

WHAT IS A WOLA?

by William F. Hoffman

Many places in Poland bear name *Wola*, either alone or accompanied by another word. The Polish Wikipedia page for *Wola* lists over five hundred places that fit this category, plus more than three hundred places named with the diminutive form *wólka*, alone or with another word! Naturally, many researchers wonder what the name means. I can think of no better source for an answer than the entry written by Bronisław Chlebowski for the *Słownik geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego*. Here is my translation of his explanation.

Wola, in Latin *libera villa, libertas*, a name given to agricultural villages, appearing as early as the first half of the 13th century and constituting a separate category of settlements, by comparison to others, in terms of the populace used to settle them and the freedoms they were granted. The need to make use of empty wooded lands belonging to princes, clergy, and knights, along with the growth in numbers of free men, the end of the slave trade, and the decreasing inflow of prisoners of war, brought about the founding of villages with free populace, either Poles or new arrivals from other countries, mainly Germans. These settlers were given plots of land and exemption for a certain number of years (up to twenty) from all rents, fees, and taxes, and in most cases separate institutions and charters based on German law. That free villages (*Wolas*) existed based on Polish law is attested by the fact of their conversion to German law. Thus, for instance, in 1328, Władysław, Prince of Dobrzyń, conferred Chełmno law on *Wola* and other villages in Dobrzyń *ziemia* (*Kodeks dypl. pol. II*, 658). In 1363, King Kazimierz transferred the villages of Chothow and *Wola*, property of Krzesław, from Polish law to that of Środa (*Kodeks Małopolski*, III, 168).

An important indication as to the populace used to settle these villages is given by a Latin-language document which “Boliziarus dux Polonie” issued in 1255 to the monastery in Łąd: “We have granted [to the monks] the freedom to locate a new free village between the river called Wirbec and their monastery, which is to be called *Libera villa* and is to be populated by Germans or free Poles with full German law” (*Kodeks Wielkop.*, No. 331, 600). In a document from 1325, that village is called “*Wolany alias Villa Gerlaci*.” Here we learn that it was founded on land of the village of Dolany and populated by German settlers. It is mentioned in a 1255 document endowing the monastery in Krzyżanowice: “*Volia*, which in the vernacular is called *Grochovisko*” (*Kodeks dypl. pol. I*, 75). We also encounter this *Wola* in an act of endowment for the monastery in Zawichost in 1257. In Silesia and adjoining parts of Wielkopolska [Great Poland] and Małopolska [Little Poland], such settlements were called by the name *Lgota* or *Ligota*. A document from 1369 mentions a *Wola* and *Ligota* near each other, in the vicinity of Żarnowiec (*Kodeks Małop.* III, 229).

Wolas appear most frequently during the 14th century in areas of northern and eastern Małopolska and the eastern borderlands of Wielkopolska, in the 15th century in Mazovia, Podlasie, and Ruś Czerwona, and finally extended as far as Volhynia. The name *Wola* sometimes disappeared, superseded by the original name of the area; or sometimes it changed its second part along with a change of owner or connection with a nearby settlement. As the differences were gradually erased between free people and those bound to the soil, the name *Wola* came to mean a newly founded settlement, and one therefore free from taxes for a certain period, just like *Nowa*

Wieś [which means literally “new village”]. Also used in the same meaning was the name *Wólka* [a diminutive form, literally a “little wola”]. [Bronisław Chlebowski, Vol. 13, pp. 774–775]. In this passage Chlebowski comes through with information not only on the meaning of the terms, but also the economic and political situation that caused such names to get started. The landowners’ efforts to augment their income led to the creation of many new villages and settlements, and the names of those places often reflect their origins. *Wola*, *Wólka*, *Łazy*, *Ligota*, and *Nowa Wieś* were all names for newly-founded agricultural settlements which were exempt from taxes until they had had a chance to get off to a good start.

The Polish Wikipedia page for *Wola* refers the reader to another page,

https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lokacja_na_surowym_korzeniu.

Lokacja na surowym korzeniu means literally “raw-root location,” mirroring the Latin description *in cruda radice*, as these settlements were founded on “raw roots,” that is, unimproved land. That Wikipedia entry provides additional information. Raw-root location (Latin: *in cruda radice*) — the establishment of a village or town in a previously undeveloped and uninhabited place. It allowed the design of a regular street plan and predetermination of the location of individual town buildings, the size of the market, the location of the parish church, etc. As far as possible, efforts were made to establish cities in this way. Often this involved clearing forests and developing wild land. As a result, in “raw-root” settlements, the freehold period was much longer than in others, as much as 24 years. In Poland, these settlements were commonly founded from the 13th century in connection with the revived colonization movement under German law. This process was also highly intensified in Małopolska and Ruthenia in the 14th century, especially during the reign of Kazimierz the Great. Raw-root locations were less frequent in later periods, influenced by the general regression of towns and changes in the agricultural economy. Cities continued to be founded, but in the 16th and 17th centuries they were mainly magnate, rather than royal, locations (e.g., Zabłudów, located in 1553, or Głogów Małopolski, established in 1570).

To sum up, a *wola* or *nowa wieś* or *ligota* was a “new village,” built typically on unused land, which often had to be cleared of trees first, and settled by German or Polish peasants. The “freedom” (indicated by the word *wola*, “will, liberty”) or “relief” (indicated by the archaic term *ligota*, “relief”) is connected with the suspension of taxes or rents that attracted many peasants, overburdened by feudal obligations, to volunteer as settlers on these “raw roots.”

Part of this explanation comes from an article I wrote for Rodziny years ago, to explain unfamiliar terms seen in place names.