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MUSEUM OF LEMKO CULTURE AT ZYNDRANOWA

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The nationality policy of Communist Poland (PRL) was dominated by the concept of making the state monoethnic. The goal was to be achieved through displacing national minorities beyond Poland's border, followed by the assimilation of those still living in its territory. This very activity applied also to Lemkos who were first resettled to live in the Soviet Ukraine (1944–1946, ca 95,000 people), while those left behind (ca 35,000) were accused of cooperating with the Ukrainian underground, and were deported as part of the Vistula Operation to the Western and Northern Territories of Poland. In Poland Lemkos used to live mainly in the Low Beskids and the eastern part of the Sądecki Beskids: these areas were called the Lemko Land. Lemkos were a people of not fully defined national identity as yet. A part of them opted for pertaining to the Ukrainian nation (pro-Ukraine orientation), while some others to the Russian nation (Moscalophile orientation). In the Second Polish Republic Lemkos were treated as a separate ethnic group among whom anti-Ukrainian attitudes were instigated. The Polish Communist regime, in turn, regarded them as a Ukrainian ethnic group. Currently, in Poland they are regarded as an ethnic group still showing either the pro-Ukrainian orientation represented by the Lemko Federation (Zjednoczenie Łemków) or the pro-Lemko orientation (Carpatho-Ruthenian), headed mainly by the Lemko Association (Stowarzyszenie Łemków) adherent to the concept of their national identity. Importantly, a significant part of Lemkos have been Polonized, thus not recognizing their ethnic origin.¹

Lemkos were forced to abandon the possessions accumulated over many generations. The few who did not leave the inhabited area for economic reasons (employed by the railway and in oil extraction) were unable to preserve the Lemko wealth. They lacked the necessary resources for doing that, additionally fearing deportation if they became

involved in such activities. State patronage could have saved Lemkos' tangible culture, however, Polish central authorities, apart from the appropriation of the former Ukrainian, Lemko included, property by the Treasury of State, were not interested in the preservation of their real estate (except for several Orthodox churches and some of such churches' furnishing, mainly icons²). For this reason, the abandoned churches, chapels, graveyards, but also houses and farm facilities with their equipment were left prone to conscious and unconscious devastation.³ The only improvement in this respect could have been achieved through the return of their former owners, this, however, was strongly opposed by the regime. It was only following 1956 when the policy towards the Ukrainian, including Lemko, population was toned down that the possibility to return appeared, and about 5,000 Lemkos jumped to the opportunity.⁴

The return of the displaced Lemkos contributed to reviving Lemko culture, albeit to a very limited extent; regrettably, the process was unable to prevent the devastation of the real estate. Owing to a small number of Lemkos, lack of the necessary material resources, and the lack of property laws, the main care was taken of the facilities serving for worship, mainly Orthodox churches, wayside shrines, though not the abandoned dwellings and farm buildings. The Lemko activists who returned as the first focused on the organization of the amateur artistic movement. Lemko ensembles were created; they performed in nearby villages, boosting the morale of those Lemkos who had stayed behind, fulfilling, as much as in a limited way, the basic needs in the native culture. Attempts were also made to resume religious celebrations following the Greek-Catholic or Orthodox rites. Together with the formation of artistic ensembles Lemko folk costumes were collected. In this respect, it was Paweł Stefanowski of Bielanka who became



1. Museum farmstead at Zyndranowa, 2021, Photo Roman Drozd

famous for having organized in 1964 a display of Lemko costumes in a purpose-adapted barn; he did this without an official consent of the regime.⁵

The situation was much more challenging with respect to the preservation of farmsteads and outbuildings. The Lemko activists judged it a burning issue, and decided to create a Lemko museum. On 17 August 1968, during a meeting at Bielanka, the decision was made to establish the Museum of the Regional Lemko Culture meant to comprise the following facilities: the Orthodox Church at Bartne, the homestead at Zyndranowa, and the peasant cabin at Pielgrzymka. Furthermore, the Museum Council was appointed, comprising Michał Doński, Grzegorz Pecuch, Paweł Stefanowski, Teodor Gocz, Jarosław Polański, Leon Gal, and Jarosław Merena.⁶ At that point Bartne was to serve as the main seat of the Museum, while the remaining facilities were to serve as its branches.⁷ For financial reasons these attempts were not supported either by the Main Board of the Ukrainian Socio-Cultural Society in Warsaw or the Ministry of Culture, the latter not really interested in the existence of such an institution. As claimed by Stefanowski, it was: Gal, Gocz, Stefanowski, and Teodor Kuziak of Bartne who actively contributed to creating the Museum.⁸

