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CHURCHES
IN THE CENTURY
OF THE TOTALITARIAN SYSTEMS

EGLISES
A L'EPOQUE
DES SYSTEMES TOTALITAIRES

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Worlds Upset: Identity Conflicts after Socialism with Special Regard to Sub-Carpathia

“In East-Central Europe everyday offers a new adventure, and if one goes through the experience with an open mind, he will have to admit he is lucky.”

Gyorgy Csepeli

In view of the subject-matter (Totalitarian Systems and the East-European Churches) of the 20th-century section of the conference, the above title, “Worlds Upset”, sums up my thoughts as a scholar of society. The conflict the section chose to study will certainly provide enough material for investigation for many decades to come. And in this respect we ought to think not only of the period under totalitarian regimes, but also of old problems that have recently surfaced as apparently new ones, after the many years of oppression.

Global changes have mobilised forces in East-Central Europe deemed by both Eastern and Western observers not to exist anymore. National feelings emerged anew with immense force. The several decades of experiments with replacing it by internationalist propaganda have proved a failure. In this national renewal, which, it must be stressed, is not by principle a negative process, religion has played a significant role.

In what follows I shall analyse the fieldwork I carried out in the ethnically varied Sub-Carpathia. The subject of my investigation is a conflict; the origins and evolution of which I wish to survey. However, I cannot and do not wish to do justice in any form whatsoever, because I do not think justice exists in such situations. I find these conflicts interesting because they afford an understanding of social processes and necessities.

The Hungarian name of the territory, *Kárpátalja* (Sub-Carpathia), refers to the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains. Today the territory belongs to Ukraine and is called “Trans-Carpathian Region” *Zakarpats’ka oblast*. It is surrounded by Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and the Carpathian Mountains. It is neither a historical nor a geographical region. It emerged as a result of the dissolution of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918. With this name and with these artificial borders (splitting up linguistic and ethnic boundaries and counties that had been formed historically much

earlier) it is a political region. Until 1918 it belonged to the historical Hungary, between 1918 and 1938 to Czechoslovakia, during World War II to Hungary and afterwards it was incorporated into the Soviet Union. Today it is part of Ukraine (see map)¹.

By way of introduction, I should like to emphasise that what I am going to discuss is not a conflict between two nationalities. The subject of my investigation is strife among Hungarians. Ethnic and religious identities usually support one another. The case to be considered seems at first sight to prove that this is not an immutable law: I am going to elaborate on a conflict between religious and ethnic identities within one ethnic group.

THE UNG-REGION AND THE STUDIED SETTLEMENTS IN THE SUB-CARPATHIA



¹ Magocsi regards the territory as belonging to Transcarpathia. We define it as a political region, while Magocsi in attempting to define the Ruthenian ethnic group uses the name because of the Lemkos living north of the Carpathian Ridge. See Magocsi, Paul Robert: *The Birth of a New Nation Or the Return of an Old Problem? The Rusyns of East Central Europe*. Forthcoming in Acta Ethnographica, Budapest.

According to the late 18th-century censuses, 25-40 per cent of the population of these villages were Ruthenian Greek Catholics. However, by 1806 Ruthenians were assimilated to Hungarians to such an extent that in certain settlements and with respect to languages used for preaching, Ruthenian became second to Hungarian. At the turn of the century, the population of these same villages was entirely Hungarian, and remained so even in the 1941 census. Though the villagers in question assimilated completely with Hungarians, they remained faithful to their Greek Catholic creed. Their assimilation was accelerated by the fact that in every settlement of the region they were in a minority position. Furthermore, Hungarians, being economically superior, could exert powerful influence upon them. Besides their "Hungarisation", Greek Catholics also went through the process called "Latinisation", both their domestic culture and cults were adjusted to those of Roman Catholics. Thus by the middle of the 19th century the "other", the "alien", and, to use local idiom, the "mountaineers" and the *Tóts*² disappeared from these villages, which thus became ethnically, linguistically and culturally homogeneous.

