

## BIEL

Requested by Irene Provost: "I have a very short question regarding the maiden last name of my grandmother, **Biel**. There has been much discussion within the family as to the real spelling: **Biel**, **Bill**, **Beil**, etc. She came from a village around Sanok, Bykowce (Niebieszczany). Research for that village has been very tough."

Analysis by: William F. "Fred" Hoffman <[wfh@langline.com](mailto:wfh@langline.com)>, for UPGS 2008

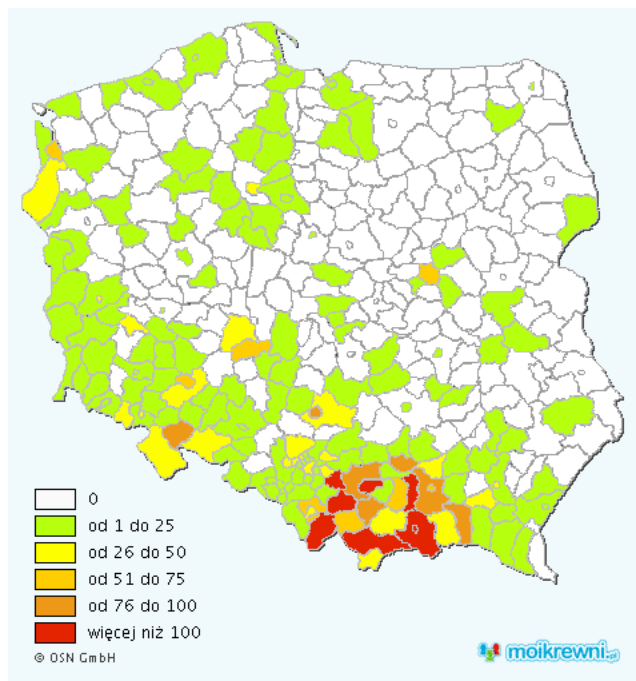
**Biel** is the only one of those spellings that makes sense in terms of standard Polish spelling. Poles generally avoid using double letters, so **Bill** would be an unusual spelling. They also don't use the combination *ei*, so **Beil** is unlikely as a Polish name (though it could certainly be a German name, from a German word meaning "axe"). But **Biel**, pronounced roughly "b'yell," is a perfectly good Polish name. The Moikrewni Web site has data and a map that tells us about its frequency and distribution, at <http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/biel.html>. I have reproduced it here.

If you look at the far southeastern tip of Poland, the third county from the right is Sanok county of Podkarpackie province, which is where Bykowce and Niebieszczany are located. This county is colored green on the map, which means the name shows up there, but in a number under 25. I have access to the database from which those numbers were drawn, and in fact there were 21 Polish citizens named Biel living in Sanok county as of 2002, 10 males and 11 females. I have no way of knowing whether these actually are relatives of yours; but the chances seem pretty good. The only way to establish this for sure is to contact them or to do research on the spot.

I don't have access to names and addresses of those people named Biel; but there may be a way to get them. There is a government office in Poland that has on file the addresses of all people currently living in Poland:

Wydział Udostępniania Informacji w Departamencie Spraw Obywatelskich MSWiA  
02-672 Warszawa  
ul Domaniewska 36/38  
POLAND

You can write in English; writing in Polish would probably get an answer faster. In any case, the response will be in Polish. My understanding is that this office contacts Polish citizens with the name in question and asks for their permission to give out their address. If that person says no, that's the end of it; but if he or she says yes, the office will send you that information, and you can try writing to him or her, if you wish. Obviously this is no help if a name is scattered all over the country, or you don't know what area to search in. But in instances where a name is highly concentrated in one area, or a researcher



Map showing the distribution of the surname **Biel** as of 2002.

knows exactly which area to look in, I pass the info along. If this office does succeed in providing you with addresses, chances are very good those addresses belong to relatives. It may be worth a try.