The lack of support did not discourage the originators from establishing the Museum. In 1968, after Gocz had moved to a new house, the issue of putting the emptied homestead: *chyża* to use was raised. Following Stefanowski's persuasion, Gocz agreed to having a museum created there; it was called the Memento Hall of Lemko Culture.⁹ Consequently, also the name of the Museum of Regional Lemko Culture was applied. Stefanowski became the President of the Museum Council, while T. Gocz was appointed its guardian.¹⁰ However, no attempts were made to bestow a legal status on the Museum. Maria Gocz is of the opinion that it was not done, since there was no awareness

how a similar institution should operate.¹¹ The lack of the legal status made it impossible for the Museum to acquire financing for its operation, though on the other hand, it made it harder for the regime to close it down, since it continued as Gocz's private property.

Initially, the Hall consisted of the following, the furnishing and equipment included: the 1860 cottage also serving as an outbuilding (*chyża*), a stable from 1924, and a pigsty from 1934. The *chyża* had three display rooms. In the dwelling room, e.g., furniture and household tools were displayed together with a loom and folk costumes. The hallway contained, among others, wooden bowls, querns, carpentry tools, and scales, while the third room featured a display dedicated to a county clerk.¹² With time, the homestead housed household utensils, while the stable contained exhibits dedicated to the Battle of the Dukla Pass of 1944 where Lemkos fought within the ranks of the Red Army.

The growth of the display, incorporating militaria, led to the decision of the Museum Council in 1974 to rename the institution the Museum of Lemko Culture and War Remembrance.¹³ Furthermore, the decision was made to raise a monument commemorating Soviet and Czechoslovak soldiers fallen in the Battle of the Dukla Pass. The ceremony of unveiling the monument was to be attended not only by representatives of the local administration, but also delegates from Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, thus turning it into an international event. To prevent it from happening, the regime decided to demolish the monument. On 1 December 1976, it was blown up by sappers. During the explosion, the Gocz's dwelling house was damaged, and so was the planking of the Museum buildings.¹⁴ Additionally, the militaria amassed in the Museum were confiscated,¹⁵ this meant to liquidate the display. Nonetheless, neither the blowing up of the monument nor the militaria confiscation discouraged Gocz from further museum activity. Despite the



2. Stable, 2021, Photo Roman Drozd



3. Exhibition of vestment, 2021, Photo Roman Drozd



4. Exhibition of folk costumes, 2021, Photo Roman Drozd

above having been a truly traumatic experience, which Gocz honestly admitted,¹⁶ he did not give up collecting militaria which currently form a sizeable collection, while the monument explosion popularized the Museum as such. Trying to prevent the fame from spreading, the Krosno Secret Police (SB) worked out a special operation code-named 'Monument'.¹⁷

The question arises why the regime did not resort to the monument issue and the gathered militaria as an excuse to close down the Museum. The authorities certainly had necessary means and capacities. From the documents available today it can be deduced that they were planning to do so already in the early 1970s, when a scheme was worked out to have the collection taken over by the museums in Rzeszów and Łańcut, ostensibly for conservation.¹⁸ The plan, however, was not implemented; neither was that of transferring the Museum buildings to the open-air museum in Sanok, since Gocz did not agree to the latter.¹⁹ On the whole, it can be assumed that the regime's central regime authorities regarded the Museum as a lesser evil, contrary to the local ones who were eager to close down the institution whose existence only caused them problems. However, the uninterrupted operation of the Museum could have been favoured by the fact that Gocz was SB's secret collaborator code-named Pietrek.²⁰ Additionally, not charging admission fee the Museum did not give the authorities the alleged reason to be accused of financial irregularities.²¹

The Museum continuously faced financial challenges. It was a private institution, so the administration claimed it could not finance it. Therefore, the Museum Council

undertook many fundraising efforts. These were favoured by the political changes in Poland inspired by the Solidarity movement. In response to the motion of the Museum Council of 29 April 1983, the Voivodeship Conservation Officer in Rzeszów entered the homestead into the register of listed historic facilities.²² This allowed to gain financing to conserve some parts of the collection as well as to conduct an essential renovation of Museum buildings. Regrettably, having slightly improved the Museum's situation, it did not really solve the problem of its financing.

