

How to Pronounce and Recognize Your Polish Town and Family Names

by Fay Vogel Bussgang (JGS of Greater Boston)

Polish can be a very difficult language to master, but learning to pronounce correctly the names of towns and family names one is researching and to recognize them in their various grammatical forms should be manageable. One could then recognize that "Brzeziny" and "w Brzezinach" refer to the same town but that "Brzeżany" is something totally different or that "w Warcie" refers to the town of "Warta," but "w Warce," to "Warka." A guide to Polish pronunciation and basic rules of Polish grammar useful for genealogical research are presented below.

Polish Pronunciation Guide

The following guide gives English approximations for sounding out town and family names. When you practice, go slowly, sound all the letters, and put the accent on the **next-to-last** (penultimate) syllable.

<u>Polish</u>	<u>English Equivalent</u>	<u>Sounds Most Like:</u>	<u>Polish Example</u>
a	short ah	h <u>ă</u> !	Kr <u>ă</u> ków, R <u>ă</u> dom
ą* (nasalized)	on [but <i>om</i> before b/p]	song [tr <u>om</u> bone]	Nowy S <u>ą</u> cz [D <u>ą</u> browa]
e	eh	b <u>e</u> t	Mazow <u>e</u> cki, Przem <u>y</u> śl
ę* (nasalized)	en [but <i>em</i> before b/p]	B <u>e</u> ngal [h <u>e</u> mp]	B <u>e</u> dzin [D <u>e</u> bicy]
i	ee	f <u>e</u> et	Katow <u>i</u> ce, Wiel <u>i</u> czka
o	o	b <u>o</u> ught	Dro <u>h</u> obyc <u>z</u> , Ho <u>r</u> o <u>d</u> enka
ó/u	oo/u	b <u>oo</u> t, fl <u>oo</u> te	Zielona G <u>ó</u> ra, Lu <u>b</u> lin, Ku <u>z</u> nica
ó/u	short oo/u	b <u>oo</u> k, p <u>oo</u> t	Ł <u>o</u> dź, Lw <u>o</u> w, Krak <u>o</u> w
y	short i	f <u>i</u> t	G <u>d</u> ynia, Dro <u>h</u> obyc <u>z</u>
c	ts	e <u>at</u> s	Katow <u>i</u> ce, Kiel <u>ć</u> e, Pł <u>o</u> ck, Siedl <u>ć</u> e
ć/ci	ch (softened)	cello/ <u>ch</u> eat	Zamo <u>ś</u> ć, C <u>ie</u> chan <u>o</u> w, Tyko <u>ć</u> in
cz	ch	<u>ch</u> urch/ <u>C</u> zech	Łow <u>ic</u> z, Wiel <u>i</u> czka
ch/h	h (aspirated)	<u>H</u> elen	<u>C</u> hęc <u>in</u> y, <u>C</u> he <u>ł</u> m, <u>H</u> oro <u>d</u> enka
dz	ds	sud <u>s</u>	Dzban <u>o</u> w, Radzan <u>o</u> w
dź/dzi	dgy	fud <u>g</u> y	Ł <u>o</u> dź <u>ki</u> , Dzia <u>ł</u> oszyce, Radzieju <u>o</u> w
j	y	ye <u>a</u> r	Ja <u>r</u> osław, Kołomy <u>ja</u> , Radzieju <u>o</u> w
ł	w	wo <u>o</u> d	Ł <u>o</u> dź, Białysto <u>k</u> , Wro <u>o</u> ław
ń	nn	on <u>io</u> n	Gda <u>ń</u> sk, Pozna <u>ń</u> , Toru <u>ń</u>
prz	psh	p <u>sh</u> aw!	Przedb <u>o</u> rz, Przem <u>y</u> śl
r	r (rolled)	<u>rr</u> oar!	R <u>ă</u> dom, <u>R</u> awa <u>R</u> uska
ś/si	sh (softened)	<u>sh</u> !	Przem <u>y</u> śl, Siedl <u>ć</u> e, <u>Ś</u> ląsk
sz	sh	<u>sh</u> op	Kalisz, Kolbusz <u>o</u> wa
szcz	shch	<u>sh</u> children	Bydgosz <u>cz</u> , Szczec <u>in</u>
w	v	va <u>n</u>	L <u>w</u> ów, <u>W</u> arszawa, <u>W</u> arta
ź/zi	zh (softened)	cash <u>h</u> mere	Ku <u>z</u> nica, Zielona G <u>ó</u> ra
ż/rz	zh	vis <u>io</u> n	Łom <u>ż</u> a, Rzesz <u>o</u> w, <u>Ż</u> ychlin

* The *ą* and *ę* are nasalized without an *n/m* following them before the letters *ch, f, w, s, ś, sz, rz, z, ź*. and *ż* In these instances, such as in Śląsk or Częstochowa, *ą* is pronounced like the French *on* (bon), and *ę*, like the French *in/aim* (fin/faim). This is also true of *ą* at the end of a word, while *ę* at the end of a word is usually not nasalized but pronounced like *e* in bet.

