devil realized he was short a soul to fill his quota of minority souls in Hell. So he checked through his list of minority groups in the world and saw that he hadn't got a soul from a very small minority group, called Kashubs, who lived near the Baltic in northern Poland. He sent out his soul scouts to search for someone they thought would be willing, after a little tempting, to sell his soul. The scouts came back and told him it would be very difficult to tempt a Kashub to sell his soul, as Kashubs were very pious. The Devil said, "there must be some

poor peasant there with some weakness that I can use as a bargaining tool". One scout said "I heard of a peasant there who, although he was extremely pious, has a couple of weaknesses: one, he treats his wife well and two, he likes to gamble." "Well!", said the Devil, "He must be a fool if he treats his wife well. This soul will be a walk-over, I shall have a bet with him."

So he zapped himself to Kaszuby and planted some tobacco in the peasant's field. The peasant came across the unusual plants, and whilst he was wondering what they were, the Devil appeared. The farmer, not recognizing the Devil, asked "Do you know what these plants are?" The Devil said "I am the Devil, and I am going to bet that you can not guess the name of these plants. The farmer said, "I am but a poor farmer, I have nothing to bet with." And the Devil replied, "If you can tell me the plants' name your fortune will be made, but if you can not, I want your soul." The Devil having some time on his hands, decided to be generous, "I'll give you three days to find out. If you can't tell me the name on the third day, your soul is mine."

The peasant went home and told his wife about what had happened. The wife told him not to worry, no tricky Devil was going to take the soul of her good Kashub man. The very next day she rolled herself in pitch and then in pepper and feathers, and she looked like a strange bird! She went to the field and started to trample amongst the tobacco. The Devil appeared and said, "Go away you ugly bird, I didn't plant this **Tobacco** for you to trample on." Full of glee she waddled quickly off home to tell her husband the name of the plant.

On the third day the farmer went to the field and the Devil whoozshed up and said, "Well, are you ready to give me your soul?" The farmer slowly plucked a tobacco leaf and sniffed it. He then looked up and said "You can go to Hel*, this smells like tobacco to me!" The Devil, as double-crossed Devil's do, vanished in a flash. Unfortunately, the flash set fire to the tobacco.

The peasant rescued a couple of plants and took them home to show his wife. They planted the plants and called them *diobelszcze zelsko* [the Devil's weed], and spent the rest of their lives sniffing them, trying to figure out how to make their fortune from them (meanwhile, their neighbour, Mr. Marlborowski, who had smelled the burning tobacco plants and cried the proverbial "Eureka!", went off to America and made his fortune).

*Hel is a small seaside town north of Gdańsk.

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self-governing population. A high percentage of them were Kashubs with territorial appurtenance and not as Mr. Lessner contends - that they never had their own country. It is deplorable to use space for further historical documentary. It is enough to imagine and realize Germany's aggressive demands, especially in regard to the corridor which is the Gdańsk Sea Coast settled by the Kashubian population, and also in the outburst of World War II. Incidentally, Gdańsk (the name) originally was derived from Slavonic, *wda, Gda - Gydanyzc* (written before 1000 AD) - then *Danzig* (German).

The Kashubians always gravitated towards Poland, having their origins in the Słowiański clan. Their outstanding poet Hieronim Derdowski, in his beautiful ode, emphasized that "There can be no Kashubians without Poland, and no Poland without the Kashubians". For Mr. Lessner, the very name Derdowski (his surname) should have been an example that there are a great many Kashubian surnames ending with the suffix *-ski*.

The book, *The Cassubian Civilization*, was not written by anthropologist, Bronisław Malinowski, - its contents were the work of three authors, Friedrich Lorentz; Adam Fischer; and Tadeusz Lehr-Splawiński.

Lessner's exuberant imagination makes Lech Wałęsa, (who actually comes from the hamlet of Popowo near Dobrzyń in the Bydgoszcz region) a Kashub, and also unceremoniously, our Holy Father, Pope Karol Wojtyła, (who comes from Wadowice near Kraków). One can also see that he is not aware that one of the most prominent sons of the land of Pomerania, General Józef Wybicki, is the author of the Polish National Anthem, "Jeszcze Polska nie zginieła". King Jan Sobieski, enjoyed staying in the Kaszuby region. He had his own estate in Rzucewo, north of Gdańsk near Puck, which does not necessarily mean that he is a native Kashubian. Renowned regional writer, Rev. Bernard Sychta, stated that "Kashubians do not belong to Poland, but they are Poland's".

If Mr. Lessner had kept up communication with his fatherland, then if only with regard to his fellow countrymen, he would not have exerted himself to these ridiculous and imprecise expressions.

Bronisław Socha Borzestowski
scjón of the Borzestowski family, stemming from
Borzestowo, shire Kartuzy, in the Gdańsk area.