In the studied settlements (see map), the Reformed populace constituted the religious majority, the number of Roman and Greek Catholics was roughly the same, however, only the Greek Catholics possessed a church of their own in all the three villages (e.g. Gállocs, Palágykomoróc, Sislóc) examined, with one priest residing in one of them. On top of it all, the Roman Catholics lost their parish as it was annexed to Slovakia in 1945.

After World War II the functioning of the Churches was severely constrained in Ukraine and Sub-Carpathia, both belonging at the time to the Soviet Union. The authorities struck down upon the Greek Catholic Church most harshly: it was reunited with the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of Lviv in 1946, presided over by the secret police³. Greek Catholic ministers and communities were thus given a chance to practice religion, but only within the bounds of the Russian Orthodox Church and according to its rite. Priests not conforming to that rule were all deported⁴. The Hungarian speaking Greek Catholics naturally did not opt for the Orthodox rite in Slavic. The Russian Orthodox rite was not attractive for them, as it was for many Ruthenian communities, since it was in a language completely, or almost completely alien to them. Thus the first church was turned into a training hall, the second one was closed down, then transformed into a museum never to be visited by anyone, and the third one became the gymnasium of a nearby school.

The Roman Catholics of all three villages were bereft of priest and church alike. But the circumstances of the two Catholic Churches were entirely different: even though

² The word *Tót*, of unknown, possibly Celtic or Thracian-Illyrian origin, generally means "Slovak" and has a pejorative connotation.

³ Himka, John-Paul, *The Greek Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Nation in Galicia*, in: J. Niessen (ed.), *Religious Compromise, Political Salvation. The Greek Catholic Church and Nation-building in Eastern Europe* (Pittsburgh 1993), pp. 7-27.; p. 18. Bociurkiv Bohdan R. *The Uniate Church in the Soviet Ukraine: A Case Study in Soviet Church Policy*, "Canadian Slavonic Papers" 1965, pp. 89-113. Magocsi Paul Robert *Religion and identity in the Carpathians*, "Cross Currents" Vol. 7., 1988, pp. 87-107.

⁴ For the martyrs of the Munkács diocese see: Pekar Athanasius B. "You Shall Be Witnesses Unto Me" *Contribution to the Martyrology of the Byzantine Catholic Church in Subcarpathian Ruthenia* (Pittsburgh 1985), p. 3. For the final days of the Munkács diocese, see: Salacz Gábor: *A magyar katolikus egyház a szomszédos államok uralma alatt*. [The Hungarian Roman Catholic Church under Neighbour States] Munich 1975, p. 9.

wardenship and membership in local church councils became gradually new sources of social prestige in the 1990s and seeking these offices was a natural and primary goal of people with a propensity to partake in public life, if they had not achieved their aims in the newly elected municipalities or in the leadership of the local schools, in other words in the new legitimate organisations. With the further development of organisations, the increase in the number of priests and masses occurred, and amidst the fractured society of these villages, a new community, organised on a purely voluntary basis, the Roman Catholic parish, appeared and its vitality far exceeded that of worldly organisations.

In 1991, however, word spread that the Greek Catholic Church existed again, and that it could reclaim its former churches, the humiliation of being sheltered could thus be terminated⁵. But the formerly Greek Catholic churches were now administered by the evolving Roman Catholic community. From outside, it seemed the changes would have no effect on these village communities, as no underground Greek Catholic organisation had existed, it had no extant community (church council or warden), and, as a result of the dissolution of denominational differences, all Catholics, Greeks and Romans, saw themselves members of the Roman Catholic Church just undergoing reorganisation. Still, it was the authorisation of the Greek Catholic Church that fatally divided the village communities. This conflict, as far as I see it, constitutes the symbolical struggle for high-profile positions, or, seen at another angle, the process of the homogeneous village community falling apart into several communities of different mentalities and interests. The struggle is symbolical because the different "parties" are not openly attempting to gain one another's positions, to question one another's honesty. Everyone is fighting for the church, for the legitimacy springing from the possession of the church. Today the most important source of legitimacy and power, indeed, the most important resource is the church. The way to reach the legitimacy sources leads through the parish community and its leadership. Thus, churchwardens became the chief targets of the competing parties. For everyone the others' churchwarden became the "informer", the "immoral" one, the "self-appointed", the "inept" one. It was not only believers but to some degree even priests that were involved in the fault-finding, frailty-reciting concerning the wardens as well as one another, even by being taken in by clearly malicious rumour.

