

A Brief History of the Kurpie People

Here is some information supplied by our cousin **Wojtek Zauska**, concerning the history and some of the traditions of our Polish Kurpie ancestors. Our family in Poland is very proud of their Kurpie heritage and background.

The Skansen (museum) located on the scenic bank of the Narew River in Nowogród, Lomza province, is devoted to the history and culture of the Kurpians, a tribe that inhabited the woods and heaths of the northeast part of Poland. This heath land, called the Kurpian Heath (Puszcza Kurpiowska), was divided into two territories: the Green Heath (Puszcza Zielona) - situated along the middle Narew region and the White Heath (Puszcza Biala) - situated at the junction of the rivers Bug and Narew.

The Kurpians, also called the heath landers (puszczaki), were, by virtue of royal privileges, a free folk, i.e., they were not obliged to do bonded service. They ruled themselves by their own traditional rights (the so called "bee farmers' law", known in German as "Beutnerrecht"). The huge forests consisting mainly of coniferous trees, were filled with natural wealth, wild animals (bisons, elk, deer), and the numerous nearby lakes were plentiful with fish. The prime occupations of the population therefore, were hunting and fishing, collecting natural fruits, mushrooms, producing wood-tar, melting iron from limonite and finishing amber. The inhabitants of these heaths occupied themselves with wickerwork and with making products from wood; the women wove linen and cloth from flax and wool.

Apart from hunting and fishing, the main occupation of the Kurpians was bee farming in wood trunks, i.e., in huge living trunks of pines, oaks, and lime trees. The bee farmers had their own organization headed by an elder, the so called "bee starosta" or bee master, and ruled themselves by the so called "bee farmers' law", establishing severe punishment for the theft of bees or honey and for the destruction of bee hives. As tree clearance progressed, the forest economy came slowly to an end and the inhabitants gradually turned to cattle breeding and agriculture.

The specific way of life of the heath lands shaped the character of the inhabitants. They were courageous hunters and excellent marksmen (there is a well known saying in Poland: "he shoots like a Kurpian"); skillful bee farmers and fisherman, in general, a cheerful and hospitable people. Strong bonds within the territorial community were in evidence, as also were their love of freedom and justice, and their passionate patriotism, especially distinguished during the Swedish invasions in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the national uprisings in the years 1794, 1831, 1863, and in both World Wars. The regional distinctiveness of the Kurpians, revealed itself in their economy, architecture, costumes, daily life and customs.