

Kashubian Identity and Related Issues

from *The Kashubs Today* by Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński

The Kashubian identity, as any social phenomenon, is quite complicated. It is possible to describe it through a few statements, but each of them has been called into question in recent years.

I.

The first statement claims that... "Kashubs are Kashubian," which means that the base of their identity is the Kashubian culture, especially the language. Recently, however, researchers state that the role played by the language in constituting the Kashubian identity is losing its significance, with increasing importance of such elements as Kashubian origin, family ties, birthplace, etc. From the point of view of the group, essential are also such factors as historical experiences and shared vicissitudes, native homeland (*tatczëna*), shared customs, intellectual and artistic heritage, common institutions, etc.

Thus, it is possible today to be a Kashub, without speaking Kashubian. Moreover, it is possible to be a Kashub by choice, i.e. without any Kashubian roots. On the other hand, frequent are cases of persons who know the language and have Kashubian roots, but do not acknowledge this. The question: "What does it mean to be a Kashub?" is open and continually discussed.

II.

The second statement claims that the Kashubs are not German. This is a result of the difficult, often dramatic, Kashubian-German relations in the past, and particularly the developments of 1939-1945. Obviously, this does not mean that the Kashubs were not Germanized. On the contrary, political pressure and attractiveness of the German culture, particularly during Poland's partitions, and in Western Pomerania also between the World Wars, induced many Kashubs to choose the German option of nationality. Yet, such a choice meant explicitly resignation of one's Kashubianness, since Germans looked upon the Kashubian culture with certain superiority and disrespect. A person who wanted to become German must have rejected Kashubian heritage. The Kashubian movement in the XIXth century was born right from the resistance against Germanization. For Kashubian leaders it was obvious that one cannot be Kashubian and German at the same time.

Yet...recent years have brought some changes also in that respect. Evidence can be the fact that the majority of persons belonging to the German minority community in Pomerania have Kashubian roots, and they do stress this. On the other hand, many persons originating from Pomerania who live in Germany are starting to discover their Kashubian roots, making this an attractive element of their own family history. Certainly, of great influence was the literary output of Günter Grass, but also the political changes after 1989, friendly relations between Poland and Germany, or changes of the social climate in Germany itself, where stressing somebody's distinctiveness stopped being perceived as worse. Therefore, many persons who immigrated to Germany claiming their "German descent" in the 1970s and 1980s, nowadays quite eagerly declare their Kashubianness.

III.

The third statement claims that the Kashubian and Polish identities are not mutually exclusive. Brunon Synak, basing on his empirical research claims, "Strong Kashubian identification does not intervene with an explicit definition of and emphasis put on Polish ethnicity/nationality. Kashubianness and Polishness are identities that overlap on various levels of identification (regional and national), yet within the same

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universal cultural values. (...) Kashubian and Polish identities are not substitutional, thus one of them, when strengthening, does not weaken or divest of another." (Synak, Brunon 1998 *Kaszubska tożamość. Ciągłość i zmiana*. Studium Socjologiczne, Gdańsk, pp72-73).

Nevertheless, that sentence has recently been subject to discussion. Do the Kashubs really have a double identity—Kashubian and Polish? Is that right?

Opponents of this thesis claim that making such an assumption, one dooms the Kashubs to inevitable eventual assimilation (Polonization), as the Polish culture (especially the Polish language) always act in a dominant position. In other words, Kashubian-Polish relations are not equivalent and lead to weakening of Kashubian constituents. Therefore, in order to protect and develop the Kashubian identity one should accept the thesis, according to which the Kashubs are a separate West Slavic nation—linked strongly with the Poles, but separate.

That view has recently caused harsh discussions within the Kashubian community, so far not decisively settled. Yet, it is beyond all doubt that an absolute majority of Kashubs become identified with(in) the group and declare the Polish nationality at the same time.

IV.

The above remarks are related with the fourth statement: Kashubian identity undergoes change. It can be inherited, thoughtlessly adopted in the process of socialization in families and community. It can be also 'recovered' in the case of persons who come from such families where their Kashubian origin was concealed or not attached with any importance. Or, it can also be a consequence of a deliberate, conscious choice, the result of one's own cognitive effort or cultural activity

Researchers claim that in accordance with global tendencies, the issue here is a gradual transition from a passive, thoughtless adherence to one's homeland, native culture and values, to a more and more active search for the deepening of an individual and group identity, i.e. the so-called 'new ethnicity.'

See 'Book Sources' on page 3 for information about ordering

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Book Review

English—Polish—Kashub Dictionary

Hoping to fulfill a need of English speakers and show the relationship between the three languages, Stanisław Frymark has assembled the *English-Polish-Kashub Dictionary*. It was published by the Wilno Heritage Society which is celebrating 150 years of the arrival of Kashubs to their area and whose descendants are still very aware of their heritage. The booklet is first of all a dictionary of basic words, but also includes a pronunciation guide and some common phrases.

The seasons:	Spring—wiosna—zymk
	Summer—lato—lato
	Autumn, fall—jesień—jesén
	Winter—zima—zěma

The book is available from

the Wilno Heritage Society, Wilno, Ontario K0J 2N0, Canada, wilno.org; heritage@wilno.org.