Better times for the Museum came together with the 1989 transformation in Poland. A cooperation with the Museum of Brotherhood in Arms in Dukla and the Office of the Town and County of Dukla was established. This allowed to employ a staff member and gain financing to conserve a part of the collection and acquire new facilities. In 1993, a wooden building from Tylawa and a windmill from Wapienne were moved to the Museum premises. In 1994, a hut that had once belonged to the Jewish Zalman family in Zyndranowa was acquired, and a display of Judaica was mounted there. Gocz had gone to primary school with their son Samuel until the Nazis displaced the whole family. Hence the need to preserve the hut and the memory of the neighbours. It is the only in Poland rural museum unit dedicated to Jews. The ceremony of its opening was attended by Prof. Samuel P. Oliner of USA, a descendant of the Zalman family.²³

The contract with the Dukla local government was valid until July 1994. As of that date the county administration refused to prolong it owing to the lack of financial resources.²⁴ Since the Museum had no sufficient financing, the Council decided to suspend its operation.²⁵ The spectre of Museum's gradual winding down emerged. Not accepting such an outcome, the Council decided to found an association which was to focus on running the institution. The Society for the Development of the Museum of Lemko Culture at Zyndranowa (TRMKŁwZ) was founded in 1995. Additionally, the name of the institution was changed to the Museum of Lemko Culture at Zyndranowa (MKŁ).²⁶ The so-far Council was dissolved, and replaced with the Board with Gocz appointed its President.²⁷ The Society became the Museum's guardian, albeit not its owner, the ownership still remaining with Gocz.²⁸ The Society as such opened new opportunities to the Museum's development. Thanks to the favour with Artur Bata, Director of the District Museum in Krosno, in 1996, both Museums signed an agreement providing the Zyndranowa Museum with factual support by the Krosno one. Despite all these changes, Gocz retained the ownership of the homestead, its furnishing, and the land.²⁹ The agreement allowed to recruit two part-time employees, and collection inventorying as well as some conservation works were launched.³⁰ In 1998, another facility was acquired: a Gypsy blacksmith's shop, and so were new exhibits, including smithery. It seemed at that stage that Museum's future was bright. Regrettably, the change of the Director of the Krosno Museum led to breaching the above agreement. The excuse given for the fact was the lack of an ethnographic department at the Krosno Museum, and too big a distance between Zyndranowa and Krosno, this supposedly impeding proper supervision over and care of the Zyndranowa Museum.³¹ Unhappy with that decision, TRMKŁwZ addressed various local and central government



5. 'Lemko Wailing Wall', 2021, Photo Roman Drozd

institutions looking for assistance, though in vain.³² The Museum's situation was once again tragic, though not as dramatic as in previous years. The very existence of the Society yielded chances for gaining some financing; additionally, the Museum stayed open to the public, which generated a small income. The Society succeeded in acquiring some financing from the Ministry of Culture and Art for cultural projects, particularly the 'From Rusol to John' celebration and the publication of the *Zahoroda* annual.³³ Furthermore, after Gocz had transferred his rights to the Museum to the Society, even greater opportunities for fundraising appeared.³⁴ The biggest of those were the funds from the Regional Operational Programme for the Subcarpathian Voivodeship 2007–2013. The latter financing allowed in 2012 to put into service a brick display pavilion (showing costumes and painting) where there is also room for administrative purposes, as well as a library with a reading room. Furthermore, the *chyża* underwent conservation, and the communication paths were paved with blocks.³⁵ Since 2005 the Dukla local government has been financing a part-time guide to the Museum in the peak tourist season.³⁶ Today, the Museum of Lemko Culture is financed with the acquired grants and admission fees (some dozen thousand visitors annually). According to Bohdan Gocz, these resources secure the minimal financing for the Museum's operation.³⁷ However, it should be added that in 2004, owing to the advanced age and health condition, Teodor Gocz resigned from the position of the President of the Board, succeeded by his son Bohdan Gocz. In 2019, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage authorized the statute of the