If you write people by this name, your chances of getting a reply are better if you write in Polish, of course. You can hire a translator—probably the best way to go—or you can try to put together a very basic letter in comprehensible Polish by using any of the various Polish Letter Writing Guides online. The original Guide is the one put together by the LDS Family History Library, available here:

[http://www.familysearch.org/ENG/Search/rg/images/36339\\_LWGPOLISH.pdf](http://www.familysearch.org/ENG/Search/rg/images/36339_LWGPOLISH.pdf)

Polish name expert Prof. Kazimierz Rymut mentions the name *Biel* in his book *Nazwiska Polaków* [The Surnames of Poles]. He says it shows up in Polish records as early as 1396, and comes from the root seen in the Polish adjective *biały*, “white.”; the word *biel* means “the color white, and in older Polish could also mean “fat, grease.” Basically, however, *Biel* is kind of like our English surname **White**. It probably started as a nickname for an ancestor who was associated with whiteness in some regard. Maybe he or she had white hair, or a very pale complexion; or maybe they wore white clothes, or bleached clothes for a living. It’s hard to say exactly why a family might be called *Biel*, because there are so many possible reasons. But the link with that word meaning “white” is pretty strong.

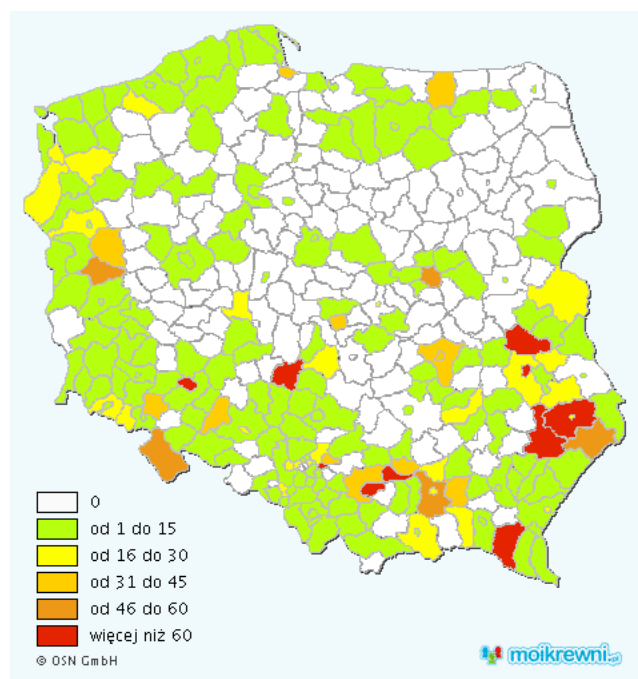
I should mention one more thing. There is also the name **Bil**, which sounds like “beel,” and it, too, means “white,” but comes from the Ukrainian version of the word, білий (*bilyi*). Languages tend to mix near the borders, and thus near the Polish-Ukrainian border it’s not unusual to see names influenced by either or both languages. It is entirely possible **BIL** is the name you’re looking for; it would mean pretty much the same thing, but as I say, it’s more Ukrainian than Polish. Data on that name is illustrated here:

<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/bil.html>

Notice that 64 of the 3,193 Polish citizens named **Bil** lived in Sanok county. The name tends to show up in areas near the Polish-Ukrainian border, though over the course of time people by this name have spread all over Poland (especially due to the 1947 Operation Vistula, which forced large numbers of ethnic Ukrainians to relocate to the north and west).

So what I’m saying is, **Bil** is also a fairly good match for the info you have. And **Bil** might well be Americanized as **Bill**. This is, therefore, also a plausible candidate for the name you want. For all we know, in Poland your ancestors might have gone by **Biel** among Poles and **Bil** among Ukrainians. That kind of surname variation is very common.

It’s probably OK to rule out **Beil** as a candidate. That spelling looks German, and would be pronounced like our word “bile.” We find German names all over



