

Reflexive essay

Adopted by a Nickname

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This reflexive autoethnographic essay traces a life through given names, surnames, name days, confirmation names, and community nicknames. It situates one Central European biography within the language politics of postwar Poland, examining Catholic naming practices, the marginalization of non-Polish and non-Catholic histories, and the symbolic dominance of Polish in the country's linguistic landscape. Family surnames open onto Polish, Kashubian, German, and Jewish histories, while the author's research connects personal naming with language documentation, policy, and minority-language advocacy. The final section turns to Wymysiöeryś, the severely endangered language of Wilamowice. There, a traditional kin nickname came to mark a long relationship with speakers and new speakers, and a form of adoption into the community after decades of research and advocacy. The essay argues that names are not merely labels: they carry religious authority, family memory, ethnic ambiguity, political pressure, and possibilities for belonging. Together, these episodes form an anthroponomastic curriculum of a life spent among minoritized language communities.

Keywords: anthroponymy, autoethnography, Kashubian, language revitalization, minority languages, nicknames, Wymysiöeryś

*To my parents and to my adoptive community
of Wymysöjyn in Wilamowice*

Names before biography

My parents died when I was twenty-one (my father, Stefan) and twenty-six (my mother, Maria). At those ages, a parentless child is no longer called an orphan. Yet a sense of being left alone with my family name accompanied much of my early adult life, especially because I had no siblings.

My names—both Christian¹ and family names—have never been indifferent to me. I enjoyed my unusually long anthroponym even before I knew the term *anthroponymy*. For many years, I believed I was the world's only Tomasz Wicherkiewicz. Its six-plus-thirteen letters made it unusual and sometimes awkward: it did not fit many forms or the narrow columns of petty bureaucracy in communist and postcommunist Poland. Even the first messengers of capitalism stumbled over it. My first payment card allowed only thirteen characters for the cardholder's name—the exact length of 'Wicherkiewicz.' Years later, when a taxi driver in the United States saw it, he joked that he might call me 'Mr. Alphabet.' Long names did not frighten

my family. My mother used both her maiden and married surnames, Maria Przymus-Wicherkiewicz, while my father often used both his first and middle names, Stefan Wiktor Wicherkiewicz. I therefore sometimes introduced myself as Tomasz Stanisław Bogdan Wicherkiewicz—an admittedly elaborate form that I use here as an author for the first time.² According to family lore, 'Tomasz' honored the patron saint of the church where my grandmother prayed for my birth; 'Stanisław' and 'Bogdan' commemorated my grandfathers: my maternal grandfather, Stanisław, a Home Army officer killed in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, and my paternal grandfather, Bogdan, an ophthalmologist who died in 1924.

Catholic names and their discontents

Until recently, Polish Catholic custom often favored name days over birthdays. Birthdays were said to be 'for children,' while a person's annual celebration was assigned by the Catholic calendar to the feast of a canonized or beatified saint. Children, of course, could celebrate both. Only as an adult did I learn that name-day celebrations were neither uniform across Poland nor equally important to all ethnic and religious communities. Masurians, Kashubs, Silesians from the German-Polish borderlands, and Polish Lutherans did not all adopt the custom to the same degree; Eastern Orthodox Christians observed name days differently and according to another calendar of saints. My ignorance—common within the Polish majority—reflected a powerful image of Polish society as ethnically homogeneous, centralized, monolingual, and Roman Catholic. The desire to fill that cognitive void helped direct my attention toward religious, ethnic, national,³ and linguistic minorities. The name-day tradition was so strong that the officially atheist communist authorities promoted a secularized version of it. Popular calendars expanded to include non-canonical variants of saints' names, literary names without Catholic references, and names built from Slavic stems.

Church authorities also changed calendars and feast days, so why could I not? When several saints had the same name, each with a different feast day, a person usually celebrated their name day on the first feast day for a saint with that name after their birthday. There were at least five Saint Thomases.⁴ The feast nearest my July birthday was that of Thomas the Apostle. As a child, however, I disliked his nickname, 'Doubting Thomas,' and the story of placing a finger in Jesus's wounds.⁵ I did not yet understand metaphor; the image repelled me, and 'doubting' sounded wholly negative. Once I started school, I chose the scholar Thomas Aquinas instead. I was delighted that an entire tradition—Thomism—bore my patron's name, although later I understood that scholarship itself proceeded through disciplined doubt. By choosing Thomas Aquinas as my patron saint, I gained a new feast day, the 7th of March, until the Church moved it to the 28th of January. I now seldom observe name days, but this story shows how deeply ecclesiastical regulation can enter an individual life and its social relationships.

