

A KASHUBIAN TREASURE ON THE TIP OF OUR TONGUE

Thoughts from the visit of Wojciech and Ola Elmanski to Wilno, Ontario

by David Schulist

Wojciech and Ola Etmanski, Guests at Wilno Heritage Week

The Wilno Heritage Society had the pleasure of hosting the Etmanskis during their Canadian Polish/Kashub Heritage Week celebration during the week of February 11th to 18th, 2001.

The Canadian Polish/Kashub have waited over 140 years for the news that Mr. Wojciech and his wife Mrs. Ola Etmanski brought to us about our Kashubian heritage.

Mr. Etmanski spoke to us about the region of Poland that our ancestors left. This region is called KASZUBY. He said that our heritage comes from a very special part of Poland where there is a different culture of its own. This culture is called Kashubian. Yes, they are Polish citizens, but their culture is different from Polish culture. They dress differently, they eat differently, their folk art is different. The Embroidery and pottery have their own distinctive design elements. Their emblem is the Griffin (Polish: gryf) and not the eagle. The white eagle is for the country of Poland. Their colours are Black and Gold and when you see their flag, the black will be on top and the gold on the bottom. History shows that the Kashubs never had their own country, but they had their own culture. Their region has been taken over many times by different countries: Prussia, Germany, and Poland. When you ask Wojciech, "What is your citizenship?" he would answer, "Poland for now. Who knows who will take us over next." The Kashub area has been under all the pressure of take over and still they kept their culture. Now for the most important part of any culture, Kaszuby still has its own language. Wojciech stressed "NO LANGUAGE--NO CULTURE." The amazing story about the Kashubian language is that it is still here today after so much influence from the Prussians, the Germans, and the Polish. What he brought us was a treasure--a book called *Kaszebscze Abecadlo*. It is a book that teaches the first part of any language and the name translated to Elementary Kashub. Like all languages, this is where we start. Thanks to Mr Witold Bobrowski we now have this book. This is very good news to us Canadian Kashubs. We are very excited here in Canada. There is hope for us to preserve our first language.

Our Canadian Polish/Kashub Story about our 'Polish' Language

The story begins as we learn we do not speak Polish, but the Kashub language. Wow!

This is our story here in Canada. The funny thing that happened here was that for some strange reason, our ancestors did not tell us that we were of Kashub heritage. Maybe our grandparents and our parents did not listen very well, or maybe they were ashamed to say they were of Kashub culture. We all believed that we spoke the Polish language. I think the confusion happened when our ancestors were asked their citizenship and they answered Polish and from then on we thought that we spoke Polish.

We all went in different paths, but our story is about the same. Let me tell you about my own story. When first I started school back in 1956, in a one room school house, I spoke the Polish language as most of us did and very, very little English. The teacher had a tough job of not only teaching us the subjects, but the English language. TV also helped us in the English language and soon we spoke and wrote in English. When we were at home we would still speak Polish and also in the school yard and in churches and other places. This was our first language and we were comfortable speaking it. Even today, one can still find people speaking the Polish language to each other even though they can speak English very well. After five or six generations, we still have our language here. Amazing! Today I am still amazed that I can still speak the language and I am fourth generation. *Continued on the next page*

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After the Second World War, our language story changed. This is what happened to me. My parents owned and operated the Wilno General Store and, of course, the kids had to help. My job was to pump gas. My father would say, "David, the Polish tourists are coming and I want you to speak Polish to them. You speak Polish very well, so use it." Well, here comes my first customer. We start to speak to each other and find that we do not understand each other. The gentleman said to me that I did not speak Polish. I did not believe this at first. My mother, father and grandmother and grandfather understand me, why does this person not? First I thought that my ancestors went and mixed up the language and messed it up. I did not feel good at that time. I heard from others that they also found that they could not understand the visitors from Poland. We all started to say that they spoke 'high' Polish and we spoke 'low' Polish. So life went on. In the sixties and seventies, my father, Martin Shulist, became interested in our unique Polish culture. He always wondered with all the Polish people living here, could this area be where the first Poles to come to Canada settled. With seven years of research in Canada, he found that Wilno, Ontario, was indeed where these Poles settled first and today Wilno is known as Canada's First Polish Settlement. At this time, in spite of my father's obsession for our culture, I was not interested. As a teenager, who cares? Now I am very proud of my father and his hard work; Wilno is now on the map. As I grew up and started a family, I started to lose my language. Living in different parts of Canada I found that the 'low' Polish language was not used much in the rest of Canada.

