

Wisła - what can we think when we see her

Reflections on Wisła, the myth and economy

**Special lecture
for the International Shiseikan Budo Association Summer Seminar
Stara Wieś 2014**

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Foreword

It is my honour and pleasure to meet today the exceptional group of instructors and participants of the ISBA Summer Seminar 2014. Throughout the years of my contacts with Shiseikan people and *Budo* people in Europe, I have received so much, that I am glad I can do something to enrich – I hope – this seminar.

I read with great interest the text of Director Araya. the sentence on teaching Budo: "At the deepest level seek to understand the principles present since the creation of the universe. This is hidden knowledge".

But can we really recreate in our imagination principles that were at work at the time of the Creation? Maybe they are still present. Maybe it is here and now that we can find them.

Director Araya talked to us about the things material and immaterial. Which is, he touched upon metaphysics. Physics is about things that have physical features. Meta- is beyond that (and we know it comes from the order of books in Alexandria Library).

We are here at Stara Wieś, and this dojo is absolutely marvelous because of the nature that surrounds us. In Budo training one needs a scale. Our teachers, especially Inaba Sensei, talked a lot about the scale of the movement. When you do kesagiri, it is as if you were aiming at cutting oblique the whole space. Here at Stara Wieś we have this magnificent view of very gentle hills that end with a blue horizon. In a way it is so typically Polish. This horizon seems to me like a sea. I know it is not a sea. Yet my heart sees the sea, and never ending horizon. This never ending horizon is eternity, from which we came and into which we will disappear.

In my lecture today I would like to wander about, do some free association, along the lines of one object. The object will be the river, the associations will be created about history, language, myth, economy, politics, all related to Wisła, the biggest river flowing into the Baltic Sea.

Introduction

While talking with Adam Radecki about this year's seminar, we came to conclusion that in our cultural program we should continue to present to you some facts and ideas that illustrate more the positive side of Polish history and culture, as we tend to stress a lot the dramatic and traumatic experience in our history, and this becomes stereotyped. This is why I suggested visiting the Łazienki Park and Palace on Water in Warsaw. And also visiting the holy place of Jasna Góra is thought of as introducing you to the existence of a long lived cult of Black Madonna, and through it, perhaps, the continuation of the cult of the Great Mother, or Great Goddess of Life, in this land of Poland.

Obviously people – tribes, nations – claim their right to certain places, especially to the places of their origin. They value them as indispensable in their proper lives. They claim they love them. In Europe this claim for, and indispensability of a native land was embodied in the Greek myth of Antaeus, a son of the God of Sea – Poseidon and the Goddess of Earth – Gaia, he who would not be defeated if his body would be touching the ground. Indeed, he was crushed by Heracles, when he lifted him from ground and, lifted in the air, squeezed him between his strong arms. Sometimes this feature of Antaeus of being divinely strong thanks to his standing with force on ground, is used as a metaphor for invincibility grounded in knowledge of facts, realism, surroundings. Strange as it may sound, it resembles the concept of *fudoushin* – *unmovable spirit* – in Japanese *Budo*. Whereas in Japan *fudoushin* is built on mental power and physical training of breath (ki), in the myth of Antaeus it seems related to physical connectedness with earth. In Polish native tradition we do not have a similar myth.

When war is lost, the exile which results for those defeated, can be a worse outcome than death. The destiny of the exiled peoples is, with few exceptions, bad. In the Polish history there were numerous examples of that.

With very few exceptions, Polish history and the history of its culture was a creation of lowlands, and the flow of water through it, is important. And presence of natural phenomena in the primitive philosophy of our ancestors is quite noticeable.

In Japanese *Budo* and in Shinto, the concept of purification in living water is important, and as we learned, it should be the sea, or river. But in Poland we do not have so many opportunities of the sea, as the majority of the land is continental. On the other hand, rivers and lakes are quite abundant in Poland. It can be said that in Poland culture and civilization was created in relationship to vast lowland areas and river basin.

Wisła – location, names, the basin

Wisła can be said to represent Poland in the imagery of the nation nowadays.

