

## MOOR

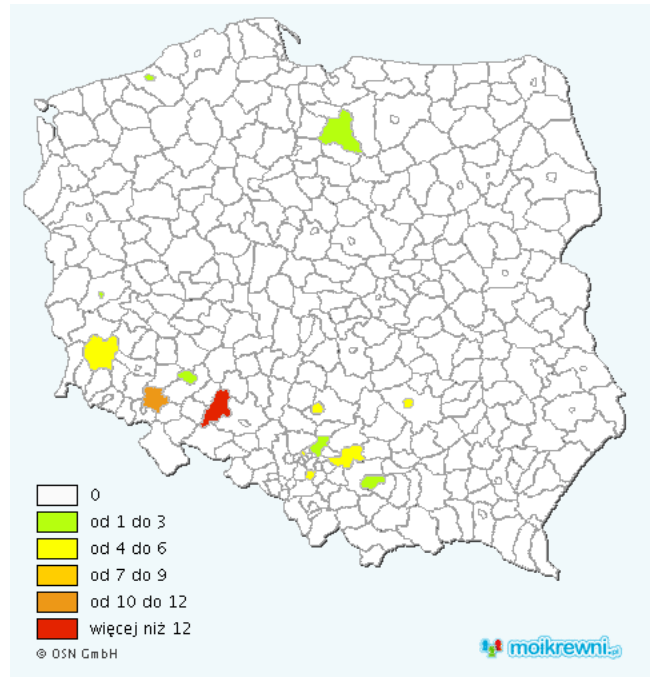
Requested by Tiffany Keck: “My great-great-grandmother is Anna Moor from the Suwałki area in Poland and it seems that there are a good number of Moors living in the Suwałki area today. We don’t know anything at all about her family. Research I’ve done into this last name suggests that it’s origins are English. What I’d like to know is, in your opinion, would it seem that this family emigrated to Poland from somewhere in the British Isles, or could the last name have Polish origins as well?”  
Analysis by: William F. “Fred” Hoffman <[wfh@langline.com](mailto:wfh@langline.com)>, for UPGS 2008

The data available at the Moikrewni Web site for **Moor** (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/moor.html>) shows that as of 2002 there were 65 Polish citizens who went by this name. As the map at right shows, they were scattered all over, but with the largest numbers in southwestern Poland, in the region we call *Silesia*, Poles call *Śląsk*, and Germans call *Schlesien*. The largest numbers were in the counties of Brzeg (15), the county marked in red on the map. There were 12 Moors in the county of Świdnica, which is orange on the map. There don’t seem to be any living anywhere near Suwałki, so it looks as if your information on that is inaccurate. Of course, there could have been people by this name living in northeastern Poland at one time, and the name could have died out in that area for any of a number of reasons, including emigration.

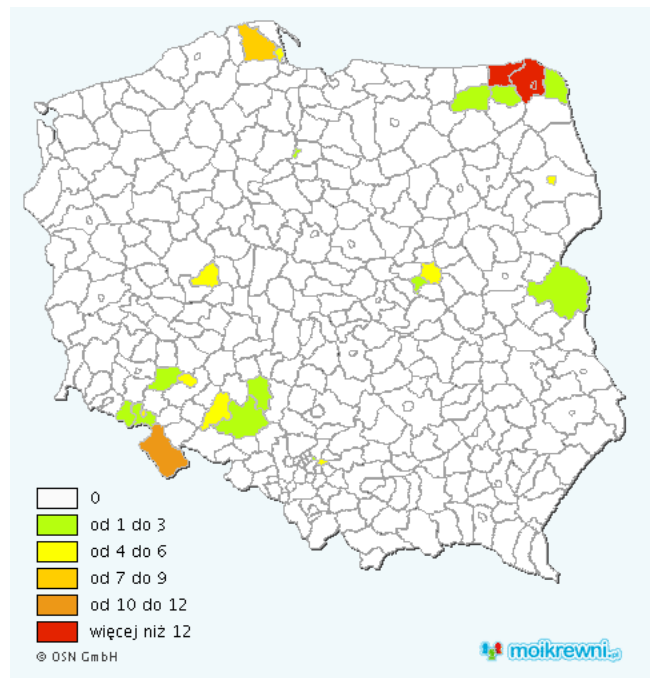
Now data for **Mor**, with one *o*, is different. There were 181 Polish citizens by that name, and the largest numbers were in northeastern Poland: specifically, the counties of Gołdap (43), Suwałki (38), and municipal Suwałki. These are the counties in red in the upper right corner of the map.

This isn’t surprising. Polish avoids the use of double letters; when we see names with them, they usually turn out to be foreign, either of non-Polish origin or influenced by a foreign language such as German, which does use double letters—especially vowels, to indicate length. So it makes sense that *Mor* would be the more common spelling, with *Moor* a less common variant, presumably influenced by some other language such as German or English.

Professor Rymut mentions **Mor** in his book *Nazwiska Polaków* [The Surnames of Poles]. He lists it under names beginning *Mor-*, and says they can derive from various roots, including *mór*, “plague,”



Above: Map showing the distribution of the surname **Moor** as of 2002. Below: the data for **Mor**.



*mor*, “black,” *mora*, “the stench of illness,” and *morzyć*, “to torment, torture.” He does not include the spelling *Moor*, which, as I said, makes more sense in the context of English or German linguistic origin.

The name could be of English origin, but I think German is more likely, especially in northeastern Poland, much of which used to be in East Prussia. It’s certainly not impossible that people from England named *Moor* or *Moore* resettled in Poland. But let’s face it, we know darned well Germans were living all over the country, including the northeast. And this name is thoroughly plausible as German.

A book Rymut recommended as especially good on German surnames, *Duden Familiennamen* by Rosa and Volker Kohlheim, gives *Moor* as a German name. It says ***Moor*** is more often spelled ***Mohr***; both are pronounced much like our word “more,” except the German *r* is more guttural than ours. The primary derivation for the German surname *Mohr* is from the noun *Mohr*, “Moor,” which, as in English, denoted a person of dark complexion or dark hair. Other possibilities are from Middle Low German *mōr*, “moor, swamp”; a house named “zum Mohren,” such as tavern or inn connected with a sign saying something like “The Moor’s place”; places named *Mohr* and *Moor*; and finally, a rare archaic term for a peasant or swineherd.

Of all these, the connection would probably be relevant in most cases would be “dark-skinned or dark-haired person.” In other words, a person was nicknamed *Mohr* or *Moor* because he looked like he came from Africa (ultimately from Greek *Mauros*, Mauritanian”). The other derivations could come into play in some cases, but I suspect they’re relevant less often.

As I said, it is quite plausible a German living in East Prussia might be called *Moor*, and the name persisted. Sometimes the German spelling of *Moor* was retained. Other times it was Polonized by dropping the double vowel, which is foreign to Polish, yielding *Mor*. Both spellings still exist in Poland, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if research in old records shows the same family called *Moor* one time, *Mor* another, *Mohr* yet another. That kind of spelling inconsistency is perfectly normal, and just one of the problems researchers have to learn to deal with.