Museum of Lemko Culture.³⁸ Throughout the whole period of the operation of the Zyndranowa Museum, new facilities and exhibits have been amassed. Presently, they include the following: a *chyża* cottage (homestead), a stable, a building of the village community centre, a blacksmith's shop, a chapel from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, a windmill, a small inn, a pigsty, a brick display pavilion, and a Jewish hut.³⁹ Apart from these facilities, the Museum premises boast other smaller objects, albeit also extremely interesting. They include: a treadmill, a well sweep, a trimmer, some old beehives, and a way-side shrine transferred from the no-longer extant village of Czarne.⁴⁰ What I find the most impressive is the collection of crosses from destroyed Lemko churches and graveyards. They are displayed on two wooden walls, hence this part of the display is commonly referred to as the 'Lemko Wailing Wall'. It encapsulates Lemkos' tragic history in Poland.

Today, the Museum of Lemko Culture differs significantly from other museums in Poland⁴¹ which preserve Lemko exhibits. The Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok or the Sądecki Ethnographic Park in Nowy Sącz mainly focus on displaying facilities representing various groups inhabiting the area they cover, among them Lemkos. In this respect, both play an extremely important role in Lemko objects' preservation and dissemination. They have helped to save from destruction many Lemko architecture specimens and objects of daily use. Meanwhile, MKŁ, apart from these functions, is also a major actor in promoting and preserving Lemko culture and identity. The latter supported by Museum's publishing and cultural projects, which include open-air workshops

for Lemko painters and sculptors, or meetings called 'Lemko Poetry Autumn', the major event being the 'From Rusal to John' Festival attracting yearly over 2,000 individuals of Lemko descent. Such events provide an opportunity for Lemkos and people interested in their culture from different parts of Poland and the world to meet. Most generally, they are local Lemkos and descendants of the Lemkos displaced following WW II, as well as of those who had migrated to the USA and Canada before 1939. They are all provided with the opportunity to see the Museum displays, and to become acquainted with their ancestors' customs and rites; also with the opportunity to sense that not only do they constitute a cultural, but also a national community. To many it is discovering their own roots. For Poles, in turn, such projects give an opportunity to become acquainted with the richness of Lemko tangible and intangible culture.

The Museum of Lemko Culture and the Lemko Watchfire at Zdynia attended by several thousand people constitute a permanent element of the bond of the displaced Lemkos and their descendants with their former homeland and

their culture. It has to be emphasised that the Museum's management gives priority to the preservation and promotion of Lemko culture, overlooking the divisions and nationality options existing among Lemkos. The motto that the Museum of Lemko Culture has been faithful to since the very beginning are the words pronounced by Oleksandr Pavlovych: 'Ту мене мати породила, солодким молоком кормила, ту хочу жити, умерати, де жили мій отець і мати' ('It is here that my Mum brought me to the world; it is here that I was with her sweet milk fed; it is on this land my mother and father lived that I want to live and die'). For this reason the Museum has been bonded not only with the Lemko Land as a region, but also with all the Lemkos living in Poland and beyond its borders. It is a symbolic place which connects them to the lost homeland. Each visitor can 'go back' to the times of their ancestors, see how they lived and what tools they used on a daily basis, observe how rich their culture used to be and is: as written down with colourful threads on folk costumes and patterns on painted Easter eggs.

Abstract: In 1947, as the result of the Vistula Operation, Lemkos were resettled to the Western and Northern Territories of Poland, this making them abandon their material possessions which remained at their former domicile prone to devastation. Certain Lemkos resented those developments to the extent that following 1956 some returned to their native land, determined to save their tangible and intangible culture. Amateur artistic projects were revived, and it was decided that traces of Lemko tangible heritage were to be taken care of. This led to the concept of creating an ethnographic Lemko museum. In 1968, using Teodor Gocz's

farmstead at Zyntranowa, a memento hall was created; it later assumed the name of the Museum of Lemko Culture. The institution continuously faced challenges: it lacked financing and factual supervision for its operation. Despite this, the Museum collection continued growing, and new buildings were safeguarded for the purpose. The Museum's creators aimed not only at preserving and displaying traces of Lemko tangible heritage, but also at maintaining bonds of the displaced Lemkos with their former homeland. With time, the Museum also began playing an important role in preserving the Lemko ethnic identity.

Keywords: Museum of Lemko Culture, Lemkos, Ukrainians, Communist Poland (PRL), Zyntranowa, Teodor Gocz.

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