

# Ukrainian Greek Catholics in Search of Ancestry, Belonging, and Identity

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From 2015 to 2018, I conducted ethnographic research on religious dynamics and inter-confessional relationships in eastern Poland's Subcarpathia region. This research allowed me to reveal hidden interactions between contradictory memories of local confessional communities, specifically those comprising Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics and Orthodox followers, as well as a sense of belonging to definite places, and religious experience. This, in turn, enabled me to trace mechanisms that demonstrate how religion influences the forging of identities in this region and coexistence between various ethnic and confessional groups. Basing on participant observation, fieldnotes, and interviews, this chapter addresses the interplay of religion, memories, belonging, and identities.

My fieldwork is related to previous anthropological research on religion in southeast Poland, which emphasizes the following: Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic churches in this region have played a crucial role in constructing memories concerning Polish-Ukrainian history on the local level, influencing the relationships between the Polish majority and Ukrainian minority. While conducting my research, I observed how palpable the past seemed to be in the everyday lives of my interlocutors, regardless of their ethnic or religious identity, shaping present day imageries, and relationships.<sup>1</sup> According to Maurice Halbwachs, memory is maintained by the instrumentality of fundamental collective ideas and values, which constitute the “social framework of memory”.<sup>2</sup> The main modes of preservation of collective memory are rituals and commemorations sanctifying the continuity of tradition,<sup>3</sup> as well as monuments, museums, and other “sites of memory”,<sup>4</sup> reflected in the landscape. Danièle Hervieu-Léger gives an account of religion as representing a “*chain of memory*”, that is, a form of collective memory based on the sanctity of tradition. This continuity of memory “transcends history” and manifests itself in the religious

act of recalling a past which “gives meaning to the present and contains the future”.<sup>5</sup>

There are two important locations I will focus on in this chapter. The first is a pilgrimage sanctuary known as *Kalwaria Paclawska* (“The Roman Catholic Sanctuary of the Lord’s Calvary and the Calvary Holy Mother of God”), which is also a Franciscan monastery. In August 2016 and August 2017, I took part in an interdenominational pilgrimage from Lviv in western Ukraine, to this shrine, organized by the Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine. *Kalwaria Paclawska* and the neighbouring village of Paclaw lie nearly 30 km from Przemyśl and close to the Polish-Ukrainian border. Before the Second World War, this area also featured a well-known Greek Catholic pilgrimage site with a church and a number of chapels, which were subsequently destroyed in the mid-1950s by the Polish communist authorities. Currently there are grassroots attempts by the Ukrainian minority in Przemyśl to commemorate the former Greek Catholic shrine and revive its veneration.

The second location is the mountain of *Zjawninnia* (“Apparition” in English), near the village of Kormanice, situated 10 km south of Przemyśl and approximately 13 km from *Kalwaria Paclawska*. Before 1939, this was the site of a Greek Catholic church and a chapel, both of which were also ruined and desecrated by the Polish communist authorities in the mid-1950s. This site was one of the stops on the pilgrimage route to the Greek Catholic pilgrimage site at *Kalwaria Paclawska*. Since the late 1990s, it has been revived by the efforts of the Ukrainian minority in Poland. There are annual pilgrimages in August from Przemyśl to *Zjawninnia*, in which I personally took part in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

## Brief Overview of Historical Context<sup>7</sup>

The complexity of interconfessional relations in the region of Subcarpathia goes back to the Union of Brest, which was signed in 1596 between the Ruthenian Orthodox Church (based in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth) and the Holy See to ensure better coexistence between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and respective local elites on the territories of present-day Belarus, Lithuania, western Ukraine, and eastern Poland. Through this act, the new Uniate (Greek-Catholic) Church appeared. While the Church’s administrative structures were to be subordinated to the Vatican, the Byzantine rite would be preserved. Thus, the Greek Catholic liturgy was supposed to be similar to its Byzantine counterpart. Over the following centuries, the liturgy

followed by the Greek Catholic Church remained close to the one used in the region's Orthodox churches. Following the three partitions of Poland, in 1808 the eparchies of the original Ruthenian Uniate Church were split between the Austrian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire. The three eparchies fell under Habsburg jurisdiction were reorganized as the Greek Catholic Church soon after liquidation of the five eparchies that ended up in Russian Empire. Established in 1807, the Greek Catholic Church in the Austrian Empire became the only survivor of the original Uniate church formed through the Brest Union. Consequently, there were many Greek Catholic parishes in Galicia, namely in the Subcarpathia region.