My Christian-name story does not end there. Young Catholics, usually between fourteen and seventeen, undergo confirmation, a religious ceremony in which they formally affirm their Catholic faith and become more fully involved in the life of the Church. In Poland, a Catholic person being confirmed customarily adopts another name and thus another patron saint. My confirmation followed soon after the canonization of Maximilian Maria Kolbe, so I chose 'Maksymilian' as my fourth given name.

Maximilian Maria Kolbe (1894–1941) was a Polish Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in place of another prisoner at Auschwitz. Before the war, he had founded a monastery, operated an amateur radio station, and led religious organizations and mass-circulation publications. The historical record is more complicated than the heroic account I knew as a teenager: publications issued under his leadership included antisemitic material, although he also censured some of it (Westminster Abbey, n.d.). As I came to understand and care more deeply about Poland's Jewish heritage, I found it increasingly difficult to accept that nominal patronage without questioning it.

Surnames across Polish, Kashubian, and German histories

Beyond my Christian names lie my surnames. Family history connects me not only to Wicherkiewicz, my paternal line, but also to Sławski, [von] Piechowski, and Przymus through other parental lines. Two of these names especially stimulated my ethnolinguistic curiosity.

'Wicherkiewicz' contains the Polish stem *wicher*, 'a strong gale,' and the diminutive marker *-k-* yielding a comic image of a small but complete gale.⁶ The ending *-ewicz* reflects an East Slavic patronymic pattern associated with surnames in the eastern borderlands, although the earliest documented members of my family lived at the western edge of Polish ethnic territory. The recorded line begins only in the nineteenth century, with my great-grandfather. His siblings included a medical professor, Bolesław Wicherkiewicz, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1904, as well as a biologist, an entrepreneur in the Dutch East Indies, and a linguist who wrote a widely used conversational Polish grammar for German speakers (Nobel Prize Outreach AB, n.d.). The gap between this documented prominence and the family name's short record makes me wonder—without claiming evidence—whether an earlier non-Polish name was Polonized.

Surname formation in Central Europe was often political. In 1787, Emperor Joseph II required Jews in the Habsburg lands to adopt hereditary German surnames; Prussian authorities followed with related measures. Naming officials sometimes imposed insulting or absurd forms. Jan Stanisław Bystron (1927, 129) describes this bureaucratic violence in his study of Polish surnames. Could 'Wicherkiewicz' have emerged through such a process? I do not know, and the uncertainty matters as much as the hypothesis.

More is known about '[von] Piechowski.' The surname is associated with Kashubian petty nobility in what is now Polish Pomerania and derives

from the village of Piechowice. Its structure joins *Piech-*, an Old Polish or Kashubian form related to the name Peter, with the toponymic suffix *-(ow)ski*. The German 'von' is the most politically charged element: a patrilineal marker of nobility used by many men in the family until the First or Second World War. The combination of German 'von' and Slavic 'Piechowski' condenses the history of Kashubian identity. Twentieth-century national narratives often demanded an unambiguous declaration—Polish or German—and left little room for transitional, local, or layered identities. The mixed name could therefore seem too German to some Poles and too Polish to some Germans, much as the Kashubs themselves did. After the Second World War, the 'von' was erased and prohibited.

Kashubia formed the northwestern periphery of the Slavic world and a long-standing contact zone with German-speaking populations. Kashubian has consequently been classified both as a Polish dialect and as a distinct Slavic language. That sociolinguistic and political question occupied much of my career. In 2011, Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński and I edited *The Kashubs: Past and Present*, to which I contributed a chapter on language policy and Kashubian sociolinguistics (Obracht-Prondzyński & Wicherkiewicz, 2011; Wicherkiewicz, 2011).

