

The Kaszubs

from *Żołnierz Polski* (Nr. 23), Sunday, June 7, 1924, a weekly published in Warsaw

Take note of the date of this article. It reflects the thinking of that time.

by Czesław Rokicki

translated by Renata Stachowicz and Blanche Krbecek

From the Baltic Sea to the Carpathian Mountains and from the Oder River to Wilno and further, one great Polish nation lives. If one travels to different parts of Poland, however, or even listens and observes a group of Poles from different parts of the country, for example soldiers in a regiment from different parts of Poland, it is easy to notice that Poles differ from one another. Their speech, the way they look, dress and act is different. In one part of Poland a bucket is called *kubel*, in another *wiadro* and still another *wębork*. Here the speech is slow and there fast. There their traditional dress is navy blue, there brown and over there stripes, all with different ornamentation. Even the shade of the skin, height, posture and the way they walk differs from one region of Poland to another. In summary, among Poles, just like among those of every nation of the world, there are different tribes. There are the Mazury, the Krakowians, the Gorali from the mountains, those from Wielkopolska (Greater Poland) as well as Kresowcy living in Poland's former Eastern frontier. The differences between the tribes are not remarkable, but still exist. I would like to talk in detail about the Poles from near the sea, called Kaszubs.

The Kaszubs live in the northwestern part of Poland on the shores of the sea and near where the Wistula River enters the sea. This area, from the earliest times, was called Pomerania, meaning near the sea. And, Kaszubs, some hundred years ago, were called Pomeranians.

A long time ago, Pomeranians occupied a greater area than today. The area where the Pomeranians lived was larger, but as time passed the Western part, the part west of the Oder River, was completely Germanized—only the Pomeranians living east of the Oder toward the Wistula River remained Polish.

Among all the Polish tribes, the Kaszubian village dialect is the strongest. This dialect differs from the popular, or book, language, mainly in pronunciation of some sounds. The words, however, and grammar are the same. The best examples can be seen in the lyrics of *frantowki* or Kaszubian folk songs. Also, there is a part of one song which was written in a manner similar to *Jeszcze Polska nie Zginęła* (trans. note: Polish National anthem) by a well-known patriot and composer, to fortify Kaszubs against Germanization.

Nigdy do zgube
Nie przyńdom kaszube
Marsz, marsz za wrodziem
Me trzymame z Bòdziem.

Never will the Kaszubs
Come to loss and ruin.
March, march after the foe.
We will hold with God.

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Kaszubian dialect suffered due to the influence of Germanization. They use some words taken from the German language, such a *knop* for *chłopiec* (boy) and *mùca* instead of *czapka rybacka* (fisherman's hat).

Kaszubs are patient and headstrong—that is their primary genetic trait or marker. Then they are hard working and very religious, careful and like to keep to themselves. Also they are not very trusting of others, a trait possible acquired as a reaction to the Prussians during the partitions. They are not as lively and happy as the Mazurs or Krakowians. Their main virtue, sometimes carried to a fault, is persistence, therefore Kaszubs are prone to foam with rage. They will sue one another and continue the feud for years. Thanks to the perseverance of the Kaszubs, Poland retains the right to the sea—the right based on the language and customs of the people living near the sea. The Kaszubs remained there regardless of German waves that pounded them from different directions. Little by little, the Germans eroded Kaszubian land and customs, but these were only small pieces. The complex of social and cultural conditions allowed them to hold out until the arrival of independence and unification of the homeland.

Kaszubs are mostly peasants with small holdings, called *gburs*, and some are landless. By the sea and lakes, of which there are an abundance here, live fishermen for whom fishing is their bread and butter. Among the *gburs* we'll find many lower gentry. Their financial situation does not differ much from that of other peasants, but it differs when it comes to customs, and just like in other parts of Poland, these differences fade slowly. Among both German and Polish villagers in small towns, factory workers are almost non-existent in the Kaszubian region since there is almost no manufacturing here. There is, however, major at-home manufacturing, which includes making pottery, embroidery and weaving. After uniting with Poland, Kaszubs, mostly those living near the seashore, earn income from the hospitality industry, or renting rooms during the summer and providing food for the guests.