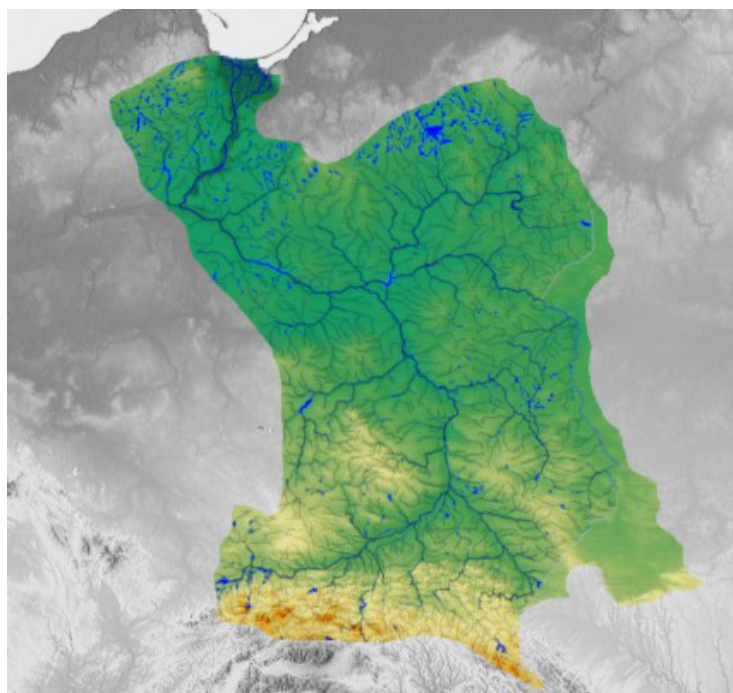
She is at present our longest river (1047 km), and the longest of all rivers flowing into Baltic Sea (which is almost like a huge lake of Europe).

The name Vistula is Latin equivalent for Wisła in Polish. And the word simply meant a “river”, “stream”.

This name, linguistically, is feminine. We Poles have gender for all nouns, all names, all places. Some European languages have it as well, although English has not.

In Polish language, all phenomena of nature have gender, they are either feminine, masculine or neutral. The word river is feminine, Wisła as well, but for example Rhein or Danube is masculine.

No linguist is quite sure about its origin but generally it is agreed that it developed from the Indo-European word stem *Veis* meaning anything liquid, flowing. Many river names in Europe were inherited from tribes and peoples who disappeared from the land once they inhabited. The oldest example of Wisła's appearance on maps is the one on the map belonging to Roman military leader Agrippa (1st century B.C.) and in the Natural History of Gaius Plini Secundus (Pliny the Elder), under the name VISCLA, and in later documents as VISTLA which is very close to Vistula. ¹



Later its name was in Polish chronicles reported as Vandalus, which the first historian of Poland Wincenty Kadłubek tells us to come from the name of a maiden (Wanda) who drowned herself in that river, but rather it comes from the name of the tribe of Vandals, a tribe living in Central Europe, in much of today's southern, central and a part of western Poland.

(Wisła basin)

¹ Zbigniew Balik is a specialist in the oldest toponimics in Slav territories, he comments extensively on the names of geographical places.

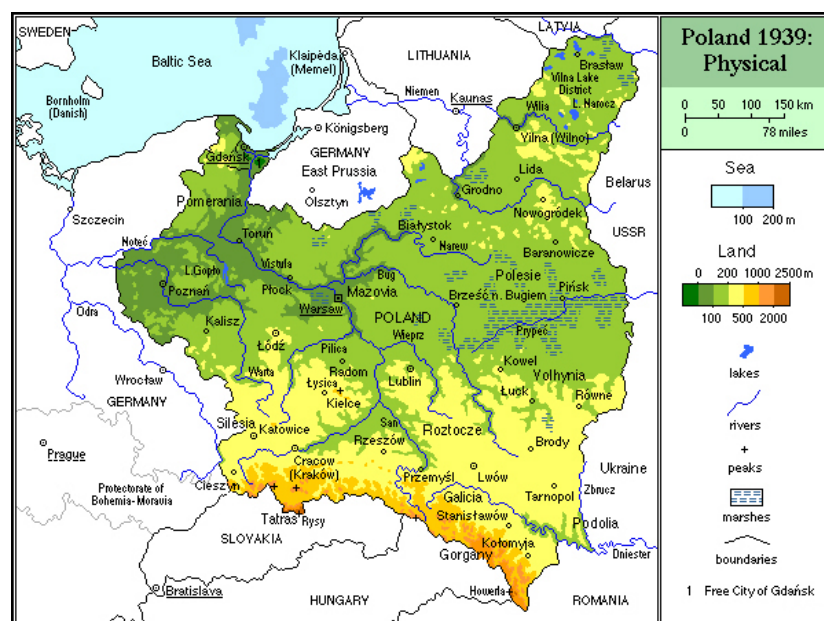
In the past, millions years ago, great waters flowed through this land, linking East and West, and shaping the surface of Europe. It is along these old and by now completely gone rivers, where animals moved, and also tribes, from East to West, of whom we know so very very little.