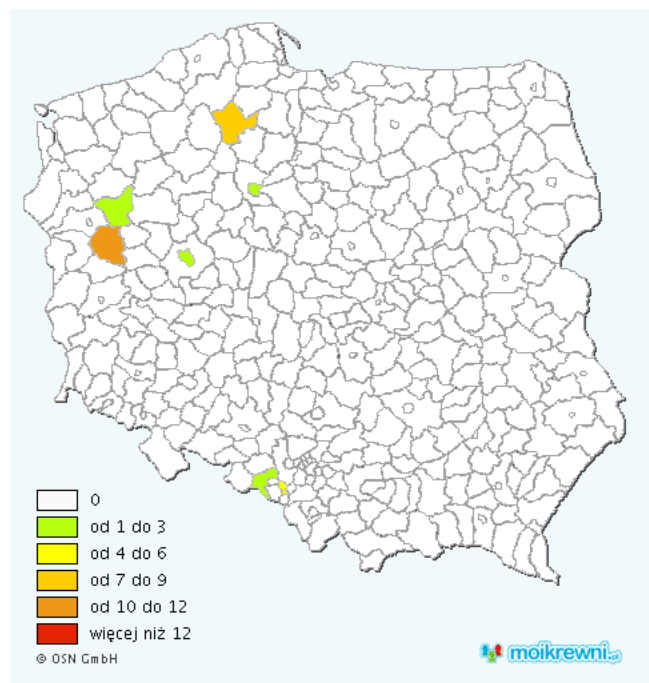
Map showing the distribution of the surname **Bil** as of 2002.

Poland, because lots of Germans resettled in Poland over the centuries. By and large, however, Germans settling in southeastern Poland have been somewhat Polonized over time, and we'd expect the name to be spelled phonetically as **Bajl** or perhaps **Bejl**. If the name retained its German spelling, I'd expect it to show up in areas long ruled by Germany, not near Sanok. And in fact that's what the Moikrewni map shows (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/beil.html>). As of 2002, there were 32 Polish citizens who went by **Beil**, all living in western Poland, in areas long ruled and dominated by Germans. I doubt it's a factor here, except perhaps as a misspelling.

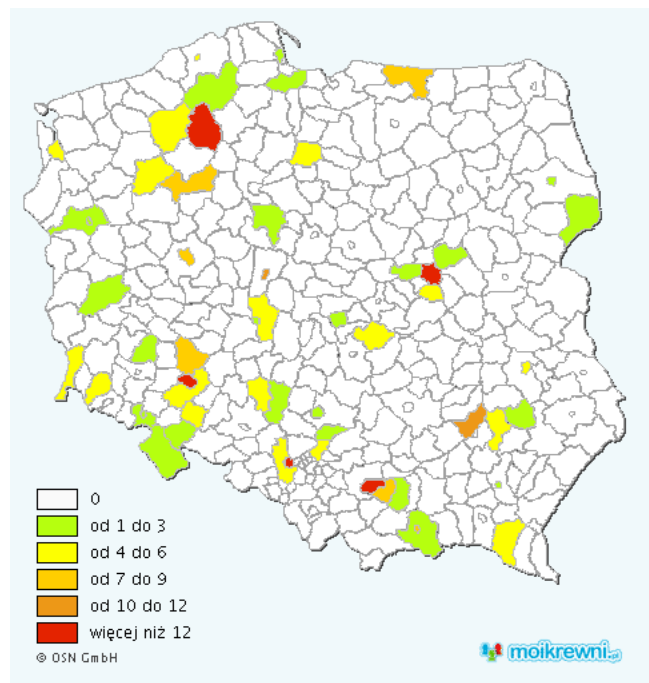
I must admit, was very surprised to find 314 Polish citizens going by **Bill** as of 2002! But that's what the map shows (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/bill.html>). As I said, Poles don't normally use double letters; when you see a name with them, it's generally of non-Polish origin, especially German. But the people named **Bill** showed up all over Poland; 4 of them lived in Sanok county! So even in Poland, this spelling is rare but does exist. (Rymut includes it under the many surnames from that basic Slavic root meaning "white.")

I think the odds are you're looking for **Biel**, or at least that's the standard Polish version of the surname in question. **Bil** and **Bill** mean essentially the same thing, but the presence of the vowel *i* rather than *ia* or *ie* probably indicates Ukrainian influence. From surname analysis alone, we can't say which one is the "right" name. Only research into your family history might establish that. It wouldn't surprise me at all if you find the name spelled several different ways, even in Poland.

Your best practical bet might be to write that office in Poland to get addresses for any Biels and Bils and Bills living in the Bykowce area. If they can provide you with addresses, you could try writing to those people. Maybe that will help you make a connection and answer your question better than I can.



Map showing the distribution of the surname **Beil** as of 2002.



Map showing the distribution of the surname **Bill** as of 2002.

To return to the index page for UPGS 2008 surname analyses, <http://www.fredhoff.com/UPGS2008.htm>, click on the URL.