Beware: The **final consonant** of a word is **unvoiced**, i.e., the larynx (voice box) is not used to create the sound. The following letters change to their unvoiced counterpart at the end of a word: *b*→*p*, *d*→*t*, *dz*→*c*, *dź*→*ć*, *dż*→*cz*, *g*→*k*, *rz/ż*→*sz*, *w*→*f*, *z*→*s*. Therefore, Brzeg sounds like "Bzhek," and Krakow sounds like "Krakóf."

Pronunciation Tip: It is my observation that Poles do not use their lips as much as people speaking English or French. The sounds are articulated more inside the mouth. It is a little like a ventriloquist who may speak quite clearly although with lips relaxed and barely moving. If you practice that way, you will find that it is easier to pronounce words with a string of consonants without becoming completely tongue-tied.

Rules of Polish Grammar Useful for Genealogists

Even if you cannot translate a Polish document, understanding the most common forms of the names of people and towns will help you determine if a person or place of interest to you is mentioned in that document.

There are three important concepts to note in learning the Polish language that may be new to English speakers: case, gender, and stem. Each of these, explained below, as well as whether the noun is singular or plural, influences the ending (suffix) of the noun.

The **case** of a noun indicates its function in a sentence; it can show whether the noun is the subject [he], the direct object [him], the indirect object [to her], or is in a prepositional phrase [in Warsaw]. There are seven different cases in Polish, but only those commonly seen in genealogical research are described below—nominative, genitive, instrumental (used mainly in marriage documents) and locative [location]. Table A1 gives examples of town names in the most frequently encountered cases.

Town names, like other nouns in Polish, come in different varieties; they have **gender** (feminine, masculine, or neuter), and some are even plural.

The **stem** is the basically unchangeable part of a word to which endings are added. [e.g., the stem of Warszawa is “Warszaw” to which endings such as “y” or “ie” may be added: “z Warszawy,” “w Warszawie.”] The stem is termed soft, velar, or hard, depending on the pronunciation of its last consonant.

This may sound confusing, but it will make more sense as you go along. It is not necessary to learn all the grammar presented here. Try to get a general understanding of the concepts and then write down just the endings that apply to your particular town and family names and become familiar with them.

NOMINATIVE CASE. The nominative case is used to denote the subject of a sentence. The name of a town or person, in the nominative case, is spelled as you commonly know it; Horodenka, Radom; Glasman, Spiro.

GENITIVE CASE. The genitive case denotes "of" or possession, follows certain prepositions, or is the direct object after a negative verb. In vital records, the genitive is most often used following *z/ze* (from) to identify the town someone comes from, as in *z Krakowa*, and to indicate maiden name, as in *z Bussgangów* (from the Bussgangs).

Forming the genitive case from the nominative for town names

- Feminine town names usually end in *a* in the nominative case: Warszawaa, Wartaa, Horodenkaa. (A few town names that end either in double consonants or *ew* are also feminine: Bydgoszczz, Łódźż, Żółkiewz.) The genitive ending for all feminine town names is *y* or *i*: Warszawyy, Wartyy, Horodenkii, Bydgoszczyz, Łodzii, Żółkwii. (Note: *ie* before a final letter in the nominative, as in Żółkiewz, is dropped in the genitive before the ending is added.)
- Masculine town names end in a consonant in the nominative: Lwów, Gdańsk, Płock, Włocławek. For towns with masculine names, the genitive ending is *a* or *u*.
 - The genitive of most Polish masculine town names is formed by adding *a* at the end: Lwowaa, Gdańskaa, Płockaa, Włocławkaa (Note that an *e* preceding a final letter is dropped in the genitive before the ending is added).
 - If the town name ends in a soft consonant such as *ń* or a hidden softening (which you learn by usage), *ia* is added: Poznań →Poznania; Radom →Radomia; Wrocław →Wrocławia.
 - Most foreign cities and a few Polish towns have the ending *u*: Londynuy, Bostonuy, Tarnobrzeguy, Żmigroduy.
- Neuter town names end in *o* or sometimes *e* in the nominative: Chełmno, Radomsko, Opole. Neuter town names form the genitive by adding *a* to the stem: Chełmnaa, Radomskaa, Opolaa.
- Plural town names end in *y*, *i*, and, with a few exceptions, *e*, in the nominative: Chęciny, Suwałki, Działoszyce, Katowice. To form the genitive, the final letter is dropped to form Chęcin, Suwałek, Działoszyc, Katowice. (If the word thus formed ends in two consonants that make pronunciation difficult, an *e* is often added between the consonants, as in Suwałek.)

