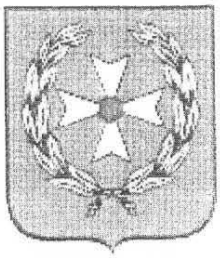
Wejherowo

Excerpted from **Kashubia, Homeland of the Baltic Slavs**
A Tourist Handbook
by **Jaroslaw Ellwart**, translated by **John M.** and **Liesel Hingst**



Wejherowo Coat of Arms

Wejherowo (Kaszubian: Wejrowò, German: Neustadt in Westpreussen), situated in the valley of the Reda and Łeba rivers, is one of the largest Kaszubian towns and the Kaszubian culture is still vibrant here. This is the only town in Kaszubia that originated under the First Polish Repblic *[1569-1795]*. It is a spiritual capital and especially famous for its 300 year old pilgrim center, the 26 chapel Calvary (sanctuary of the Passion or Way of the Cross) begun by Jakub Wejher.

The province of Malbork (Marienburg), which leased the landed estates of Śmiechowo (Schmechau) among others, conveyed *[to Jakub Wejher]* the settlement called Wejherowska Wola (Weihersfrei), with permission of the Polish King Władysław IV. Nearby flowed the little stream Biała (later renamed Cedron), which Wejher named after the town of Biała near Smoleńsk, where the explosion of a mine had buried him and only by God's help did he survive. After his rescue, he vowed to build a church on his estate.

Within a dozen years or so, Wejherowo had two churches and a Franciscan cloister, with a row of chapels on the adjacent hillsides. With all these, the steadily growing settlement obtained municipal rights in 1650. After Jakub's death, his heirs continued the work. *[However,]* the small community lived in the shadow of the Schmechau estate and fared rather badly. A hundred years later the population had only risen to about 250. Only the activity of the cloister distinguished Wejherowo from the other small border towns. The Franciscan clerics operated a school and put together an appreciable library. Besides education, the cloister dedicated itself to missionary work, thanks to which many Protestants were converted to the Catholic persuasion, which later would become a feature of the the Polish nationality.

The first partitioning of Poland (1772) brought considerable legal changes *[under Purssioan rule]* which were implemented after the Napoleonic Wars *[1803-1815]* with the creation of Wejherowo County. The choice of this small town as the county seat was influenced by its good traffic network and the insignificance of its Polish population segment. The influx of officials, merchants and free farmers from the surrounding villages caused the population to climb from 736 in the year 1776 to 4,145 in the year 1871. A high school opened in 1850 and the town gradually acquired a municipal character.

Throughout the 1800s Wejherowo was a showplace for the struggles between the Kaszubian movement and the Germans. One of the steps *[taken by the Prussian government]* was the eviction of the

Continued on page 9

Wejherowo continued from page 8

Franciscans. In 1834 the Order was directed to vacate its cloister buildings. The monks delayed their departure until they could find new accommodations, into which they finally moved in 1872. Just three years later they were again obliged to leave their new cloister. The authorities were supported in this by the Keyserlingk family, who owned the landed estates in Wijherowo. At the start of the 1900s, the Kaszubes began to organize *[themselves]* socially and economically. For instance, there were the Polish People's Bank, the famous 'Lutnia' choir and an array of pro-Polish organizations. The indulgences *[obtainable]* at the Calvary mountain also had a great importance. The long-time provost of Wejherowo, Walenty Dąbrowski, preached in the Kaszubian language and encouraged the pilgrims from all over Kaszubia to remain loyal to their faith and their mother tongue.

A certain awakening to Polonism came in 1920 when units of the Polish army under General Haller marched into the town. Within a few years Wejherowo was almost entirely Polonized. In the election of 1924, only 25% of the votes went to German candidates. *[However,]* the initial passion quickly faded, and the officials who were sent to Wejherowo from Poland's interior soon had the people against them because of their incompetence and failure to understand the local conditions. Previously existing economic contacts were cut off by the *[newly]* drawn *[international]* border. Only in the cultural sphere did Wejherowo play any further role as a regional center. Many graduates of the local high school joined in the movement toward regionalism.

The year 1939 was a tragic one in the town's history. A part of the German population participated in the extermination campaign of the National Socialists. Many distinguished Polish townspeople were murdered in the Piaśnica (Piasnitz) woodlands located nearby. During the first year of German occupation, those Poles who had moved here after World War I were expelled, and the vacated farms were taken over by Germans. In 1942 began the extensive campaign to coerce the residents into signing the People's List III (and thereby taking German nationality). Families who refused to accept German citizenship were expelled or deported to labor camps. Overall, 90% of the people in the town and county of Wejherowo had taken German citizenship by the summer of 1944. Despite the German terror, the Kaszubian underground organization "Pomeranian Griffon" made its appearance already in 1941. By 1943 there was also a pathfinder unit, subordinate to the second pathfinder *[headquarters]* in Gdynia (Gdingen).

On the 12th of March, 1945 the Red Army took the town. Although Polish authorities had been called into action, the residents had to endure days-long plundering and violence. Thanks to the work of the *[local]* firefighters founded by Jozef Landowski, Wejherowo escaped the fate of many other Pomeranian towns that were left in soot and ashes after the liberation. The new forcibly imposed rule of the Red Army was not to everyone's taste. In the first postwar year, a few anti-Communist partisan groups were active, but by 1951 these were broken up by the security service and militia.

Present points of interest in Wejherowo are the hospital from the 1700s, the Neustadt parish church, a former town hall from the 1700s, the Franciscan cloister church from the 1600s, the former Evangelical church from the mid 1800s and the library of the Kaszubian-Pomeranian Museum of Literature and Music. At the foot of the hill is the Przebendowski Palace of the Keyserlingks, erected on the site of the old palace of the Wejhers and the Przebendowskis (Prebendows). Since 1993 this had been renovated for the Kaszubian-Pomeranian Museum, founded in 1967 and continuing the work of a regional museum at Sopot (Zoppot) which existed from 1913 to 1918. The Calvary mountain, the "Kazubian Jerasusalem", has drawn pilgrims for over three centuries.