From minority studies to language advocacy

The late 1980s brought profound changes to my part of Europe and to my own life. Poland was moving toward a more democratic and pluralist political order, while I was seeking my place within it. People I met and choices I made turned a long-standing interest in minorities into an academic path. Minority studies then had few institutional footholds in Poland, where the historical and continuing presence of minorities was widely ignored. European integration gradually introduced new accounts of diversity and multilingualism, including the languages described as minority, minoritized, regional, endangered, autochthonous, or lesser used.

The organized Kashubian movement gained momentum as other marginalized communities sought recognition in the new Polish public sphere. The Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language, adopted in January 2005, recognized Kashubian as Poland's regional language. Even if younger activists now regard that status as too limited, it transformed the language's public position. I was an ardent supporter and may have been the first to propose the Polish legal term corresponding to the German 'Regionalsprache' for Kashubian.⁷ Meanwhile, my von Piechowski identity grew stronger because the name itself embodied Kashubia's uncertain balance between German and Polish state-language identities. The 2005 Act opened public domains for Kashubian, including education and the official linguistic landscape. Kashubian place names appeared on road signs, and some Kashubs began to use Kashubian forms of their personal names. The ancestral village of the von Piechowski family acquired the additional official

name 'Piechóce,' while some relatives adopted 'Piechowski' or restored the prefix 'von' in public use.

Kashubia was becoming visibly Kashubian. In 2019, the Association of Kashubian Language Teachers awarded me the *Ryngraf Witosława* prize for contributions to Kashubian. The ceremony took place in Stężycza municipality, where my great-great-grandfather Michał von Piechowski was born. The family story had circled back.

Adopted through Wymysiöeryś

The title of this onomastic curriculum refers to my most valued nickname: 'Tiöma-füm-Fliöra-Fliöra,' granted to me in Wilamowice by friends who speak Wymysiöeryś, in accordance with their anthroponymic tradition.

Wilamowice is a small town in southern Poland and an exceptional linguistic enclave. Known as *Wymysoü* in Wymysiöeryś, it was probably founded around 1300 by Middle High German-speaking colonists and long formed part of the *Bielitz-Bialaer Sprachinsel*. During the long nineteenth century, the town developed a local identity within the multilingual Habsburg Empire and through intensive contact with Polish-speaking neighbors. German, Polish, and distinct local identities were later claimed or imposed; other origin stories pointed to Holland, Flanders, Friesland, England, or Scotland (Wicherkiewicz et al., 2018).

I had known little of this before the winter of 1989, when I first visited Wilamowice while preparing my first academic paper. I was a linguistics master's student at the University of Poznań and had been invited to present with my supervisor, Professor Alfred F. Majewicz, at the Fourth International Conference on Minority Languages in Leeuwarden/Ljouwert. Soon after stepping from a cold, rattling bus in Wilamowice and asking who might know the town's dialect and the history of its medieval settlers, I entered the warm home of the retired teacher Helena Bilczewska. She served tomato soup to me and then showed me the manuscripts collected by her late husband. Among them was a draft of what appeared to be the longest known literary work in Wymysiöeryś.⁸ That discovery became a decisive point in my work with minority languages. I expanded my research on Wilamowice, its culture, language, community, and literature. A study of the manuscript became my doctoral thesis and later *The Making of a Language: The Case of the Idiom of Wilamowice, Southern Poland* (Wicherkiewicz, 2003). Fieldwork and studies in historical Germanic linguistics, dialectology, language contact, and ethnolinguistics also led me to the manuscript's author, Florian Biesik.

Biesik was born in the mid-nineteenth century and later became a senior Austro-Hungarian railway official. Influenced by Dante Alighieri and living far from Wilamowice in the Adriatic port of Trieste, he created a literature in his microlanguage. He wrote under the pen name 'Fliöra-Fliöra,'⁹ also his Wilamowicean kin nickname, and sent poems home. Heinrich Anders (1933), a German dialectologist who worked at my University of Poznań between the

wars, published some of them. The rest receded from view amid the violence and dislocation of the Second World War.

