

WHY THE KASHUBS CAME
and
WHY THEY LEFT THEIR HOME IN EUROPE
by Kazimierz Mielewczyk

Kazimierz Mielewczyk left Poland after World War II and now lives in Barry's Bay, Ontario, in a beautiful wood house he himself built, and spends the winters in Florida. The following is an insight into the thoughts of the past, presented by a relatively new immigrant (compared to many of our ancestors who immigrated in the last quarter of the 19th century).

When it became possible to do so, the Kashubs emigrated because they were no longer free men, but governed by the Prussian Empire, as it was then called, and now called Germany. They were persecuted by the Germans for their own religion, since to the Kashubs Catholic was synonymous with Polish. They were also persecuted for their own language, and to preserve it they invented a pictorial alphabet to confuse the Germans. Even in free Poland, between WWI and WWII, we were forced to learn it as soon as we were able to talk. It was a habit by then to the Kashubs. Polish was forbidden during the German occupation. All the Kashub children attended Catechism classes at Catholic Churches. The priests taught in Polish, sort of secretly. They also taught religious songs and prayers in Polish. . .the way our grandmothers sang and recited.

Education was not compulsory, and grade schools were not common, as today. Back then there was only one high school for the whole Kashub region, at Chojnice (Konitz), and nothing was free of high costs. Only the large landowners were able, if they were enough subservient to the Germans, to send their offspring away for education, sometimes even abroad. Civil servants and government employees were only Germans, or assimilated Poles. Yes, there were a few of those. Also the opposite; some Germans were assimilating into the Kashub community.

Then there was the compulsory draft into the Prussian Army. Regiments composed entirely of Kashub youth were forced to fight their wars, and of course were led by officers and commanders who were Germans or assimilated. At war before a major attack, to get the Kashubs going, they played for them the Polish Anthem. My own Grandfather, Wojciech Mielewczyk, to avoid the draft, stuck his right hand into a threshing machine and got away with it. I have a photograph of my Grandfather with the mangled hand visible.

In a nutshell, these were the most important reasons for leaving the Old Country. The reason the Kashubs settled in the area of Wilno and Barry's Bay was because it was only the most arable land left on the Opeongo Trail at that late time. The good land was already settled by other immigrants.

But personally I live here, and love it, as I feel at home, as nowhere else today.

And in closing, Kaz offered this story.

Does anyone know what a "pikenhaube" is? It is a Prussian helmet with a pickpoint on top. The Kashub villagers made their doorways lower by eight inches so the soldiers would have to either remove their helmet or bow their heads to the Kashubs when entering.