

## KATARSKI

Requested by Annette Gathright: “While my family contends they were Polish, my Polish friend say **Katarski** is not a Polish name. Some people have said it comes from Catarrh, like in head cold, and other say it is the Polish version of **Kotarski**. I reject the former, although many members of this family have a good ‘Polish’ nose that might be a haven for nose problems. The Katarski branch of my family came from NE Poland, town of Myszyniec, N. of Ostrołęka, then in province of Łomża, and abt 5km from the old East Prussian border. I was told that this area, the Kurpie forest area, was a haven for those who wanted to disappear from any type of authority for whatever reason because of its remoteness/wilderness.

“I know the following about this name: there are more Katarskis living in Lithuania today with that name than in the whole of Poland. Myszyniec, and likely NE Poland in general had many immigrants from Lithuania, based on the names found in that area... One is Petkiewicz, which is related to me by marriage with the Katarski family. In addition, the Green Kurpie forest *stroje* (folk costume) from that area has a look that is more like those in Lithuania than the ones in Poland from areas nearby.

“One Katarski I have contacted ( who now is in Australia) relates his family was Russian, His father was born in Kybartai, in western Lithuania, near the border with E. Prussia ( all this pre-revolutionary so it was in Russia at that time); his ancestors were all in the Czar’s army. Records for this family say his gfather was from the noble family of Katarski (spelled with characters at the end without Latin/polish equivalents) from the area of Moscow. I also know that *katarski* is a word for a monetary denomination in the Middle east - Qatar,, for one. The family in AU with proven roots in Russia states a family member way back was given this name for some service he did for the then Czar and that family member was in the military ... service performed somewhere in the eastern end of the Mediterranean, or even further east or south.

“With all that information, what do you make of this name’s origin? I have so far found nothing in regard to my ancestors’ ‘origin’ other than above; can’t get my family out of the NE Poland, and can’t tie them positively to the ones in Russia... no records for the town where I have from of their living.  
Analysis by: William F. “Fred” Hoffman <[wfh@langline.com](mailto:wfh@langline.com)>, for UPGS 2008

Wow! I’m going to have a hard time adding anything to what you’ve come up with. But let me do what I can.

In Polish **Katarski** is spelled with no diacritical marks, and its pronunciation is fairly obvious: much like “kah-TAR-skee.” The traditional feminine form, **Katarska**, sounds more like “kah-TAR-skah.”

The data available at the Moikrewni Web site (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/katarski.html>) shows that as of 2002 there was exactly one Polish citizen who went by *Katarski*, and no one who went by the feminine version, *Katarska*. The one Katarski lived in Włocławek county of Kujawsko-Pomorskie province, in north central Poland. The name has apparently died out in northeastern Poland.

I checked the online Lithuanian telephone directory at <http://telefonai.zebra.lt/>, and you’re right, the Lithuanian version, *Katarskis*, is more common than the Polish one. That directory showed eight Lithuanians who went by *Katarskis* or the married feminine form *Katarskienė*. The online directory is far from comprehensive; it lists only those who choose to be listed, and does not include the many who long ago gave up on land lines and got cell phones. Of those eight listed, four lived in the area of Telšiai, with one each in the *rajonai* of Panevėžis, Jonava, Vilnius, and Klaipėda.

I also checked a 2-volume set called *Lietuvių pavardžių žodynas* [Dictionary of Lithuanian Surnames], edited by Lithuanian name expert Aleksandras Vanagas and published in the 1980s. Vanagas and his colleagues felt the name *Katarskis* was most likely to come from the roots seen in Polish *Kotarski* and in the Belarusian name *Котар* [Kotar]. But from what you say, it seems very doubtful the name is of Polish linguistic origin. More useful is the data that dictionary gives on Lithuanian name distribution. Vanagas and his colleagues maintained a card file in which they noted down the appearance of individual surnames in various sources, including telephone books and official documents. They showed 16 instances in which *Katarskis* was mentioned: 8 in or near the city of Telšiai; 1 in the area of Luokė (Telšiai *rajonas*); 2 in Mosėdis (Skuodas *rajonas*); 2 in Nevarenai (Telšiai *rajonas*); and one in the Šiauliai area. This data suggests the name was never very common; but it was not unheard of, and it most often showed up in the general area of Telšiai, in northwestern Lithuania.

I also checked a surname directory to the *Słownik geograficzny gazetteer* [*Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich, Indeks nazwisk*, Szymon Konarski, published by Wydawnictwo DiG, Warsaw 1995, ISBN 83-85490-09-4] and found it showed one mention of *Katarskis*, in Volume 15-2, on page 500. It's in the entry for *Poswojgi*: “*Poswojgi*, manor, Telsze county, Gadonów district (16 versts away), 37 *desyatinas* [a Russian measure of land] owned by the Dowszkowys, 48 by the *Katarskis*, 40 by the *Konopackis*, 171 by the *Strandtmans*.” I'm pretty sure *Poswojgi* is the Polish name of Pasvaigė, which is northeast of Telšiai (see <http://www.maps.lt/>). In Volume 8, the entry for *Poswojgi* says it had a chapel of the Telsze/Telšiai church. I guess that means Pasvaigė was served by the church in Telšiai. In any case, the records are probably held by the Lithuanian State Historical Archives, Gerosios Vilties 10, Vilnius LT-03134, Lithuania. A search there might uncover some information on these *Katarskis*.

