

RAKALA — RYKALA

Requested by Pat Walsh.

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I’m not sure whether this question deals with two different families named **Rakala** and **Rykala**, or if it’s one family that shows up with both names. All I can do is look at the information available to me, tell you what it shows, and draw conclusions that seem justifiable.

I started by checking the searchable database at <http://www.herby.com.pl/indexslo.html>, which gives data on surnames borne by about 93% of Polish citizens as of 1990. While this database’s figures are in some regards inferior to those available at the Moikrewni site (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/>)—its data is from 1990, while Moikrewni uses 2002 data, and the later data is also considerably more accurate—the Herby.com.pl site does allow you to search the database, and to search with “wild cards,” ? for any one letter, * for any combination of letters. So I could search for R?ka?a to find all names in the database that fit the pattern R_ka_a, whatever the second or fifth letter might be. That would include vowels such as *ą* or *ę* or *y* in second position, and *l* or *ł* in fifth position.

Here are the results:

Rąkała 0 0

Rękała 1 Za:1

Rękawa 1 Wb:1

Rukała 1 Kr:1

Rykala 12 BB:8, Ka:4

Rykała 1140 Wa:35, BP:17, BB:27, By:7, Ch:13, Cz:246, El:28, Gd:13, Go:9, JG:11, Ka:117,

Ki:10, Ko:11, Kr:56, Ks:6, Lg:3, Lu:12, Łd:27, NS:4, Op:7, Pl:22, Pt:7, Pł:20, Po:10, Pr:13,

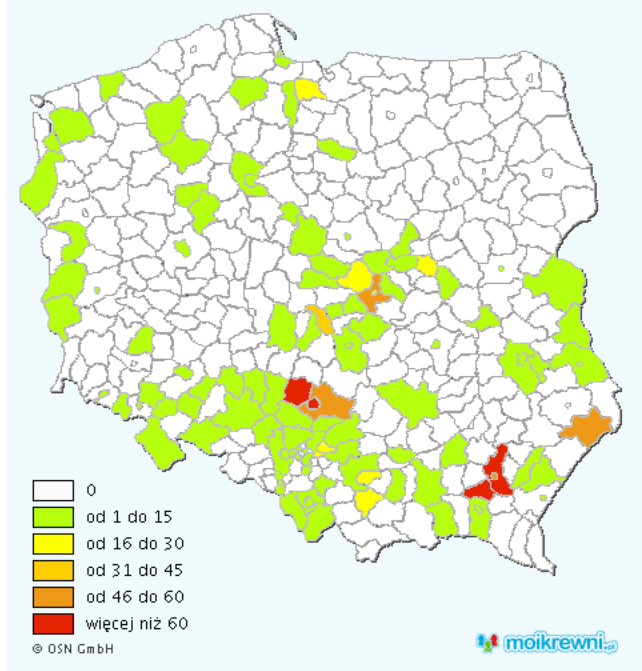
Ra:5, Rz:105, Sd:6, Sr:40, Sk:96, Sz:19, Tb:1, Ta:5, Wb:13, Wł:23, Wr:25, Za:61, ZG:10

Rykata 1 Rz:1

These give the name, its frequency, and a breakdown of its distribution in terms of the provinces as they existed in 1990. Thus Rąkała is listed, but the data was incomplete and that explains its frequency of 0. There was one Rękała in Zamość province, one Rękawa in Wałbrzych province, one Rukała in Kraków province, 12 Rykalas (eight in Bielsko-Biała province, four in Katowice province); 1,140 Rykałas found all over Poland but with the largest numbers in the provinces of Katowice (117) and Rzeszów (105). There was also one Rykata in Rzeszów province (which raises the question whether that might really have been a Rykała but the *ł* was misread and keyed in as *t*).

There was no Rakala or Rakała listing. This strongly suggests “Rakala” is either a misreading, a misspelled form of the name in question, or a very, very rare name that no longer exists in Poland. These are all possibilities; but if the question was whether the family name was *Rakala* or *Rykala*, the answer is clear: *Rykala* is by far the most likely form.

I followed up by checking the various possibilities on the Moikrewni site. It showed no listing at all for any of these names except *Rykala* and *Rykała*. There were 11 Rykalas, all living in south central Poland (counties of Wadowice, 5; Żory 3; and Opole 3). It is highly likely this is just a regional variant of *Rykała*. Sometimes names with *ł* have variant spellings with plain *l*. The spelling indicates that in a particular area, some people change the *ł* or “hard *l*,” which sounds like our *w*, into a plain *l*, which sounds



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

Other counties with comparatively large numbers were Kłobuck, Śląskie province, with 107; municipal Częstochowa, Śląskie province, with 92; Rzeszów, Podkarpackie province, with 89; Tomaszów Lubelski, Lubelskie province, with 58; and municipal Rzeszów, Podkarpackie province, with 54. As this data and the map show, the name is most common in south central through southeastern Poland—but unfortunately, not to the extent that it gives a reliable indication where a given Rykała family came from. Only research into the family history is likely to shed much light on that.

Polish surname expert Kazimierz Rymut mentioned this name in his book *Nazwiska Polaków* [The Surnames of Poles]. He says *Rykała* appears in Polish records as early as 1407. He lists it under names from the root *ryk-* as seen in the noun *ryk*, “roar, bellow.” Surnames in the form *X-ala* usually started out meaning “one always doing X, one of whom X is the most prominent characteristic.” Thus *nos* is “nose,” and *Nosala* means “one with the big nose”; *mądry* means “wise,” and *Mądrala* means “know-it-all, smart aleck.” So it seems reasonable to suggest *Rykała* started out as a nickname for an ancestor who was always roaring or bellowing.

I should add that the surname **Rakala** (“rah-kah’-wah”) did exist at one time, as Rymut mentions it in his book, saying it appears in Polish records as early as 1403. He lists it under names from the noun *rak*, “crab,” also used in the meaning “cancer.” It probably began as a nickname for an ancestor who was perceived as somehow crab-like.

Similarly, Rymut also includes the surname **Rakala** (“ron-kah’-wah”), saying it comes from the root seen in the noun *ręka*, “hand.” It apparently would have started as a nickname meaning something along the lines of “the hand guy,” maybe referring to a handy person. These names existed at one time, but have apparently died out in modern Poland.

more less the same as our *l*. Poles would pronounce *Rykała* roughly “rick-ah’-lah,” whereas they’d pronounce *Rykała* “rick-ah’-wah.” I can’t be positive, but it seems pretty likely *Rykała* is just a regional variant of *Rykała*, one that shows up occasionally in south central Poland.

When Poles with that letter *l* in their names left their homeland, they soon found that people speaking other languages didn’t know what to make of it. It usually ended up as plain *l*, though in some cases it was spelled phonetically as *w*, which is what it sounds like to English speakers. But in most cases *l* became plain old *l*.

The Moikrewni site (<http://www.moikrewni.pl/mapa/kompletny/ryka%25C5%2582a.html>) shows 1,341 Polish citizens named **Rykała**. The largest number, 123, lived in the county of Strzyżów, in the province of Podkarpackie, in southeastern Poland.