(old riverbeds in Europe)

There were natural lowlands sculpted by grand rivers, and many rivers which of we know now located themselves in the hollow of the ancient riverbeds. Along these riverbeds animals traveled, and tribes moved.

If you compare this with the territory of the pre-war Poland (1918-1939) you can see that much of the country was located on Wisła basin plus basins of upper Dniester, Prypec, Niemen and Wilia.



(Wisła basin and Poland)

Wisła starts where two streams: Biała Wisielka (White Small Vistula) and Czarna Wisielka (Black Small Vistula), coming out of Barania Góra (Sheep Mountain) in Beskid Range, flow together, then, painting a beautiful S, she goes up to the Baltic Sea forking in two branches, forming a delta with right branch Nogat and left branch Leniwka. The triangle formed is called with a name Żuławy. But until XVI Century she forked off higher up the flow, with a branch passing through Elbląg, one of the most important port towns at that time (and this was important to economy).

Political implications of names of the rivers

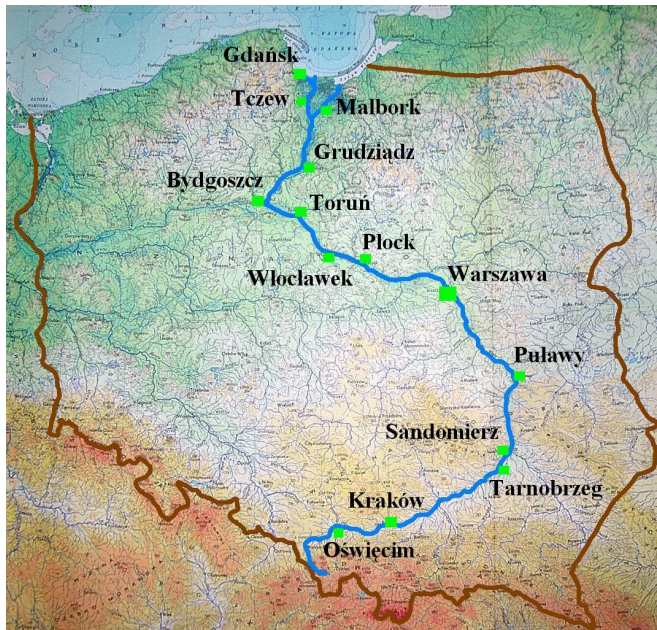
As Poland moved its borders many times, and after World War II (WW2) especially radically, bringing about the complete remake of the nation's buildup, names of all big rivers flowing through Polish territories all of the sudden started to have symbolic and political undertones.

For example Odra (Oder) together with Nysa/Neisse only recently became an equivalent of Poland/Germany border. And many times in the aftermath of WW2 these two names were repeated in the history textbooks, as if to cover names of e.g. Niemen or Wilia (Vilia) in Lithuania and Bielarus, now completely lost for Poland. Or of Czeremosz (Tcheremush) in Western Ukraine, which constituted Polish-Rumanian border in the years 1919-1939, or even better Dniestr (Dnister) or Prut, whose names appear so much in Polish literature or painting.

Niemen/Neman/Nioman, Nemunas, Memel (in German) is the greatest river in Lithuania, whose presence in Polish history is great and in literature enormous. This is due to the fact that the greatest Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz immortalized the river's name in his creation, and he described the landscape over it in the way no one else did so well. Another Polish poet Czesław Miłosz immortalized a small river Issa in Lithuania, where he grew up and in a novel "The Issa valley" he draws a picture of almost wild landscape in northern Poland, woods and moor, where a boy is brought up in closest relationship with animals, hunters, peasants, deep human feelings.

