

## **The Change of the Cashubian Identity before Entering the EU**

*Agata Grabowska, gabory@poczta.fm*

*Pawel Ladykowski, poolad@poczta.fm*

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology,  
Warsaw University, Warsaw

### **The History of the Cashubians**

Cashubians as an ethnic group escape anthropological or sociological categorizations. For more than 100 years they are engaged in fight for their rights and raising of their status.

Since 1848, when the awakening of nations began, small-numbered Cashubian intelligentsia started an open discussion on who the Cashubians actually are and whom they wish to become.

At the course of XIX and XX century Cashubians lived on the territory of Germany (Prussia), but in the borderland of German and Polish ethnical group. They formed a typical borderland group that tried to protect their identity from the influence of Prussian policy of Germanization as well as from the disseminating in the predominant Polish national group. Actually, Poles' situation at the time was the same – both Polish and Cashubian group were endangered by the German *Kulturkampf* pressure.

For centuries the Cashubian territory was diminishing. Constantly influenced by Germans of Western Pomerania, the Cashubians were gradually losing their language and their customs. In the XVI century, when the last member of the indigenous Pomeranian dynasty of Gryfits died, the Cashubians were crowded out into the peasant stratum. The last Cashubian prince died in 1637 and the Gryfits' heritage came into possession German dynasties. The Cashubians lost their representation in the duchy of Cashubia and Pomerania.

In the beginning of XX century several thousands of Cashubians were living in Pomerania around Gdansk. Small, isolated groups lived also in Western Pomerania. It was the first time when their young village intelligentsia started to deal with problem of self-identity. For the first

time the Cashubians were able to discuss if they can afford the independence, or should they connect themselves with other, stronger national groups. This Cashubian debate became more significant in the beginning of the World War I. That was crucial time – after 120 years – the new Polish state started to emerge from the ruins of the great empires: Russia, Prussia, Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. Cashubians were pushed to decide whether they wish to join this new Polish state or Germany. Decision of the majority of them of associating the Cashubian future with Poland was based on the sense of shared ethnic, lingual and cultural background. They chose the Polish identity with observing their separate local character. During the interwar period Cashubians became an integral part on the cultural scene of Polish Pomerania. At the same time they formed Polish representation of the Free City of Gdansk, being the main reason of the Polish policy towards Gdansk. Cashubian farmers were delivering agricultural products to the city. Also the smack crews were recruited from the local, Cashubian fishermen. Actually, Cashubian was the main language one might have heard in Gdansk markets.

The German invaders made an effort to separate and set the Cashubians and Poles dispersed. During the World War II the Cashubians along with the Silesians were within the group subjected to the *Volkslist*. Introducing different categories of citizenships within the III Reich did not give any effect in setting the two related groups against each other. These happenings – the history of Cashubians in Gdansk before and during the II World War – became a topic of novel *Blechtrommel* by Günter Grass, the German novelist accepting his Cashubian origin.

After 1945, when Poland experienced Soviet influence, the problem of Cashubians was reduced to a “safe” level of popular folklore. Official statistics did not show any existence of minority groups. The groups struggling with the dilemma of identity and creating the status were either subjected to strong polonization (i.e. Silesia) or became reduced to the level of local folk festivity. The Cashubians were given the chance to act within the framework of the existing Cashubian organizations, however their “progress” was in advance limited to scheme imposed by the Polish totalitarian state. Due to this policy Cashubians became to perceive themselves as a local version of a broader type of Polish peasants. They were among ethnographical groups of Poland. Popular folklore festivities

deprived of its sacral character – it was the main picture of the Cashubian society during the period of the Polish People's Republic. Cultural pressure resulted also rooting out of the language from the cities. Cashubian language, as reduced to a local dialect by the state propaganda, was only spoken at home. The fact that the Cashubian Switzerland, as this region is also called, is one the most popular regions visited by tourists, contributed to the increase of significance of the predominant Polish language. National policy of the state imposed a special pattern of Polish culture, deprived of any – also the Cashubian – differences. The Cashubians were accepted only as an ethnographical folk group of Poland, deprived of any cultural independence and the possibility of building their Cashubian identity. In fact they disappeared from the public life.

