

What is The Kashub "Island" or "Wedge" in Poland ?

by ks. Aloysius Rekowski, CSsR

In this article let us study more closely that little wedge on Poland's map bordering on the Baltic Sea which we call Kaszuby or Kashubian Switzerland as it is sometimes called in Poland, not because of any high mountains, but because of its natural scenic beauty and its hundreds of lakes and rolling meadows. Except on its southern borders where you have the Carpathian Mountains, Poland is a very flat and agricultural country. Kaszuby is perhaps a little more rolling than most other parts of Poland and a delightful mixture of fields, meadows, forests, lakes, small rivers and canoe routes. The soil is generally sandy and, even though the annual rainfall is copious because of the proximity of the Baltic Sea, still most of the area can only grow such crops as rye, hay and potatoes. In some ways it is much more suitable for tourism than for farming.

The region (or province) of Europe between the Oder and the Vistula Rivers and bordering on the Baltic Sea has always been called Pomerania (Pomorze in Polish; Pommern in German) meaning "by the sea." The Kashubs inhabited Eastern Pomerania, sometimes called Pomorze Gdanskie. The section of Pomerania inhabited by the Kashubs was larger three, four hundred years ago but, in our times, consists of a wedge perhaps the size of Renfrew County, Ontario, running southwest of Gdansk down to the small city of Chojnice and then northwest close to the cities of Bytow and Slupsk and joining the Baltic Sea near the two lakes of Leba and Gardno.

In that little wedge there would be well over a million inhabitants. The vast majority would be concentrated in the Baltic tri-cities of Gdansk, Sopot and Gdynia. Gdansk, the largest, is a very old commercial port city at the estuary of the Vistula River where it empties into the huge bay of Gdansk. Between 1918 and 1939 Gdansk remained a free city still mainly dominated by German commercial interests. And so Poland, lacking any port which it could call unequivocally its own, decided to develop Gdynia. Gdynia, the port where the Polish passenger liner Stefan Batory has a berth when it plies between Montreal and Poland during the summer months, was originally a completely Kashub town. Along with Gdansk, and Szczecin further west on the Oder River, Gdynia today has developed into one of the three main ports of Poland. The tri-cities today have a very cosmopolitan, even though thoroughly Polish character. The sailors, dock-workers and ship-builders come from all over Poland. What percentage of their inhabitants would be of Kashub parentage is hard to say, perhaps as low as ten percent. But I feel sure that there were many "still stubborn" and independent-minded Kashubs among the first associates of Lech Walesa in those port cities where Solidarity was born.

The ethnic Kashub population two, three hundred years ago has been cited as totalling approximately four hundred thousand (400,000). Today in that wedge there may still dwell upwards of two hundred thousand Kashubs who still preserve some of the old traditions and who may still understand or speak the dialect, though for the most of them classical Polish is today the everyday language, at least outside their own homes.

The heart of Kaszuby would be around the cities (10 - 15 thousand) of Kartuzi and Koscierzyna for the central and southern Kashubs and around the larger city of Wejherowo in the region adjacent to the peninsula of Hel for the northern Kashubs. Our middle-aged and older generation would feel very much at home among our cousins there, as I did during my two-week stay with them. Apart from the odd modern Polish expression, you would soon forget you are in Poland in the villages of Lipusz, Parchowo, Rekowo, Kalisz Kaszubski, as the Laskas, Palubickis, Peplinskas, Rekowskis, Turzynskis, Kulases etc. started conversing with you in everyday Kashub.

Father Aloysius Rekowski is a noted Kashubian scholar who has written over 100 articles on the subject of the Kashubs. His ancestors are from Lipusz and neighboring parishes in Poland.

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