After the war, persecution, language bans, cultural abandonment, and assimilation devastated a tradition that had endured for centuries. Democratization after 1989 weakened those pressures. In 2000, however, I still wrote with misplaced certainty:

'The Wilamowiceans are only now starting to be proud of their tradition and distinctiveness. Unfortunately, they can no longer be proud of their ethnolect, since, after 750 years of existence, this smallest <...> minority language in Poland faces imminent extinction, which will inevitably accompany the death of its last speakers (probably within some 10 years)' (Wicherkiewicz, 2000, p. 554).

I believed that I had at least documented the language and its community, including the distinctive system of kin nicknames (Zieniukowa & Wicherkiewicz, 1997). These forms combine Germanic and Slavic lexemes and morphemes within a complex sociolinguistic system. They identify individuals both inside and outside a small, historically endogamous community in which given names and surnames recur frequently. How shortsighted I was. I should have remembered Joshua A. Fishman's (1981) *Never Say Die!: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*. I also did not know that Tymoteusz Król had been born in Wilamowice in 1993. His parents hired a nanny who spoke mainly Wymysiöeryś to him. He became a gifted native speaker, community linguist, and visionary language revitalizer. As a teenager, he standardized orthography, collected and classified folk dress, wrote and taught. Coming across my pessimistic prediction, he decided to prove it wrong.

Król's Wymysiöeryś nickname, 'Tiöma Fum Döktör,' and his role as a bridge between older native speakers and new speakers have since been documented in articles, books, and films. Revitalization now includes young speakers, theater, teaching, documentation, and digital projects (Olko et al., 2016; Wicherkiewicz et al., 2018). The nickname generator *Däj noma* ('Your Name') was created to help Wilamowiceans recover or construct traditional forms, many of which are now used in social-media profiles (Stowarzyszenie Pracownia Etnograficzna, 2016).

Wymysiöeryś remains severely endangered, spoken by no more older native speakers, but a growing group of new speakers. The community has pursued legal recognition for more than a decade. Parliament adopted an amendment recognizing it as a regional language in 2025, but the President of Poland vetoed the measure on the 16th of October 2025 (Office of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2025). The setback does not erase the language's cultural renewal, nor the community's continuing work for recognition.

According to Król and other new speakers, my 1989 discovery and the later publication and promotion of Biesik's work helped interrupt the narrative of inevitable language death. Twenty-five years after that first visit, I was given the nickname 'Tiöma-füm-Fliöra-Fliöra.' In 2015, the municipality of Wilamowice granted me honorary citizenship. I have since felt adopted by a community that I first researched and later learned to act with. Two years

later, on International Mother Language Day, I watched young Wymysiöeryś speakers perform a familiar scene in the theater *Ufa fisa*: a student entered a retired teacher's house, received a bowl of hot tomato soup, and was shown a manuscript in Wymysiöeryś. The performance then followed Biesik's Dantean *Ôf jer Weß* ('In the Next World').

Am I not a fortunate linguist of many names?

Are names not among our most capable guides through the cultures, histories, and curricula of individuals and communities?

1. I use the phrase 'Christian name' deliberately because the name-giving practices discussed here are explicitly grounded in Polish Catholic life.
2. The three given names are used together as an authorial name for the first time in this essay. The Polish pronunciation is [ˈtomasz staˈjnɨswaf ˈbɔgdan vɨxɛrˈkɛvɨʃ].
3. In the Polish law on minorities, national minorities are those with a kin state (e.g., Germans in Poland), while ethnic ones those without (e.g., the Roma).
4. Thomas the Apostle (first century); Thomas Becket, also known as Thomas of Canterbury and Thomas the Martyr (twelfth century); Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century); Thomas à Kempis (fifteenth century); and Thomas More (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries).
5. The Gospel of John recounts Thomas's refusal to believe in the Resurrection without seeing and touching Jesus's wounds, followed by his confession of faith (King James Bible, 1611/1769, John 20:24–29).
6. My childhood nicknames included 'Wicherek,' a diminutive form, and 'Tajfun' (typhoon); both (could be) used abusively.
7. During a research stay at Bielefeld University, I followed German debates about the status of Low German as a Regionalsprache. That discussion informed my proposal to Polish legislators.
8. Wymysiöeryś is pronounced [vimiˈsøːrɨɕ].
9. The spelling 'Flïöra-Flïöra' follows current Wymysiöeryś orthography; Biesik wrote the name as 'Flora-Flora.'

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