

In Search of Kashubia, Part II: Czorlinski's Kashubia

Hieronim Derdowski (1852-1902) was a devoted Kashubian patriot who was often imprisoned for his anti-Prussian activities. He was the first Kashubian to write outstanding literary works in the Kashubian language. His famous poem, "About Mr. Czorlińscim Who Goes to Puck for Fish Nets. presented the beliefs and culture of our ancestors from the second half of the 19th century in a humorous fashion.

The poem tells about Mr. Czorliński's adventures on the way from his home in Chmielno to Puck, where he intends to buy fishing nets. The distance he has to travel on the sleigh is about 40 miles, so the trip should take a few days at most. Czorliński, however, gets into such trouble that after eight weeks of wandering all over northern Kashubia, he is still far from home. Eventually, his concerned wife finds her husband and takes him home. The funny events and witty remarks contained in the poem show many important aspects of life in Kashubia at the end of the 19th century.

One important theme of the comedy is the pride of being Kashubian and the desire for independence from Prussia. When Czorlinski is on the island of Oliwa, the former residence of the Kashub dukes, Brother Leon displays to Czorlinski portraits of the dukes who ruled in the 12th and 13th centuries, in effect the "glory days" of long ago. Kashubians longed for a restoration of their independence. Czorlinski sings his patriotic Kashubian March hymn, which years later was adopted by many Kashubians as their "national anthem."

Never will the Kashubs
Come to loss and ruin
March, march after the foe
We still hold with God!

We carried on bloody wars
With the Germans through the centuries
Songs of freedom always ringing
Over the hill and pine groves (66).

Another example of Kashubia's glorious past of Poland occurs when Czorlinski gazes at the beautiful gardens in Rzucewo.

King Sobieski had planted the very first trees in that garden:
At first he had been the castellan of the castle at Ciszewo
Now he was called in Poland and among the Kashubs King John Sobieski III
When the Kashubs had helped him chase out the Turks from Vienna
He granted the rank of nobility to many a peasant (149).

In the late 19th century, Prussia was inexorably populating Kashubia with German settlers and administrators. Poland was the counterforce to this pressure, and Polish was spoken by many inhabitants. In the midst of this contention between Prussia and Poland, the Kashubians felt the strongest allegiance to the village or town in which they lived. Kashubian townspeople were protective of their fellow villagers and suspicious of outsiders. Hospitality was highly regarded.

Riding through the village of Kantrzyn, Czorlinski tries to disguise himself because he is hauling the goods of Jewish peddlers. The local Kashubians accost him, but when they recognize him, they treat him to a feast fit for a nobleman (32). The characters feel a strong solidarity with those that speak Kashubian. At night when Czorlinski's sleigh breaks through the ice of a lake near Izbice, the villagers immediately assemble a rescue team. Following the rescue effort, the villagers generously feed Czorlinski and give him lodging for the night (76).

Kashubians resisted Prussian authority in various ways. One simple technique, demonstrated by Czorlinski, was to avoid paying customs fees by using back roads to circumvent the checkpoints (44). Kashubian disdain for local Prussian authorities is demonstrated in the humorous description of a Prussian gendarme:

For at that moment there stood in the doors an awesome figure!
This wicked apparition had on its head a little propeller instead of a kapuza (cap).
And on its chest, its buttons were gleaming like stars.
It had a totally disheveled beard and long whiskers
So that one could see only a wee corner of its mouth (pyska).
Its head was like a barrel: its eyes were as big as plates. . . .
Behind its hind legs there appeared the wee end of a tail (48).

Czorlinski ends the gendarme's tirade against him with a knockout punch to his left eyebrow "in our Kashub manner."

Kashubians resented the superior attitude of many Poles. Czorlinski tells of his experience in Warsaw, where he was disrespected as a second-class citizen (118). However, many Kashubians felt that union with Poland was the best political pathway forward. Brother Leon serves as Derdowski's spokesman when he states: "Mszczug II signed over his whole principality forever into the hands of the Polish King. And so it was that Poland received eternal rights to our land and became our protectress and our fatherland (138)."

The importance of the parish church in the daily lives of Kashubians in the late 19th century is shown in many ways. The moment when Czorlinski sets out on his journey to buy fish nets, his wife goes to church to pray for his safe return. She asks the old ladies as well as the poor people at church to add their prayers. Mrs. Czorlinski prays again when her husband sets sail for Jastarnia. Mr. Czorlinski is very concerned that the soul of his Jewish friend might not get to heaven, so goes to great trouble to have church bells rung for the admittance of his soul to heaven.