Vistula came to symbolize Poland especially after WW2 because she was the most "neutral" of all great rivers on the newly delimited territory. It was so because in the reconstructed Poland she was the biggest river fully belonging to Poland's territory. Also because in the long history of Poland she was always the river of all Polish king's capital (Kraków until 1611, then Warszawa), with the exception of first kings in Gniezno (until 1038) in Western Poland. Even when briefly the king's center was located in Płock (which we know from previous - 2006, 2007, 2010 - summer seminars in Poland), the river which flows through is the same: Wisła.

The River and economy



Wisła established her economic power of Poland as a grand route of transportation of goods. It was the single and easiest way of carrying huge volume of goods outside of Poland through the port city of Gdańsk (Danzig), a Hanseatic center of trade. Out were transported wood, salt and grain, in was carried mostly ferrous ore.

(towns on Wisła)

Polish economy was for two hundred years just funded on the infrastructure of combined river transportation, with Wisła at the center and its tributaries reaching from far away Ukraine, Bielarus. The system of inland water transportation was supported by the system of roads all heading towards river ports. The most beautiful Polish cities and towns were built on the banks of Wisła and her tributaries.



(town of Toruń)

The rhythm of this **river economy** was divided in two: in autumn crops were transported from the fields and countryside up to the river ports and storehouses, where they “hibernated” during wintertime and in spring, with the ice melting, the transportation was set in motion until autumn. All way from the upper river to the seashore in Gdansk and back the single transport lasted 3 months. Rafts were used as well, and the wood was all sold at the harbor. The specialized ships for grain called ‘szkuta’ could take in one as much as a some dozen train wagon takes nowadays. Strangely, this division in two, reflects also the ancient rhythm of ritual year in Slavic tradition: year was divided in two: summer and winter, with summer and winter solstices, coming as pivotal points.

Slavic myths – gods, goddesses, no river god. Legends

I would like to touch on the question of myths and legends connected with Wisła, or the river, in our culture.

First, the Slavs, much unlike the Japanese, do not have many myths, but have many legends. Myth is supposed to be not only a narration about ancient heroes, but it should be also be able to create structure of ritual, ceremony, in a society. So we can say that there is a myth of purification in water (creating structure of *misogi*), or myth of the dance before the cave (Uzume no Mikoto, to get Amaterasu Omikami out of the Cave) – which structured all performative acts (*geino*) in Japan. There is also a myth of creation of the islands from the brine and mud, taken from the bottom of the sea by Izanami and Izanagi.



Here I will try to tell you in brief the cosmogonic myth of ancient Slavs. I repeat it after a renowned Polish historian and mythologist Aleksander Gieysztor (Mythology of Slavs):

First there was nothing but the God who drifted on a boat on a sea, and Devil which was forming itself from the foam and which stuck to God. Then Devil had an idea of creating the World and since he could not do it himself, he jumped into sea, dug up a handful of sand, and gave it to God, who threw it on water and a small island was born. They two had little space to sit on it. Devil also hid some sand in his mouth and when God created an island, the sand in devil’s mouth started to grow. He could not contain it so he spat it out and it turned into mountains and hills. When God was asleep, Devil started to push him to the water, but the land started to extend, and the God was always on it. God woke up, and they started to fight and they decided to divide the World: God stayed up in the sky and Devil went to water.

It is similar to the myth of creation of the Japanese archipelago, isn't it?

Here it is important to know that Devil (Diabel) in Slavic myths is not really comparable to the incarnation of the Evil, the Satan of Judeo-Christian mythology. He is rather a mischievous spirit, provoking tricks and upsetting, but not essentially bad.



Here is a picture that is a strange reminiscence of the sand and the river. The picture I am showing to you is like reminiscence of this mythical component: creation of the world from a grain of sand. It shows the sand traders, who come to sell the river sand to the people in the city.

(Gierzyński "Piaskarze")

On the other hand, we have only legends about creation of Poland: one, of Bohemian origin, telling of three brothers: Lech, Czech and Rus, who split their way from East to West and created three kingdoms: the one of Lechit, the one of Rus, and the one of Czech. Second is about Wisła. This is a legend that is close to myth, precisely because of certain repetition of drowning a woman in waters, that was observed in centuries afterwards.

It tells of certain daughter of a king Krak (from whose name Krakow comes), who, rejecting the German prince for her marriage, threw herself in waters of Wisła. This is interesting because it relates legendary leaders of Vandals, (or another of Wiślan, as this tribe living in area on upper Wisła was called), and also the myth of woman drowned to save the society, the sacrifice of woman (maybe a goddess?).