Today, Kalwaria Paławska is a Roman Catholic site, and the surrounding rural area is inhabited mostly by Roman Catholic Poles. Still, before the Second World War, this area had been more diverse. The history of the Roman Catholic site of worship was researched by the Franciscan priest Józef Barcik, who paid particular attention to the historical coexistence between Greek and Roman Catholics. The history of the Greek Catholic shrine at Kalwaria Paławska and Paław had been earlier chronicled by its last rector Josyp Marynowych.<sup>8</sup>

Since the 19th century, both Roman and Greek Catholic pilgrims have seen the hill of Kalwaria Paławska as their pilgrimage site. The nearest villages were inhabited primarily by Greek Catholics known mostly as *Rusini* (*Rusyny*), later to be called Ukrainians, while the Franciscan monastery on the mountain was surrounded by Greek Catholic churches and chapels. Greek Catholics took part in a number of services in the Franciscan Cathedral together with Roman Catholics, with Greek Catholic clergy being granted permission to perform masses. The situation began to change in the late 19th century, however, when both churches' clergies started to compete for parishioners. By the end of the 1880s, the majority of the Greek Catholic inhabitants of Paław had changed their affiliation to Roman Catholicism and became the parishioners of the Franciscans' Cathedral in Kalwaria Paławska. In 1867, Greek Catholic priests were no longer allowed to hold services in the Roman Catholic Cathedral. After receiving permission from the Vatican in 1868, the Greek Catholic clergy developed their own pilgrimage site around the church in Paław. Despite the difference in calendars, Greek Catholic feasts connected with the Marian cult were sometimes celebrated simultaneously with the Roman Catholic feasts. In 1913, the new masonry church in Paław was consecrated as the "Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God", leading to the development of a significant Greek Catholic pilgrimage site.<sup>9</sup>

This rivalry between Roman and Greek Catholic clergy in Kalwaria Paławska occurred against the backdrop of several dramatic historical events, such as the First World War, the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Poland regaining independence in 1918, the Ukrainian-Polish War Eastern Galicia from 1918 to 1919,<sup>10</sup> and the increasingly oppressive policies of the government of the Second Republic of Poland towards its Ukrainian citizens.<sup>11</sup> However, the most crucial reference point for multiple memories and latent tensions between Poles and Ukrainians is the Second World War and its aftermath, when the border between the Soviet Union and communist Poland was delineated with both Polish and Ukrainian underground forces becoming active in Subcarpathia.

Due to various post-war international agreements, constructing the border between the USSR and Poland resulted in a wave of forcible resettlements between 1944 and 1946. Under this process, an estimated 480,000 of the region's Greek Catholic and Orthodox inhabitants were labelled as ethnic Ukrainians, based on their denominational affiliation, and required to relocate to Soviet Ukraine. The remainder, nearly 140,660 Greek Catholic and Orthodox civilians, were resettled in the former German territories acquired by Poland after the Second World War, as well as the northern and western part of the country, under the aegis of "Operation Vistula" in 1947.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, Poles, living in the post-war Ukrainian, Belarusian and Lithuanian soviet republics were "repatriated" to Poland. These population shifts were arranged as a part of Poland's post-war communist policy to set up an ethnically homogeneous nation-state and were framed against the wider establishment of new ethnographic frontiers in Europe, which saw the enforced transfers of millions of people. Furthermore, Ukrainians of both denominations, became a national minority, marginalized and stigmatized by the authorities in communist Poland. Such an attitude derived from the application of the collective responsibility to all people of Ukrainian origin for the activities of Ukrainian underground forces against the Polish resistance and civilians in Vohlynia and Eastern Galicia during the war.<sup>13</sup>

In 1946, the so-called "Lviv Council" took place in Lviv, which had already been occupied by the Soviet Union. Under its edicts, prepared by Soviet officials, "the liquidation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and its amalgamation into the Russian Orthodox Church" was officially mandated. From 1945 to 1946 many priests who refused to collaborate with the government and sign an agreement of "re-union with Orthodoxy" were murdered or sent to the Soviet camps as the Greek Catholic Church was forcible dissolved. Those who

managed to survive went underground until 1989. In 1963, the Church was recognized internationally as Ukrainian through the efforts of Yosyf Slipyi, however, in Ukraine itself was only able to re-emerge in the early 1990s.

The key turning point in the revival of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine was a demonstration in Lviv demanding its legalization. This took place on September 17, 1989, with thousands in attendance. On October 29, during a service in the Transfiguration Cathedral in Lviv, Father Yaroslav Chukhniy commemorated Pope John Paul II instead of the Patriarch of Moscow and announced his conversion to Ukrainian Greek Catholicism. Following these events, many parishes affiliated to the Russian Orthodox Church followed suit, including those in other cities across Galicia.