#### **The Cashubians and free mass media**

Year 1989 brought the fall of the communist regime in Poland. The transformation began and set free the problems of actual cultural diversity. The Cashubians, along with the other cultural groups, benefited from this situation and made use of freshly regained freedom. The freedom of speech occurred to be one of the most important issues of the Cashubian identity. Local papers were published for the first time. They reflected local problems and, what is even more significant, were printed in Cashubian language. The main source of Cashubian identity – their language – was mostly preserved in local (home) speech until that time. Cashubian identity is based mainly on language, as the territory of the region has been changing in the course of the centuries. They head gradually West, filling the gap in the Cashubian population in the Bytów and Lebork districts. From the beginning of the 1990s Cashubian was officially granted the status of a language, not a dialect. In 1996 it was standardized which resulted its rapid progress. Cashubian become not only a language of home communication but also a mean of artistic expression. Again the leaders were from young village intelligentsia. Their main goal is the education based on Cashubian. As language of school textbooks and writings, Cashubian has been promoted to the main language of instruction. The classical canon of the Polish literature is being translated into Cashubian. Its presence in the theatre, regional television and radio became basic element of the Cashubian cultural

landscape. In 2002, referring to the constitutional rights of Polish citizens representing national and ethnic minorities, the Cashubian-Pomeranian Association (*Kaszëbskô-Pòmòrszczé Zrzeszenié*) turned to the Parliament Committee of Culture and the Committee of National and Ethnic Minorities in order to gain the official guarantee of legal and financial bases of access of the Cashubian language to the mass media. Also, the Cashubian-Pomeranian Association wrote: “we are glad to watch the changes taking place in our country, which prepare us for the full membership of the European Union. According to the Poland’s policy towards EU, the Cashubian society requires that legal base for financial support of presence of Cashubian in mass media will be created. This will guarantee to Cashubian language equal rights in the access to free mass media as the other ethnic groups of EU countries have (i.e. Phrygian in the Netherlands). At the moment the situation of Cashubian language and its access to the free mass media is absolutely not satisfactory”.

### **Cashubian as a language of Church**

With the support of local Cashubian clergy and the catholic Pope, Cashubian became the language of the liturgy in the local churches. In 1993 the Archbishop issued the instructions on the status of Cashubian as a language of liturgy and its presence in life of Archdiocese of Gdansk. The Archbishop confirmed the significance of Cashubian as the language of sermons and encouraged the Cashubian catholics to use it as the language of their prayers. At the moment 16 parishes introduced the Cashubian as the language of the liturgy.

### **Cashubian language as the main factor of creating the Cashubian identity**

There is more than 100 authors of the Cashubian origin writing in their mother tongue. Today the Cashubian regains its previous position, lost due to the nationalistic policy of the People’s Republic of Poland. It sounds not only in the countryside but also in the cities of Gdansk Pomerania: in Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot. The Cashubians show persistence and great determination in cultivating their tradition and promoting the language. Recently there has been created the Cashubian

Philology at the University of Gdansk. It is the first step towards creating the other university faculties with the Cashubian as the language of instruction. At the moment there are 34 primary schools and 7 secondary schools with the Cashubian taught as the additional language. Each year the Cashubian becomes the crucial matter for great number of institutions of education, partly because of the students' initiative. It is the right of pupils and their parents to introduce the application for teaching in their mother tongue (according to legal instructions there is minimum seven signatures needed on order to take the application into account). The inhabitants of several towns and villages of the region enjoyed this privilege already requesting in the Ministry of Education for the creation of the Cashubian ethnical high school, with the Cashubian as the language of the instruction. Another crucial issue for the society are the Cashubian surnames, for most of them preserves the XIX century German or Polish influences. The same matter of re-cashubization concerns the place-names, rivers, lakes or the Cashubia region hills. Several villages initiated the use of double street names, however the final plan comprises the state "when the maps, the stamps, the sign-boards carried the double names", suggest the most active ones.

In the Spring 2002, on the occasion of census the Cashubians had an opportunity to manifest their separatism. The census questionnaire concerned the matters of national and ethnical origin and the home language. For the first time the question of the *Cashubian nation* was discussed in public. Part of the leaders of the Cashubian movement persuaded to demonstrate the *Cashubian nationality*: "we are in the nation-building phase", they motivated.