In later centuries, especially after Christianity chase away old belief and pagan rituals, women accused of sorcery (which is, practicing old pagan rituals) were "floated" - or drowned - in rivers, to relieve the society from sin and misfortune, in Poland later than in Germany and England, but longer.

(Witches apprehended, examined and executed, for notable villanies by them committed both by land and water, England 1613)



But exactly those who drowned the “sorceresses’ (*wiedźmy* – “knowers”), were actually repeating the ritual of drowning the Goddess of Winter, and Death in Nature – Marzanna, of pagan times! We still repeat this “drowning of Marzanna” folk custom of the in early spring – to relieve the world from the old, death of winter, to open the way for spring. So drowning a woman for the sake of society, has a feature of a myth.

(drowning of Marzanna)

It repeats, partially, the myth of the Goddess of Wintertime and Darkness - Marzanna (as opposed to the Goddess of Summer Life - Dziewanna), who has to flow with her ice and snow, away from the fields, in river water.

There is a Jewish holidays on water: The Day of Trumpets – Rosh Hashana – early September, beginning of Jewish calendar, end of world and trumpet of Angel, flowing of old sins, purification of sins, and sins were symbolically thrown to river, by reading certain passage from the Scripture (Tora).



(painting by Aleksander Gierymski)

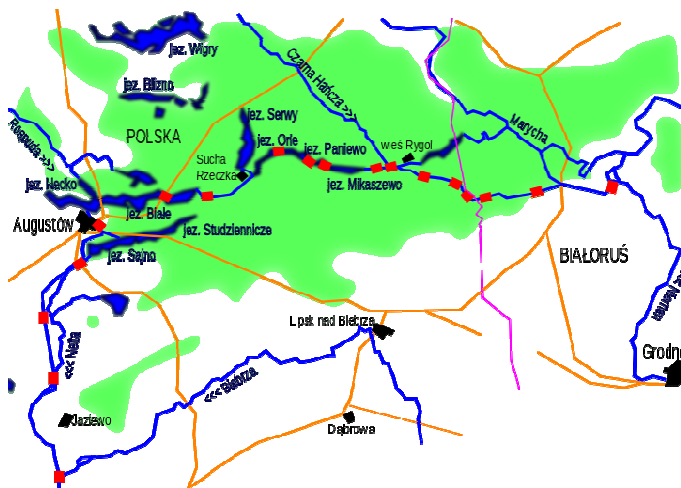
We lived long in Poland together with a nation of the Jews, and it was quite important to see their customs.

Water tracts in transnational domain

The mouth of the river with the surrounding territories were of the greatest political value, and precisely it was this reason that the domination of Teutonic Knights order at the lower Wisła and her mouth was cutting Polish king and nobility from the lucrative exchange with Western Europe.

When the Teutonic power was destroyed in XV century, and trade with Baltic and European countries developed, this combined with the enormously growing demand for food and wood, especially for shipbuilding in Western countries (England, Dutch, Spain), Poland was the main supplier of both grain and wood, and it was obtaining huge revenues.

In XVI century king Stefan Batory (elected from Hungarian nobility) decided upon constructing of a water way going all up from Krakow (the capital) to Baltic Sea but circumvention the mouth of Vistula, and joining with Niemen in Lithuania, aiming creating of the alternative route from southern Poland to Baltic Sea. This was done in order to diminish dependence of Polish economy from political pressures of Teutonic and Prussian powers. Moreover, aimed at preemptive strengthening of Polish presence on Eastern Baltic Sea against growing pressures of Muscovite (Russian) ambitions to obtaining way to open sea. Preparations were made, but this waterway was developed mainly through building of the August Canal in XIX century, joining through a masterful water engineering, water systems of Vistula and Niemen, with several sluices and bigger water-gates.



Through all of XIX century, and especially in the years of short lived semi-independence of Polish Kingdom (Królestwo Polskie 1815-1830) a project of Konstanty Prądzyński, financed and built by Franciszek Ksawery Drucki - Lubecki, a great politician, minister of Treasure, founder of the Central Bank of Polish territories under Russian domination.

(Augustów Canal)

This canal is still intact, renovated, and one can have a really nice trip on its flow and on small rivers that flow into it. One can enjoy flowing into the sluice, getting up with water lever, and flow towards the upper stream, or upper lakes.