When I settled back in Wilno, I again began to speak the language of my youth.. I did not realize that I had a treasure on the tip of my tongue until a few years ago. My father gave to me a book. I do not enjoy reading too much, but he said read this. Oh, come on Dad, not that Polish stuff again--boring. Anyway, I took the book and said I would take a peek. This book by Father Al Rekowski, CSsR was *The Saga of the Kashub People in Poland, Canada and USA*. What is a Kashub, I asked myself. When I opened the book and started to read, Father Al opened my eyes to our true culture. Through his journey, I found out about our culture. I got so hooked on our culture that with the help of my father, we started the Wilno Heritage Society. Now I am the president. My father stepped down after the organization was formed. (He got me involved without me knowing, smart man.) Now I am obsessed with our culture. The word Kashub comes up a lot in our conversation. Finally, we were getting somewhere. People would say we spoke a 'dialect' of the Polish language, called Kashub. True or false--is it a dialect or our own language?

Meeting the Etmanskis. Their presentation.

During my visit to Kashuby Poland I met a man that had a true passion for our culture.. He said something that caught my attention. KASHUB is not a dialect of any language, but a language on its own. Wow. This man's name was Wojciech Etmanski. This person's passion was so deep, that he got married in the Kashub language and he named his children after Kashubian royalty, Prince Barnim and Princess Damroka. The new child he and his wife are expecting will be named after another Kashubian prince or princess.

He is also in charge of a very historical flag which was passed down to him by another true Kashubian by the name of Father Groucha. Father Groucha was the first person to translate the Bible into the Kashubian language. This flag with the Griffin on it is draped over the coffin of any true Kashubian who helps preserve the Kashubian culture.

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Ola and Wojciech Etmanski with Kashubian embroidery

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The Kashubian language was always a spoken language and not a written one. Today, we have prayer books, dictionaries, Bibles, and now the book *Kaszebscze Abecadlo*. The impact of Wojciech's news of this book has shaken up our culture. We find that we are not of 'low' Polish

The Kashubian language was always a spoken language and not a written one. Today, we have prayer books, dictionaries, Bibles, and now the book *Kaszebscze Abecadlo*. The impact of Wojciech's news of this book has shaken up our culture. We find that we are not of 'low' Polish culture, but of Kashub culture. We knew that we were different, but now we can feel proud. We degraded ourselves by calling ourselves 'low' Polish. Our ancestors did not mix up our language. This is also good news for Kashuby Poland. There was fear that the Kashub language would disappear if nothing was done. The Polish language is taking over. The Kashub language is older than the Polish language, so let's not lose it.

This is good news to us because we can now teach our children the Kashub language in our schools. We have been teaching the Polish language at our school in Wilno. Because we thought that we spoke Polish, we hired a Polish teacher. When my daughter, Jenica, went to school, she was taught Polish, but when she came home to speak to me we did not understand each other. This will change. The Wilno Heritage Society will be carrying this book in their Heritage Park. Saint Mary's School of Wilno has ordered 30 copies and we get an order nearly everyday from Kashubs for this book. There were approximately 5000 books printed in Kashuby Poland and they all sold within one month. There are plans to reprint it, and when this happens we will have the book for sale. (Contact Dave at info@wilno.org or check the Wilno Heritage Society webpage <http://www.wilno.org>)

A quote from our local newspaper by Mrs. Frances Beirnaski, "This was the first time that I understood everything. All sermons and speeches were always in the Polish language and with Wojciech speaking, it was crystal clear, finally."

We have waited over 140 years for this news. Wojciech and Ola Etmanski are our Kashubian King and Queen. With Wojciech's passion for the culture and Ola teaching the Kashub language, there is hope that the language will remain strong. Like wojciech says, "NO LANGUAGE--NO CULTURE. Man spent a lot of time and money to save whales and other animals from disappearing from the face of the earth. Why not the Kashub language?"



Dave Shulist, left, with Ola and Wojciech Etmanski *Eaganville Leader*, February 2001