The Kaszubs in the old Polish country next to the German country lived side by side but there was no movement in industry, manufacture or among people. This contributed to the preservation of customs which were forgotten and considered as relics elsewhere. In language alone, they are using ancient Polish words, such as *dzierżeć* (instead of *trzymać*, hold or keep) and *naju* (instead of *nas*, us). They retain in memory many beliefs and superstitions: they believe in various ghosts or spirits such as *smętki*, *kraśnięta* (vampires, night walkers) and *łóppji* (dead souls that bring death to living ones). They believe that if a snake is killed on Candlemas Day it has beneficial powers. The fact that in 1836 a woman believed to be a witch was drowned on Hel Peninsula confirms that belief in black images was already strong and alive then.

(to be continued in the next issue)

Continuation:

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by Czesław Rokicki

In the new country of Poland (translator note: post WWI) the standing and role of Kaszubian Pomerania changed. It became one of the most visited areas and the center where all Polish effort focuses on developing the marine industry. Therefore, the Kaszub tradition will for sure disappear soon (sic), considering that the Kaszubs are educated and read eagerly and extensively.

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The nationalism of Kaszubs increased in 1848 when they participated in the inter-Polish movement against the Prussians. Similar to those from Wielkopolska (Greater Poland), they attacked smaller cities and disarmed Prussian soldiers. During the "January movement" they formed their own Kaszubian group which unfortunately had to resign their positions when they learned that the "movement" was about to die. Later the so called "cultural war" that German Minister Bismark started against Catholicism, turned the God-loving Kaszubs against the Germans. It should be mentioned that there is a small group of Evangelicans among the Kaszubs.

The Germans worked very hard during the partitions to separate Kaszubs from their homeland block. Therefore they colonized the south part of Pomerania with settlers brought intentionally from Germany and formed a boundary to separate Kaszubs from Wielkopolska inhabitants who, as we all know, were under German rule. They Germanized the Kaszubian infrastructure. Thus, in official documents they referred to the Kaszubian dialect as a totally different language, *kasschubische Sprache*, and the Kaszubs were never referred to as Poles. They knew it is best to first break a nation into small pieces, and then take it piece by piece. When Pomerania was going back to Poland, the lying Germans kept stressing to the Kaszubs that they were not Poles, and unfortunately they still do it from time to time, quietly to weaken Poland and tear it internally to gain another piece of it.

Kaszubs survived all of this for 150 years of captivity and they retained their Polish culture. Only every now and then there is a weaker Kaszubian spirit that gives in to those treacherous whispers. Kaszubs welcomed the Polish Army as saviors when five years ago they came with General Haller to claim the Baltic shore.

Unfortunately we must admit that now, after we gained independence, there have been some unpleasant misunderstandings between Kaszubs and Poles from other parts of the country who are coming to Pomerania. Often the fault is on the Kaszubs' side who take everything new with reserve. But, most often the newcomers are at fault since they cannot understand, feel and respect some small differences and different customs of the Kaszubs.

Let us all remember that every clerk and every Polish soldier, by careful and respectful dealings with the citizens, will bring them closer to the Polish country, but with the wrong actions the opposite will be true. By observing everyone, even the lowest grade Polish official or Polish soldier, people are judging the Polish country, its principles, laws, power and durability.

In particular, I would say it is never permissible to ridicule a dialect of people from certain parts of a country, even though it seems strange. The same applies to different customs and old habits. If the habits are bad, they will disappear through the aid of progress and education, but if they are only different, then let's leave them alone since they do not hurt anyone. A soldier would not be worth of being a Polish soldier if he were harassing or harming civilians. We are all brothers, Poles from the sea to the Carpathian Mountains. Let us love and respect one another as brothers. By doing so we are strengthening Poland because at the same time we are strengthening ourselves.