Forming the genitive case from the nominative for women's surnames

- To indicate the maiden name of a married woman, the genitive plural is used after *z/ze* (from). The usual genitive plural ending is *ów*: Bussgang → *z Bussgangów*; Spiro → *ze Spirów*. If the name ends in *cka / ska* (the feminine form of names ending in *cki / ski*), the ending is *ich*: Sawicka → *z Sawickich*, Kowalska → *z Kowalskich*.
- To indicate that a woman is unmarried, *ówna* is added to her surname in the nominative, *ównej* in the genitive: Glasman → *Glasmanówna/Glasmanównej* (Miss Glasman). To indicate that a woman is married, *owa* is added in the nominative or *owej* in the genitive to her husband's surname: Glasmanowa/Glasmanowej (Mrs. Glasman).

INSTRUMENTAL CASE. In general, the instrumental case is used to show with whom or by what means something is done. In a marriage record, it may be used for the groom who appears *with* the Rabbi. It is formed simply by adding *em* for a man (to both first and last names or just to the first name): Szmul Kron → *wraz ze* (together with) *Szmulem Kronem*. For family names ending in *cki / ski*, the ending is *m*: Aron Laski → *z Aronem Laskim*.¹ For a woman, *q* is added to the stem of the first name: Ruchla → *Ruchlq*, or also to the surname if the *ówna* form is used: *Ruchlq Wolfównq*. The instrumental case is also used after *między* (between) for an agreement between the bride and groom: *między Aronem Laskim i Ruchlq Wolf*.

LOCATIVE CASE. The locative case, which tells where something is located, is used only after certain prepositions, the most common in vital records being *w/we* (in).² The rules for forming the locative seem very complicated due to the fact that there are changes in the stem of the word, not just in the ending. If you go through your list of towns one by one and apply the rules, however, it should not be too difficult. First, you must determine the gender and number of the name of the town and also its type of stem (hard, velar, soft).

- **Hard stems.** If the last consonant of the word is hard, regardless of gender, it must be softened and then an *e* ending is added.
 - Hard stems ending in *b, f, m, n, p, s, w* and *z* are softened by adding *i* before the *e* ending:
Dęba → *w Dębie*; Lublin → *w Lublinie*; Warszawa → *w Warszawie*.
 - Stems ending in *d, ł, r, and t* are softened before adding *e*, according to the following pattern: *d*→*dzi*, *ł*→*l*, *r*→*rz*, *t*→*ci*: Rajgród → *w Rajgrodzie*; Skąpa → *w Skąpie*; Góra → *w Górze*; Łańcut → *w Łącutcie*.
- **Velar Stems.** The final consonant of a velar stem has a guttural sound (*ch, g, k*).
 - Feminine names soften velar stems (*ch*→*sz*; *g*→*dz*; *k*→*c*) before adding an *e* ending:
Bierwicha → *w Bierwisze*; Struga → *w Strudze*; Horodenka → *w Horodence*.
 - Masculine and neuter names with velar stems simply add *u* to the stem: Tarnobrzeg → *w Tarnobrzegu*; Płock → *w Płocku*; Radomsko → *w Radomsku*; Włocławek → *w Włocławku* (drop *e* before final *k*).
- **Soft stems.** Soft stems end with the consonants *c, j, l, ć, ń, ś, ź, ż, cz, rz, sz*.
 - Feminine names ending in *ia* or in a soft stem add *i* or *y* to the stem: Bochnia → *w Bochni*; Dębica → *w Dębicy*; Bydgoszcz → *w Bydgoszczy*; Łódź → *w Łodzi* (note slashes are dropped).
 - Masculine and neuter names ending in a soft stem add *u* to the stem: Mielec → *w Mielcu*; Drohobycz → *w Drohobyczu*; Opole → *w Opolu*; Przemyśl → *w Przemyślu*; Zgierz → *w Zgierzu*.
- **Plural names of towns** all form the locative case by adding *ach* to the stem: Brzeziny → *w Brzezinach*; Katowice → *w Katowicach*; Chęciny → *w Chęcinach*; Suwałki → *w Suwałkach*.

¹ The word *ze* is used instead of *z* to indicate "from" or "with" when the word following it begins with a cluster of consonants that would make it difficult to pronounce without the added *e*. That is why in the instrumental case, *ze* is used before Szmul, but only *z* is used before Aron.

² For the same reason, *we* is used instead of *w*. Therefore, it is *we Lwowie*, but *w Warszawie*. However, what we think would be difficult may not necessarily be what Poles consider difficult. We might want *we* before Przemyśl, but they don't consider the *Prze* sound to cause any problems!! Thus, it is *w Przemyślu*.