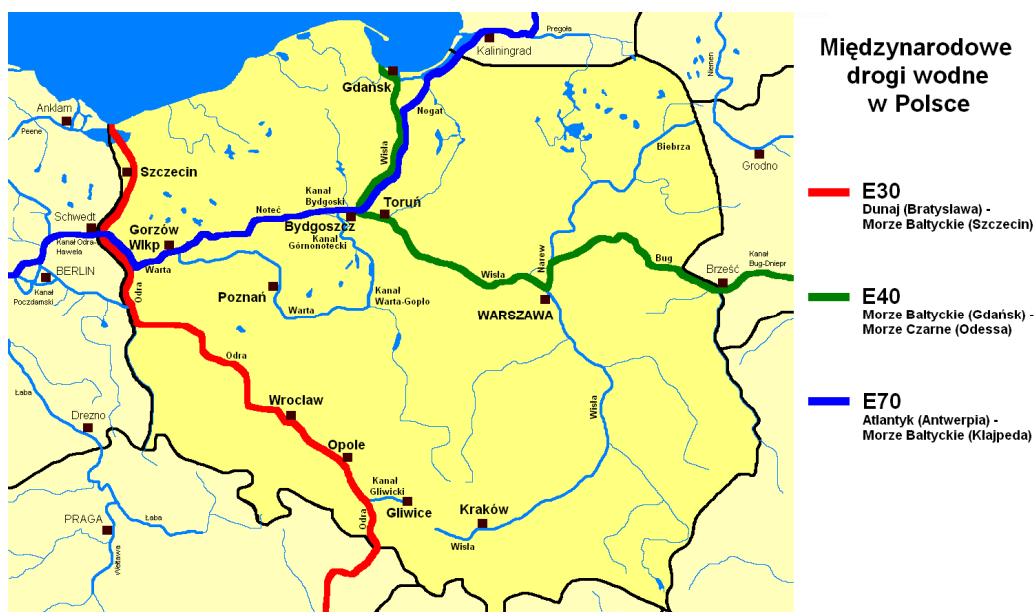
Nowadays

One river that is shared by several nations, with name slightly changing, is for example Donau, (Danube, Dunav, Dunarea, Duna, and latin Danubis). He flows magnificently and very quickly (he is a very quick river) through: Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Rumania, Bulgaria, Moldova and Ukraine. He ends in Black Sea in Rumania.



(Dunaj)

But water routes are slowly gaining back their popularity In Europe in 1996 the agreement was signed on waterways communication routes (European Agreement on Main Inland Waterways of International Importance) and Wisła now is included in 3 systems, and I describe two of them:



(international waterways in Poland)

- E40 – which links Baltic Sea with Black Sea

The E40 waterway comprises four rivers: Vistula, Bug, Pripyat and Dnieper. Its overall length is more than 2000 kilometers, but today only its Polish section on the Bug, between Warsaw and Brest, cannot be used for navigation. If it becomes navigable, it will improve the transportation. Scandinavian and German entrepreneurs are highly interested in the initiative. According to calculations of Polish experts, transportation of goods along the E40 waterway, while taking 21 days less, will require three times less fuel and will help to ease the burden on the seaports of Gdansk and Gdynia. BUT: the environmentalists are very cautious about the impact of this development.

- E70 – which links Antwerp with Klaipeda in Lithuania

It runs from Netherlands, through Germany, Poland, Russia and Lithuania. It shares a route with E40 on length of 114 km, from Bydgoszcz it runs on Brda to Malbork, then on Nogat and Wisła Bay to the border with Russia.

Conclusion

From what we saw we can safely conclude that all rivers in Poland, and at present Wisła in particular, played a great role in both economy, religion and culture. Staying in touch with the river is essential for a holistic approach in the development. Warsaw opens up to Wisła again, which means that the access to the river is much easier now, the banks are reconstructed but much of natural riverside is kept intact.



(Warsaw by Vistula river)

We do not drown sorceresses in rivers anymore. But yes, we drown our impurities and *sins*, which is - garbage and industrial waste. It is my dream to have access in Poland to places in rivers, where safely and surely, we can do a *Budo misogi*, if we need. And this is how we end this lecture, with a positive thought and a landscape of the Wisła River in Polish culture, geography, history and economy.

I was very happy I could learn myself about many things, little known to me, during the process of preparations of this lecture. Thank you very much for your attention.

20th of August 2014

Dr Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska



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