As it is not my task to do justice to anyone, let us review how each party explains its own and the other party's deeds. This should cast light upon how differently members of each community interpret the phenomena, events of their small world, the significance of their own and their group's role. The first local crisis broke out when the Greek Catholics of the village Sislóc attempted to take possession of their former church. As a result, the Roman Catholics began to build their own church. The new church was completed, thus it became a living symbol of community discord. The Greek Catholics said they would have been ready to share their church with their Roman Catholic brethren, but they insisted on it being a Greek Catholic church again. Instead, the Roman Catholics decided they would rather build their own new church, and the Greek Catholics were thus left to renovate the church by themselves. It is worth mentioning that

⁵ Though the Greek Catholic Church had been permitted to function again in the Soviet Union already in 1989, the problem only surfaced in the villages studied from 1991.

when the Greek Catholics speak of the time-consuming and painstaking renovation of their church, they always bring up the fact that they never received so much help as the Roman Catholics did, that the Roman Catholics were, in truth, given a lot from Hungary. The Roman Catholics, on the other hand, have different accounts of the same story. They say that the Greeks – according to them, a handful of old people – forcefully demanded it back, practically re-occupied it, and did not allow the Roman Catholic priest enter the church again. All this, of course, happened when the renovation of the church, to which they had significantly contributed, neared completion. The conflict in this village has now more or less abated. The construction of the new church has pacified public opinion and clarified what rights people are entitled to and where. The Roman Catholics, with the building of their church, assigned themselves a new goal, and the new church has come to symbolise their community. They gave up the old and, until recently, only and common church, which by now has no import for them anymore, it does not constitute an element of their local identity.

In the village of Palágykomoróc the church was returned to the Greek Catholic Church without any ensuing crisis. However, there is a clearly visible tension with respect to space usage. During one of my field-trips the Roman Catholics were preparing for Sunday mass, and some of their members moved the altar, used for counterfactual mass, to the centre which had been placed at the side. They themselves find it iniquitous to have the altar placed at the side in between Roman Catholic masses. I was still present when the Greek Catholic vicar arrived and emphatically warned the removers of the altar that in the future this could only be done with his permission. He believed this was mere “table-worship”, not the worship of God. I suspect the debate concerning the possession of the church is yet unresolved, as, according to a recent survey, 86 per cent of all Catholics are Roman and only the remaining 14 per cent are Greek.

The greatest and still unresolved crisis began in the village of Gálóc, when the churchwarden refused entry to the church for the Greek Catholic minister and his followers on the second day of Christmas to hold their first Holy Liturgy. He justified himself by saying that the Roman Catholic priest pastoring the village had not notified him of this, therefore he could not open the church. The Greek Catholic mass was thus held in the cemetery in the late December cold. Today, the church is in the possession of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Catholic community attends worship in the very same church and is not preparing to build a new one. The Greek Catholics have accepted that the church is presently in the ownership of their Roman Catholic brethren, but in the long run they hope for a more viable solution. The image the two groups have created of each other is interesting, too: the Roman Catholics are convinced only a few old people consider themselves Greek Catholics, while the Greek Catholics believe only a few people have remained Roman Catholic and that the majority attending mass according to Roman rite, out of mere nostalgia, is in fact Greek Catholic.

The opinion of the Roman Catholics can be summarised as follows: the majority of Greek Catholics in Sub-Carpathia are Ruthenians as far as nationality is concerned. Their majority, as a result of fifty years of propaganda and prohibition, consider themselves Ukrainians. The meagre Hungarian Greek Catholic populace is not recognised by either public opinion nor politics: there being a Greek Catholic church implies to them that Ukrainians live there. The Roman Catholics doubt whether the Greek Cath-

