

THE ART, LITERATURE AND RELIGION OF THE RUTHENIANS

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Reading Eamon Duffy's well-known book *The Stripping of the Altars* while teaching in Prague in 1994, I was intrigued by his description of medieval English Catholicism: the rood lofts, the cult of local saints, the revering of the Roman virgins and martyrs, the focus on the dead, the intervention of religion in all spheres of life and its public manifestations. Then it dawned on me that I was seeing much the same all around me in central Europe: the cathedral of the Roman martyr St Barbara at Kutna Hora, statues of St Agatha holding her severed breasts, local shrines at churches, icons of St. George and the dragon, ossuaries, wayside shrines, multiple liturgies - remnants of a religious way of life which was once Europe-wide. Religion as public life became more noticeable and more intense as one moved east from Bohemia through Moravia to Slovakia. There are historical explanations for this.

In the furthest part of east Slovakia and in west Ukraine live the Ruthenians. Ruthenia is an old region which, though torn by boundary changes and political and religious clashes, still has an identity. These people are called 'Rusyns' or Ruthenians and speak a dialect of Ukrainian. Between the two world wars almost all of Ruthenia was in Czechoslovakia, but in 1945 the easternmost section of Slovakia was moved across to the Ukraine, so the Ruthenians since that time have been split between the two countries: those in Slovakia have race, religion, customs and language in common with their fellow Ruthenians in western Ukraine, and not with the Slovaks with whom they live. The Ruthenians are poor mountain villagers on the borders of Poland, Romania and Hungary, and under pressure from all sides, including the Slovak and Ukrainian authorities. It is a region which has never ruled itself, always a suppressed, tension-filled borderland controlled by others. Here race, religion, politics and culture have rarely corresponded with national boundaries.

Czechoslovakia was a Slav wedge into German-speaking lands. This is the region of the furthest penetration west of Orthodoxy and Slavic influences, and a battleground between Orthodoxy and western Christianity. The region came under Austrian rule from the early 1600s, and the Ruthenians were among those converted to the Uniate religion, with allegiance to the Pope, though in all other matters, eg. liturgy, married priests, iconostasis in their churches, they retained their eastern, Slavic orientation. So they have divided loyalties - in

their religious allegiance they face west, but culturally they still face east. Here three religions - Catholicism, Uniates (Greek Catholics), and Orthodoxy (Russian and Ukrainian) contend.

The Ruthenian communities of north-east Slovakia are known for their distinctive wooden churches, built by local carpenters about 250 years ago out of red spruce with shingle roofs. There are not many left. They are built slightly apart from the village in a wooded area. Originally the churches were barn-like, with a dominant horizontal line. They evolved in a characteristic tripartite shape: a vestibule with bell tower above, a rectangular nave in the middle, and a sanctuary or shrine, each a separate unit, but connected to form a whole. All three parts eventually had a tower or dome. But though basically eastern onion dome in style, Baroque and even Gothic influences from the Austrian empire influenced their design. The churches face eastwards, with the turrets sloping down from the west, that is, the bell tower is the highest. The churches have few windows and are dark inside.

Inside these churches have an iconostasis built by peasant carpenters and artists - the wooden background is rudimentary. The iconostasis usually has five tiers - at the top is the rood, the second has religious scenes with foliage surrounds, the third tier has in the centre an icon of Christ as Pantocrator, with six of the apostles on each side of him. Below are scenes from Christ's life, with a mandylion in the centre, an image of Christ's face imprinted on a cloth 'not painted by human hands'. The lowest (floor) level has three doors, on each side of which are further icons of the patron saint of the church and other favourite figures (evangelists, prophets, fathers of the church) like the Archangel Michael and St. Nicholas (Svaty Mikulas), or more localised saints around which a cult may form, like St. Paraskieva or St. John of Suceava, saints not known in the Western tradition. The walls are sometimes painted with folk art. A common painting is that of the Last Judgment, with the damned going to the infernal regions in Bosch-like detail, and the ladder of life going up to Heaven. The earthly rivals of the Ruthenians - Calvinists, Turks, Jews, Tartars, Cossacks, Germans and others - are depicted as being saved by the actions of divine providence. The interiors of the churches also have painted crosses and banners for processions, altogether an ensemble rich in colour and decoration.