Professor Rymut mentions **Katarski** in his book *Nazwiska Polaków* [The Surnames of Poles], but it's one of the many names for which he could not pin down one specific derivation. The first derivation he gives is the obvious one, from *katar*, the sickness we call “catarrh” in English. He also says the name may come from the German personal name *Kater* — *Duden Familiennamen* says that name comes from German *Kater*, “tomcat”—or from a short form of the given name *Katarzyna*. It is a bit unusual for Polish surnames to come from feminine given names. There are some, however; and strictly from a linguistic point of view, it doesn't seem too farfetched to suggest *Katar-* might be connected with a short form of that name.

I notice some dictionaries also mention that *Katar* is the Polish form of the word we use as *Cathar*, the name of a 11th-century French gnostic sect. While it is not utterly impossible for French Cathars to have fled their native land in search of more hospitable climes, I have never heard that Russia and Lithuania had reputations as havens of religious tolerance. I suppose Cathars could have ended up in Russia, and possibly also in Lithuania, and could have been identified by this surname. But it seems a stretch....

I keyed in the Russian Cyrillic spelling of this name, *Катарский*, and did a search on Google. The only matches I found were references to the adjectival form of *Катар*, the Russian name for the country of Qatar. I also searched in Vladimir Dal's *Толковой словарь живого великорусского языка* [Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language], regarded in many ways as the richest Russian dictionary, one with the most archaic and regional terms. It showed a noun *карапа* [*katara*] that meant “the forepaw of a sea animal; fin.” It also listed *катарь*, which is that same word as catarrh in English, referring to a mucous discharge or blockage.

So where does that leave us? Well, there is no clear-cut choice as far as the derivation of the surname goes. There are a number of possibilities, but none is a slam dunk. When you say *Katarski* to a Pole or *Катарский* to a Russian, I think the first association they'd have would be with that term for catarrh. Maybe an ancestor suffered from this condition.

A link with the Arab emirate of Qatar seems less likely, if only because the people of Qatar actually pronounce the name somewhat like they way we pronounce our word “cutter”; in standard Arabic, however, it is pronounced it much as it's spelled, roughly “KAH-tar.” There were Turks and Tatars who came to Lithuania in the Middle Ages and fought in the armies of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, receiving lands and titles for their service. So we do run into Lithuanians whose names are of Arabic origin—which means the link with Qatar, or an ancestor bearing an Arabic name from that name's basic root, is not totally absurd. But it seems farfetched. As does a link with the Cathars, or with a Russian word for “forepaw of a sea creature.”

Actually, there is some plausibility to the notion that *Katarski* could be a variant of *Kotarski*. When you compare Polish names with their Lithuanian equivalents, Polish *a* often = Lithuanian *o*, and Lithuanian *o* often = Polish *a*, e.g. Polish *Jagiello* = Lithuanian *Jogaila*. So it's not absurd to suggest the *o* in *Kotarski* might become *a* in Lithuania, producing the Lithuanian name *Katarskis*, which might then be re-Polonized as *Katarski*. But there would still need to be some proof of a connection between the *Katarskis* in Lithuania and Polish *Kotarskis*. (Prof. Rymut says the surname *Kotarski* is connected with origin in or near Kotarczyn, in Sierpec county of Mazowieckie province, in north central Poland. There are, however, other places with names beginning *Kotar-* that the surname might refer to.)

A connection with *Katarzyna* seems a bit less likely, especially since in Lithuanian that name takes the form *Katarina* or *Katryna*, and in Russian it's *Екатерина* [Yekaterina]. A connection with German *Kater* is possible—Germans resettled all over central and eastern Europe, and a German family originally named *Kater* could have become Lithuanized or Russified and served in the Russian army as *Katarski*. But still, we're just dealing with a lot of could be's and maybe's.

The one thing I would emphasize is focus on the area of Telšiai, Lithuania. It seems we keep running into mention of the place when we look at this name. People named *Katarskis* show up in that area consistently, the *Słownik geograficzny* mentions a family named *Katarski* that owned land near there. If you could connect with someone in the Telšiai area who can do a little digging in local historical sources, that might very well uncover information about the *Katarskis* there that will shed light on the surname's origin—and possibly also on your family. I'm not at all convinced the name is of Polish linguistic origin, especially since your research suggests your family might have come to northeastern Poland from Lithuania.

That Telšiai connection is a long shot, I realize, but it's the best I can do. Analysis of the surname, by itself, simply does not yield a convincing explanation of its origin. There are too many explanations of what a *Katarski* could have been, but none is compelling. All I can do is offer an overview of the possibilities, and hope that your research will turn up some bit of information that will help you focus on the one that is actually relevant.

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