olic diocese of Sub-Carpathia, the Munkács diocese which is under the direct supervision of the Holy See (*ecclesia sui iuris*) will be able to maintain its status. They are positive that in the long run the will of Lviv will prevail, and the Munkács diocese will lose its independence and be incorporated in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church organisation⁶. Thus the fate of the Hungarian Greek Catholic minority will be sealed. They will be deemed Ukrainian, and therefore the whole village will be considered Ukrainian, as the village church is Greek Catholic. If the church were to be in the possession of the weak Greek Catholic community, Ruthenians would soon start to attend the church. Just as in the neighbouring village, where the church passed into the hands of the Hungarian Greek Catholics and Ruthenians began to appear, and though they have yet only asked to have the Gospel read to them in their mother-tongue during mass now celebrated in Hungarian, sooner or later the whole mass will be held in Ruthenian.

The case of this neighbouring village is important for the Roman Catholics of the other villages because they refer to it as warning example. As a matter of fact, of the three thoroughly studied villages it was there that most Ruthenians have settled. It is an outer parish of a highly "Ukrainised" village called Órdarma. As the majority of the villagers is Ruthenian in Órdarma, the Julian calendar is in use there. That is why the parish in the village under study, where the majority is Hungarian, also uses the Julian calendar. Thus, the Hungarians of the other two studied villages regard the use of the Gregorian calendar as a proof of forced "Ukrainisation". In this outer parish the Hungarian Greek Catholics have their holidays together with the alien Ukrainian Greek Catholics and not with the familiar Hungarian Roman and Greek Catholics. This case is a good example of how the churches can come to be involved in, and even cause, ethnic conflicts.

Some of my informants even go as far as to speak of a religious war. We sense how much harm the schematic image of politics and public opinion influenced by it is creating.

In this respect, I have to focus the reader's attention on yet another phenomenon. A good number of people with a Greek Catholic background think of the role of Greek Catholicism in a similar fashion. They explain their adherence to the Roman rite, their not returning to the Greek one, by saying that in the past fifty years they have been living in the Roman Church, they do not know, nor do they remember, the Greek rite. I, however, sense a different, probably deeper reason. Three years ago, while studying the historical ethno-demography of Gállocs, I came to the conclusion that the ancestors of the Greek Catholics had once been Ruthenians and had been assimilated to the Hungarians in the course of the 19th century. My acquaintances in the village told me to forget this nonsense, it had nothing to do with the truth, that I should discard what I had written. Today I know why it was so embarrassing for them to face this: they do not wish accept their past. What motivates their escape from Greek Catholicism – a Ukrainian

⁶ In the case of such a change, Elemér Ortutay, Hungarian Greek Catholic priest, gives voice to similar fears concerning the curtailment of the rights of non-Ruthenian speaking minorities: "...if we were to give up our status, the Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak [i.e. Greek Catholic] believers would necessarily be thrust into the background". Cited by Bottlik József and Dupka György, *Magyarlakta községek ezredeve Kárpátalján* [A Thousand Years of Hungarian Communities in Sub-Carpathia] (Ungvár and Budapest 1993), p. 49.

denomination in the public eye – the endeavour to impede the rebirth of Hungarian Greek Catholicism in Sub-Carpathia, and to achieve the full coverage of ethnic and religious boundaries (i.e. Greek Catholics are Ukrainians. Reformed Protestants and Roman Catholics are Hungarians) is the same. Namely the way public opinion and politics conceive of national identity in Ukraine, and, alas, the whole of East Central Europe. This mentality considers a change in identity to be almost a sin. On the contrary, if we believe in the freedom to change identity, the Ruthenian ancestors of present day Greek Catholics in these villages do not license in any form whatsoever the majority nationality to seek Ukrainians in Hungarian Greek Catholics⁷. It is not the denomination of a church but the conscious decisions of people that determine the ethnic composition of a settlement⁸.

In approaching the end of my analysis I have to turn back to a fact I started out from, namely that ethnic and religious identities in most cases support each other. At first sight, my paper seems to suggest just the contrary, because I have reported about the conflict of ethnicity and religion. The motives of those who attempt to obstruct the rebirth of Hungarian Greek Catholicism can, in fact, be explained by the former and seemingly disproved principle. Those fighting against Hungarian Greek Catholicism in Sub-Carpathia want to equate religion and ethnicity exactly because they want them to support each other, because they do not want local Hungarians, as they say, to “pull apart”. Religion, i.e. the preference of “Hungarian [= Western] religions” as opposed to the suspect Greek Catholicism, is, in fact, the primary means of preserving an ethnic group in this situation⁹.