Icons in the Ruthenian churches are not separate images of the saints as we see in books or items for sale, but part of an elaborate, coherent assemblage of images, the iconostasis. The artist is proud to conform to a traditional standard, not, as in the West, to display his individuality and originality. However there is some local variation - these icons derive from the Galician tradition to the north. Western influences reached here later than those from the

east. Our altar rails (and sometimes the rood loft) are all that is left of the iconostasis in our culture. These Ruthenian icons are illustrated and explained in Vladislav Greslik's book *Icons of the Saris Museum at Bardejov* (1994).

In 1918 Czechoslovakia was formed with almost all of Ruthenia in the new country; the Ruthenians were unified, though still with split allegiance in politics and culture. But their traditional life was in decline for economic reasons. In the late 1940s came two simultaneous disasters: they were divided between two countries (Czechoslovakia and Ukraine), and Communism, to which they were opposed, was imposed in both. So there were multiple tensions - Slavic vs West, Communism vs anti-Communism and Ukraine vs Czechoslovakia. They were persecuted by the Communist authorities, and their churches pulled down or taken over by the Orthodox Church. They had to choose Slovak Catholicism or Orthodoxy. After the Velvet Revolution and freedom in 1989, Ruthenian Uniates were given back their churches, but so few were left they were told to worship together with the Orthodox who had recently been their persecutors. Since 1993, when Slovakia became separate, their situation has become more precarious, as they are seen as alien 'Russians' (an example of being named in a derogatory way by one's opponents) and are being subjected to Slovakisation, without Prague to protect them. In spite of all this, Presov, the main university town in north east Slovakia, has two seminaries, Uniate and Orthodox, which are thriving at the moment.

So far we have been considering the preservation of traditional Christian religion in Ruthenia. But as we move further east into the Ukraine, something far more ancient and pre-Christian has been preserved. The Ruthenians are comprised of three groups: Lemkians in the west, Boikians around the border and Hutsuls in the Carpathian mountains in Ukraine. The Hutsuls are the most remote group, protected by their mountain fastnesses and having made a conscious decision to keep to themselves and not to modernise - they have low education levels. They occupy themselves with cattle and sheep rearing, forestry and wood-carved handicrafts; they are renowned for their decorated axes and colourful clothing. They have a tradition of being outsiders, and in the past bands of Hutsuls roaming in the woods were considered by others to be bandits or brigands, but the Hutsul people saw them as protectors, like Robin Hoods. The word Hutsul is a Romanian one meaning outlaw/highway robber, and is scorned by the Hutsuls themselves. In summer they take their herds to the uplands. Generous, passionate but vindictive, they fascinate outsiders, particularly other Ukrainians, since they have preserved ancient folk customs, daily rituals and myths which once were common in the whole of the Ukraine. Outsiders describe them as deeply superstitious, but in reality they

have kept as a living culture what others have lost. They are Christian, but mixed up with their religion are animist beliefs retained from an earlier time. They believe Nature, not God, was the origin of life. In everyday actions they believe the spells of their myriad nature gods have to be assuaged by charms and other means.

These beliefs have been preserved in literature, especially in the 19th century. The greatest writer of the time, Michael Kotsiubynsky, a non-Ruthenian from west Ukraine, visited them and decided to preserve in imaginative form their culture, which was threatened then by modernisation. Kotsiubynsky commented:

I keep thinking about those wise people who built their churches, monasteries, and chapels in the best, the wildest places. They know what they are doing. They are addressing not so much us as the ancestors who are alive within us, ancestors who for centuries staged their sacred games in woods and groves.