For Czorlinski, who was sitting in front of the bell tower deep in thought
Things now got so much lighter on his conscience
He knew that when the bell begging for forgiveness out-tolled both the others
That God had forgiven Bartek all his debts (85).

Derdowski uses the humorous Old Testament exam that the organist gives Czorlinski to underscore the religious fervor of the Kashubians.

Where is Paradise, where there is plenty of everything?
Paradise is in Wiece, which is called Vietzig in German.
For there it stands out in one of the psalms, "Adam, God's servant-boy,
You are sitting with God in Wiece."

Tell us what surname did the Holy Trinity give Adam. . . .
"Pan Skruszela" replied our nobleman: "That's the honest truth!"
An old church hymn taught us that. . .
It states clearly that the first parent was called "Skruszela."
There are a few of them living in Leśno, Jamno and Parchowo. . . .
Christ was born in KashubBytów
For Bytów and Bethlehem, that is one and the same town (141).

If the first pillar of Kashubian society was the Catholic Church, the second is the sacredness of marriage. An example of the power and importance of marriage is the tender and tenacious love relationship between the Czorlinskis. As her husband departs on his journey for fishnets, Mrs. Czorlinski wipes away her tears and "lovingly watches him disappear" (1). Her jealousy is easily aroused and easily extinguished (39). Mr. Czorlinski, in turn, misses his wife.

And so the poor fellow sometime yearned longingly for his wife
Who always fed him at home with such good cheer
All things that she knew would be to his taste
The poor woman tried to bring him to eat. . . .
When at times he did not come on time from the lake for a meal
She would hide his food under the feather thick till evening
To keep it warm and fresh
And wouldn't eat herself until he was home
For it always tasted the best when they were eating together (50).

When Czorlinski is short of cash to buy the fishnets, his wife contributes her hard-earned savings. Czorlinski responds emotionally:

Who would not love and honour such angel?"
So spoke Czorlinski – so touched was he that he began to sob (128).

The marriage ceremony that Czorlinski attends provides an additional perspective on the importance of marriage to the community. Marriage vows, Catholic doctrine, and members of the community come together to seal marriages, as indicated in the wedding announcement by the best man.

For the Lord God has sent me to wish you the best of everything
For the bridegroom along with the bride bow low before you
and invite you to the wedding for tomorrow.
For so the Holy Trinity has determined
That from these two people one pair be established. . . .
And when our little priest joins them together in church
Then we all will betake ourselves to the wedding banquet (92).

The details of the wedding banquet seem to spring right from the famous Bruegel painting of the Peasant Wedding. The best man lists the preparations for the wedding banquet:

The honorable father brought home two casks of whiskey yesterday,
A barrel of beer and more than half a basket of cigars.

For the coming festivities they're going to kill the fattened ox,
Threescore of chickens, a half-dozen turkeys and the big fat hog.
The ox bellows in the stable out of fear and groans mournfully. . . .
The deer without flank will be there too and the rooster without his comb
There will be everything God provides and the cook will prepare (92).

The copious amount of folklore and superstitions that form part of the story adds another layer of humor in a very funny comedy. Derdowski is showing that Kashubia had a rich culture of myths, legends and fairy tales. Kashubians were indeed very superstitious. Many believed that devils roamed freely and caused harm. Many were still fearful of goblins, grotesque mischievous creatures that held grudges for a long time. Perhaps geography and history explain why. Most of Kashubia was composed of isolated farms and villages surrounded by woods, lakes and rivers. The pre-Christian beliefs in evil spirits seem to have persisted until modern times.

Czorlinski is vexed by the bad omen of a rabbit that crossed his path (71), a sorceress sent by the devil (12), and finally even devils themselves (153). After being chased in the forest, Pan Czorlinski uses the belt of St. Francis to catch a Kashubian devil from Zęblewo and then sells him for a monkey. But what causes Czorlinski the most trouble is the cursed worm monster that Szmul has sewn into his hat that brings him nothing but bad luck (23).

Derdowski paints a dramatic picture of Kashubian village life in the 1870s that goes beyond what historians are able to provide. He depicts the Kashubians' rich sense of humor, the daily reality of their superstitions, the central importance of their families, their deep sense of hospitality linked to their sense of belonging to a particular village, their pride of being Kashubian and their Catholic faith that stiffens their resistance to an oppressive Prussian government. Derdowski's love for Kashubia is irresistible.