The subject-matter of my investigation was a conflict. I have tried to present its preconditions, its evolvment and existence as well as how it changed the life of villages, these closed and unified communities.

An important element in the evolvment of the conflict was one of historical and political significance and wholly beyond the control of the villagers. Their sole choice was the acceptance of the given and the adaptation to the new situation. Naturally, such changes can always upset many small worlds.

This conflict arose out of a collision of identities. A community, that thought of itself as united and harmonious, in one given significant issue reacts in different ways: some of them wish to re-animate their old church, while others think of this wish as endangering the whole community and driven by mere nostalgia and individual ambition. The community is then divided, and the two groups begin to be differentiated by

⁷ A similar instance of seeking legitimacy by way of “searching out ancestors” is given by the mayor of Kolozsvár, Georghe Funar, considered an extremist even by many of his compatriots, when he tries to make the great Renaissance King, Mathias Corvinus, a Romanian by fixing memorial placards onto his birthhouse with such content.

⁸ At the end of the last century Gēza Petrassevich reported of a similar, though reverse, phenomenon concerning the assimilation of the Ruthenians of Budapest: “...why are they ashamed of ...admitting who their parents were? ...he who is ashamed of, and denies, his father is not worthy of respect. Still, 78.7 per cent of the Greek Catholic intelligentsia does this”. Cited by Mayer Mária, *Kárpátukrán (ruszin) politikai és társadalmi torkevések 1860-1910* [Carpatho-Ukrainian (Ruthenian) Political and Social Endeavours] (Budapest 1977), p. 146.

⁹ Gans Herbert J., *Symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religiosity: towards a comparison of ethnic and religious acculturation*, “Ethnic and racial studies” Vol. 17., 1999, pp. 577-592, 589.

their norms too, they almost begin to behave as though they were enemies, occasionally even fist law being used to convince dissenters.

Such dissent might have existed in the former decades, but the issue itself did not. Only a change of historical significance could actualise the difference in opinion, a change that forced everyone to re-define his or her own position. Formerly important and prestigious elements of identity either disappeared or became causes of negative discrimination (e.g. party membership) and formerly branded public roles (churchwardenship) and conditions (church membership) now acquired valuable elements of identity for everyone.

Besides creating their own structure, the communities begin activities with which they can indicate their having established themselves. They constructed or renovated communal buildings. These buildings are indispensable signifiers of a vigorous community for these villagers. In such a (critical/conflict-ridden) situation the building itself becomes a symbol. What is more, my impression is that it was primarily the building transformed into a symbol that finally divided the community, and thus its symbolic nature was further fortified. The construction or the existence of a building manifests the falling apart of a community and the birth of a new one, in other words the transformation of a village society.

What is this story about then? Individual ambitions, jealousies, onto which the external observer projects the conflict of identities? Was this really more than just the reshuffling of positions, the seeking of social roles? Or is this another proof of the fact that Greek Catholicism is very much involved in searching for its position, role and identity in East Central Europe? My investigations in the neighbouring countries and at home support the latter. The strongest Greek Catholic Church is the one in Hungary, because it was not proscribed, but her youth have had enough of the "Latinisation", and the Second Vatican Council that opened the way for them to seek out their eastern roots, or in fact, it compelled them to do so: they want now to erect iconostases, cleanse their churches of sculptures, make their believers leave off their rosaries, "table-worship". Priests of a pre-council mentality do not, however, think that if they continue to follow the old way with regard to relations with Roman Catholicism, they will lose their self-consciousness and give up their identity. Greek Catholics in neighbouring countries, on the other hand, very well remember how Orthodoxy threatened their very existence by claiming that with re-unification they would only return to their roots. Who are the Greek Catholics then: are they a bridge or a wall between Catholicism and Orthodoxy? What is their role in East Central Europe?