

*We congratulate Dave Shulist of the Wilno Heritage Society **Wilno.org** as he begins this series of articles in Barry's Bay 'This Week'.*

Kashub
by David Shulist

There has been a great amount of interest expressed in the Polish Heritage in this area and when the Barry's Bay THIS WEEK asked about writing a few articles on our heritage, I was thrilled. I call the features, GLOS KASZEBSCZI (voice of the Kashub). I felt it important for the Kashub people of Renfrew County to express their views about their culture. The first few issues will cover the Kashub culture, language, religion, music, food and customs.

My first obsession with my Polish roots started with the word KASHUB. I have always asked myself, what is Kashub? It was in 1996 that a lot of my questions were answered. I received a book on my 45th birthday from my father called "THE SAGA OF THE KASHUB PEOPLE" by Father Al Rekowski. Recalling it now, I don't believe I was too enthusiastic about it, thinking it to be yet another history book. This book, however, was different and the word that caught my attention, was Kashub. After reading the book, I found out that Kashub was a culture, the culture of my Polish ancestors; a culture with its own language, music, dance and customs from the county of Poland. What puzzled me at the time was, why my ancestors didn't tell this to their children. It is a word that my grandparents and my parents never used. As far as they were concerned, they spoke the Polish language and they came from Polish culture. Being told Polish was my first language, I started school only knowing a few words of English. I began to question my roots in 1964, when I was working at my parents' store in Wilno and it was the time when a lot of Polish tourists started to visit our area. My father encouraged us to speak Polish and because I spoke Polish quite well, I figured I had nothing to lose. I still remember being proud as a peacock, but yet somewhat nervous, when my first customer came in.

I greeted him in Polish and started some small talk. Thinking I had done quite well, I was somewhat taken aback at his response. He indicated to me that he didn't understand me and if I was trying to speak Polish, that I wasn't doing a good job at it. My first thought was "did our ancestors mess up the Polish language?" – After speaking with some people in our community, the conclusion was that we must be speaking a form of "low Polish" and the people from the cities were speaking a "high Polish". Sadly, looking back on that period of time, we were actually degrading ourselves. Low Polish Culture?? Needless to say, that didn't sit well with me.

As I travelled the world, my heritage was put on the back burner. In 1975 I met my future wife, married and had a baby girl. Diana came from a Polish background from Hamtramck, Michigan. She didn't speak Polish, but her father and mother did and unfortunately, I didn't understand them when they spoke. In the 1980's, St. Mary's School in Wilno decided to teach our children the Polish language. A decision on which language should be taught had to be made and it was decided on the "high Polish". Our daughter, Jennifer, went to the classes. When she would come home, she would speak Polish to me, I would answer back and I remember the two of us looking at each other and realizing something was very wrong. I knew I had to find out the truth about my culture and the only way to find out my roots was to go back to my ancestor's homeland, Poland.

When I arrived in Warsaw, no one understood me and from there I travelled north to the region my ancestors came from, called Kaszuby. When I arrived, it was as if I was in Wilno, or Barry's Bay. They spoke Polish like we speak her in the valley. I asked one lady, in my language, what language it was that I was speaking. She looked at me with somewhat confusion and said I was speaking Kaszub. She wondered why I asked, and truthfully it was because I really had no idea what it was. At that moment, I realized I was not of "low Polish" culture, but of a unique culture called Kaszub; a or even Yakabuskitown. A Polish priest by the name of Father Ludwig Dembski, their first spiritual leader, intervened and settled it by naming the town, Wilno, after his hometown in Poland.

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That day, in reality, was the day we lost our identity. His most logical suggestion should have been to name the town, Kaszub, since 90% of the population came from the Kaszub region in Poland. Wilno, Poland, had nothing to do with the Kashubian culture. It would be similar to a settled. He was instrumental in starting the Polish boys and girls scout camp. He called the small settlement he developed near Halfway, Kaszub, in honour of the hard working Kashubs who settled this area. He made this area a vacation land for Polish people from the cities. Fr. Rafal was not a Kashub, but he had a great respect for the Kashub culture and people. The thousands of Polish people that are attracted to Kaszub, Ontario, are not Kashubs and do not speak our language, but fell in love with the area and people who live here. They are very proud of the Kashub people for working this land to make it one of the most beautiful places in the world. When Fr. Rafal named the settlement Kaszub, it meant nothing to u. At some point, we thought that they group from Newfoundland moving to let's say, China, settling in an unnamed region and their spiritual leader, having lived in Toronto, decided to name that region Toronto, after his hometown and not after the area the settlers came from. Make sense?? Not at all.

The spiritual leader we needed back then was a man called Fr. Rafal Grzondziel. Back in the 1950's, Fr. Grzondziel came to visit this area. When he arrived, he found out that this was where the Kashub people language that has 76 different dialects, a language that stands on its' own; a language that is older than the Polish language I spoke to Etmanski's, Chapeski's, Olsheski's, Yaskolski's. I felt like I was home in Renfrew County. When I arrived back home, one question still weighed heavy on my mind. Why did our ancestors not tell us that we were of Kashub culture? It took two years of analyzing and finally I had a theory.

It all started back in 1885, when Canada's first Polish settlement was given its' name. At one time, our history shows that the name of the town was going to be Princetown, after the first postmaster, Adam Prince. Suggestion of it being named after one family name brought an outcry from the local people. Why not Etmanskiville, Shulistville were the Kashubs. We were still not aware of our unique culture. If Fr. Rafal would have been here in the beginning, the name of Canada's first Polish Settlement would be named Kaszub. Today, visitors from Poland are confused. They see Wilno as being Canada's first Polish Settlement, but the name has nothing to do with the Kashub culture.

For years, the Kashub people have been ashamed to admit being Kashub. When I spoke to a Professor Dr. Hab. Brunon Synak from Poland, who is the President of Kashubian-Pomeranian Association, he remembers when he studied at the University of Gdansk, he felt ashamed of his Kashub heritage and told no one he was a Kashub. At that time, if anyone knew, they were called "stupid Kashub". Because the Kashubs were not well educated in the earlier days, they were perceived as stupid. I am sure with this perception, our ancestors felt ashamed, so the word kashub slowly disappeared and the word Polish was emphasized. It is ironic, that our ancestors came to Canada because they were denied the freedom to speak their language and practise their religion because of German occupation and yet, unfortunately, found themselves losing their cultural identity by simply following their spiritual leader. Today, with the fall of Communism, thanks to our present Pope, the Kashub people are finally expressing themselves. Toda, Mr. Synak and many others stand tall and proudly say, "I am a Polish citizen of Kashub culture; proud of my ancestors and their culture". I never want to hear the words "low Polish" again. The Polish & Kashub language are two very distinctive languages. Every day I say to myself "I have a treasure at the tip of my tongue".

In 2000, our Pope made a visit to the Kashub area of Poland and said to the people "Keep your unique Kashub culture, do not lose it, be proud of your culture and pass it on to your children".

Dave concludes: The next issue will cover the Kashub language. If you have suggestions or any Kashub stories to tell, please mail to David Shulist, P.O. Box 1085, Barry's Bay, Ont. or info@wilno.org