Table A1. Sample Declensions of Town Names, Arranged by Type of Stem

<u>TYPE OF STEM:</u>	<u>NOMINATIVE:</u>	<u>GENITIVE:</u>	<u>LOCATIVE:</u>
Fem hard stem	Warszaw <u>a</u>	Warszaw <u>ę</u>	Warszawie
Fem hard stem	Indur <u>a</u>	Indur <u>y</u>	Indurze
Fem hard stem	Wart <u>a</u>	Wart <u>y</u>	Warcie
Fem velar stem	Wark <u>a</u>	Wark <u>i</u>	Warce
Fem velar stem	Strug <u>a</u>	Strug <u>i</u>	Strudze
Fem soft stem	Dębic <u>a</u>	Dębic <u>y</u>	Dębicy
Fem soft stem	Kołomyj <u>a</u>	Kołomyj <u>ę</u>	Kołomyji
Fem soft stem	Łomż <u>a</u>	Łomż <u>y</u>	Łomży
Fem soft stem	Łódź	Łodzi	Łodzi
Masc hard stem	Kraków	Krakow <u>a</u>	Krakowie
Masc hard stem	Lubl <u>in</u>	Lubl <u>in</u> a	Lubl <u>in</u> ie
Masc hard stem	Żmigro <u>d</u>	Żmigro <u>d</u> u	Żmigrodzie
Masc velar stem	Gdańsk	Gdańsk <u>a</u>	Gdańsk <u>u</u>
Masc velar stem	Chmielnik	Chmielnik <u>a</u>	Chmielnik <u>u</u>
Masc velar stem	Tarnobrzeg	Tarnobrzeg <u>u</u>	Tarnobrzeg <u>u</u>
Masc soft stem	Toruń	Torun <u>ę</u>	Torun <u>ę</u>
Masc soft stem (hidden)	Jarosław	Jarosław <u>ę</u>	Jarosław <u>ę</u>
Masc soft stem	Mielec	Mielec <u>ę</u>	Mielec <u>ę</u>
Masc soft stem	Zamość	Zamośc <u>ę</u>	Zamośc <u>ę</u>
Masc soft stem	Tarnopol	Tarnopol <u>ę</u>	Tarnopol <u>ę</u>
Neut hard stem	Grodno	Grodn <u>a</u>	Grodn <u>ę</u>
Neut velar stem	Radomsko	Radomsk <u>a</u>	Radomsk <u>u</u>
Neut soft stem	Opole	Opol <u>ę</u>	Opol <u>ę</u>
Plural	Chęciny	Chęc <u>in</u>	Chęc <u>in</u> ach
Plural	Katowice	Katowic <u>ę</u>	Katowic <u>ę</u> ach
Plural	Kielce	Kielc <u>ę</u>	Kielc <u>ę</u> ach
Plural	Suwałki	Suwałk <u>ę</u>	Suwałk <u>ę</u> ach

Table A2. Sample Declensions of Compound Town Names

For towns with compound names—composed of a noun plus a modifier—the nouns follow the rules above. The adjectives, such as *Nowy* (new), *Zielona* (green), or *Mazowiecki* (in the Mazovian region), however, follow the rules for adjectival endings, depending on gender, case and number. Adjectival endings are underlined in the compound names in Table A2. to show the pattern of the endings.

<u>ADJECTIVE</u>	<u>TOWN NAME NOMINATIVE</u>	<u>GENITIVE</u>	<u>LOCATIVE</u>
Zielona (f)	Zielon <u>a</u> Góra	z Zielon <u>ę</u> j Góry	w Zielon <u>ę</u> j Górze
Zduńska (f)	Zduńsk <u>a</u> Wola	z Zduńsk <u>ę</u> j Woli	w Zduńsk <u>ę</u> j Woli
Mazowiecka (f)	Raw Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>a</u>	z Rawy Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>ę</u> j	w Rawie Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>ę</u> j
Mazowiecki (m)	Mińsk Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>i</u>	z Mińsk <u>ę</u> Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>ę</u> go	w Mińsk <u>ę</u> Mazow <u>ę</u> ck <u>ę</u> m
Nowy (m)	Now <u>ę</u> Sącz	z Now <u>ę</u> go Sączu	w Now <u>ę</u> m Sączu
Nowe (n)	Now <u>ę</u> Miasto	z Now <u>ę</u> go Miasta	w Now <u>ę</u> m Mieście
Biały (m)	Biał <u>ę</u> stok	z Biał <u>ę</u> gostoku	w Biał <u>ę</u> mstoku

[Białystok (m) is treated like a compound word made up of "Biały" (white) and "stok" (slope).]