Great deal of the Cashubians declared the Polish nationality but indicated the Cashubian as the mother tongue. The significance of declarations such as "nationality – Cashubian, home language – Cashubian, citizenship – Polish" visibly increased. "We wish to evoke the open discussion on who the Cashubians actually are. This will have the crucial meaning for our future. Accepting our cultural and lingual separateness is an introduction to strengthening our own ethnic identity" declares one of the Cashubian leaders.

### **Double identity**

„Nationality is an individual issue, delicate and complicated. The Cashubian richness is based on their double identity. Great deal of the Cashubians are of the Polish nationality. I wish that the questionnaire reflected the reality. I would like to have a chance to demonstrate my Polish nationality and my Cashubian origin, my participation in its heritage at he same time. I hope that the next census will give us such an opportunity” says Brunon Synak on <http://gdansk.naszemiasto.pl/ekartki/>.

### **“I believe in the Cashubian nation”**

Tomasz von Piechowski, the Cashubian from Torun: „We do not want to create a separate country. It is the home of all of us: Poles, Cashubians, Belarussians and other nations. The fact that the majority of Cashubians do not perceive themselves as the separate nation is a result of the policy of depriving the Cashubians of their national character, started during the interwar period and later continued in the People’s Republic of Poland. The double identification leads to decline of the Cashubian identity, to the assimilation. The existence of the nation resembles the faith in God. I believe in the Cashubian nation and I plan to spread my faith. But in the [Cashubian-Pomeranian] Association we are not unanimous on this matter”.

### **The Cashubians**

There are ca 500 thousand of Cashubians living in Pomerania. The Cashubians are one of three (along with 2 million society of Silesians and few representatives of Mazurians) indigenous ethnic minority groups of Poland. The Cashubian belongs to the Slavonic languages. However standardized, it is still in progress, mostly due to its dialectal differentiation. The Cashubian population is predominant in the country, owing to which they are able to preserve their ethnic and cultural character.

### **The snuff and Cashubian identity**

In 2000 the Polish Parliament introduced an act of law prohibiting the use of drugs and the snuff. For weeks this event became the main topic of public discussion in the media. The legislators did not expect that the act affects the most the Cashubians and their self-identity. The snuff occurred to be the type of condiment of a crucial for the Cashubian tradition function. The defence of the snuff integrated the entire Cashubian society. The law has been perceived as the attempt on the Cashubian cultural identity. The fight for right to the snuff not only integrated different fractions of the Cashubian movement but also distinguished them from the rest of Polish society. The final change in the law, owing to which free access to the snuff was preserved, equalled Cashubians ability to intervene to certain issues at the state level. The prohibition of the snuff for Cashubians is of similar significance as hypothetical prohibition of alcohol in Bavaria during the *Oktoberfest*.

### **Cashubians and the European Union**

The evolution of the Cashubian identity becomes increasingly significant before entering the European Union. Today its development is clear. During the last 13 years the Cashubians evolved from regional ethnographical Polish group into the strong, expansive ethnic group. Their transformation became a subject of the debate of the Parliamentary Committee for the National and Ethnic Minorities. Their transformation into an ethnic group is already a fact. However, the processes of emerging the ethnic or national groups are not over. These phenomena are continuously subjected to different factors shaping social groups into the new national units. Since the fall of communist regime Cashubians experience changes in their mentality. The EU-accession of Poland will only intensify this process. The EU legislation promotes the preservation of the regional diversity and encourages creating new identities: regional, ethnic or even quasi-national. Perhaps what is today *gene Cassubiae, nationae Poloniae*, owing to the European Union legislation may become *gene Cassubiae, nationae Cassubiae*. The stronger is the Cashubian position in the Polish state, the more real seems their ability of becoming the valued part of the European tradition. The status of Spanish Catalonia,

French Brittany or German Bavaria demonstrates the benefits of joining the European Union. These examples realise that Poland's access to the EU grants the Cashubians their opportunity to become one of the European ethnic or even national units. As Cashubians say: "One's love to his *heimat* – his region, in our case Cashubia, and at the same time to the great homeland – Poland – may be beneficial to both of these loves".

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