His aim was to draw out 'the sleeping ancestral voice'. He did this in one of the greatest works of modern Ukrainian literature, the novella *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* - the title indicates his aim. It is the story of a young boy who is a throwback - his soul is preternaturally in tune with the faint and elusive music of nature. Its music sings within him as he play his flute. He lives more within his head and in the world of infinite yearnings than in the present. He falls in love with a girl from a rival family, but his father dies in a blood feud with them. The impoverished youth is thereby forced to go as a shepherd to the uplands, which are inhabited by a variety of devil spirits, like wood and water nymphs, pans and satyrs. In this pre-Christian mythology the Devil is a source of both good and evil.

The trek to the mountains begins in spring. In winter the uplands have been the domain of the maras, ancient Slavic spirits of winter and death. These spirits are banished on the holiday of St. Iurii (St. George), which falls on the first day of spring, but the fertility rituals enacted on that day have been taken over from the older fertility god, Iarylo. This is an example of Christianity talking over the old rites, but being unable to suppress them. Even in crucifix scenes on icons, the pagan sun and moon gods are depicted - the sky is a face, with the right cheek the sun and the left the moon. The chief shepherd is a shaman, a sorcerer who keeps the eternal flame going all summer and orders the daily tending of the flocks by elaborate, time-honoured rituals. Here the hero has a vision of the death of his beloved in the valley below. He returns to marry unhappily. The Hutsuls are partly pagan, sexual rules are relaxed and non-monogamous, and his wife has an open affair with another man who casts

spells. The hero pines away and dies. This summary makes the story sound like a mixture of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Wuthering Heights*, but we can strip away the Romantic overlay, and recognise that the narrative is basically a means of recounting Hutsul folk lore and myth. Every object around them is infused with spiritual values. The past comes alive in them.

In the 1960s and 1970s artists and intellectuals came from all over Ukraine to visit the Hutsul region, as they realised the old ways were being destroyed by the forced collectivisation of farms. One centre of attraction was the beautiful Hutsul town of Kosmach, a mecca of old Ukrainian and Hutsul arts, renowned for its musicians, embroidery, painted Easter eggs, sheepskin coats, and its church, whose bell was donated by Dovbush, the most famous Hutsul outlaw. People were interested in the details of the past, not in an increasingly homogenised future, where Hutsuls were being turned into Ukrainians, and Ukrainians into members of the Soviet Union. A film of the famous story *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* was made in 1963. The iconostasis was taken from the Dovbush church at Kosmach to Kiev for filming, but afterwards it was not returned, since the government had a policy of making religious objects museum pieces or destroying them, so they could not be part of a living culture. Other village icons and crucifixes were wrecked, stolen or taken away at the same time. So a film designed to resurrect the past became an occasion for destroying it. The government's agents were literally iconoclasts. Not just religion but the people's life and culture were being taken away from them. The villagers said 'They have orphaned us'. As Valentyn Moroz, a Kiev intellectual who admired and defended the Hutsuls, put it:

The church has become such an integral part of cultural life that it is not possible to destroy it without harming the spiritual structure of the nation... Great cultural achievements do not come about through the destruction of tradition, but through building layer on layer.

To conclude with an Australian angle. We travelled in the Czech lands with the painter Paul Zika, an Australian of Czech origin, who teaches painting at the University of Tasmania. His father, Dr. Mila Zika from Prague, designed stained glass windows and churches in Melbourne, and taught Art at Christ College, Oakleigh, one of the forerunners of the Australian Catholic University. His wife, Heda, who was Jewish, was saved by marrying him; she converted and taught in Melbourne with the Our Lady of Sion Sisters. We visited many Baroque churches with Paul Zika, the most famous of which is the chapel of St. John Nepomuk built by the Italian architect Santini at Zelena Hora. It is surrounded by a ten-sided hostel for pilgrims and also encloses a cemetery.

Paul Zika was intrigued by Baroque forms and has since constructed a series of paintings based on the elaborate monstrances on display at the Loretanska in Prague. They were exhibited in Melbourne in 1996.