In the communist Polish People's Republic, the Greek Catholic Church was also officially prohibited resulting in a number of priests facing persecution. In both countries, the Church was perceived as a threat because of the essential role it had played in the establishment of Ukrainian national identity and national movement on the terrain of former Habsburg Galicia. Some of the priests (22 Greek Catholic and five Orthodox) were sent by Polish communist authorities to the Jaworzno concentration camp in Silesia, southern Poland, having been accused of cooperation with the Ukrainian underground forces.

In 1957, ten years after Operation Vistula, and through the efforts of individual Greek-Catholic priests such as Ivan Dziubyna and Vasył Hrynyk, new pastorates and parishes began to develop in western and northern Poland, where many Greek Catholics had been resettled. In 1989, Bishop Ivan Martyniak, became the first Greek Catholic to be ordained in Poland since the war and, in 1991, the Przemyśl Greek Catholic Eparchy was restored, covering the entire territory of Poland. In 1996, the Przemyśl-Warsaw Metropolis was formed, which included the Przemyśl – Warsaw Archdiocese and the Wrocław. The Gdańsk Ukrainian Greek Catholic Eparchy and the Vistula River were defined as the border of division.

From a theological perspective, and at an institutional level, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Catholic Church represent one single Church, subordinate to the Vatican. However, the differences in liturgies and rites create the mistaken impression that they are two different religions. Simultaneously, the Greek Catholic Church in Poland is an independent Church with a Metropolitan Bishop subordinate to the Greek Catholic Church's Ukrainian synod in terms of liturgy and ordination of bishops. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the largest Eastern Catholic Church in the world. Currently it has approximately 6.5 million members. Within Ukraine itself, the

Greek Catholic Church is the second largest religious organization in terms of number of communities within the Catholic Church. In 2021, the Greek Catholicism in Ukraine is estimated to have 4.5 million adherents across 3495 parishes, while the Greek Catholic Church in Poland counted nearly 55,000 believers within 128 parishes, in 2015. This situation is changing dynamically because of the large influx of Ukrainian workers and especially, because of the recent wave of refugees since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

### **“Homecoming” Pilgrimage as a Means of Forging Identity**

From 1957 onwards, Greek Catholics in Poland were granted permission to hold liturgies in the Eastern rite. By the late 1950s, those Ukrainians who had gained state permission began to return voluntarily to their regional homelands from western and northern Poland. Both state and local authorities encouraged returning Greek Catholics to attend the newly created Orthodox parishes in Subcarpathia to prevent the creation of grassroots Greek Catholic ones.<sup>14</sup> In a number of cases, Greek Catholics returning from the northwest of Poland discovered their home churches lying in ruins, used as stores, or otherwise converted into Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches, as happened in the villages of Kłokowice and Młodowice near Kalwaria Paławska. Nowadays, half of these villages are majority Orthodox, although most of the inhabitants are descended from Greek Catholic families, identifying as Ukrainians. The Eastern rite and similarities in liturgy, including its length, bodily engagement, extensive singing, habitual rituals such as lighting candles, recognizable Julian calendar, and the familiar aesthetics of church interiors attracted many of the returnees to Subcarpathia into joining Orthodox parishes, especially if they were held in former Greek Catholic churches. In the majority of cases, people were deeply concerned about belonging to a definite space, animated with divine power, and having “their church” present in the place where they were born and grew up, “where the ancestors’ graves are”.

For those Greek Catholics and Orthodox resettled to Soviet Ukraine between 1944 and 1946, there was obviously no possibility of visiting “their churches” in Polish Subcarpathia during the communist era. It was after the end of the communist regime in Poland and the fall of the Soviet Union that they and their descendants were able to return across the border. In a number of cases their “homecoming” became a pilgrimage. I see their movement in the

broader context of traumatic experience and identity formation, of forgetting and remembering, shared by many groups who perform journeys to their homeland or to the land of ancestors. It has been proven that the phenomena of “roots tourism” and pilgrimage share many features. These pilgrimages contain a process of recovery: family and community memories of displacement, old wounds, and meaningful places. Demands to visit a place influenced by a yearning to connect with one’s family history and searching for roots have also been framed as “pilgrimages of nostalgia”.<sup>15</sup>

My Greek Catholic and Orthodox interlocutors, residents of Poland and Ukraine who define themselves as Ukrainians in addition to fluid confessional identities, are mostly unrelated to each other and do not maintain relationships beyond the pilgrimage. Nevertheless, they share a common discursive space and participate in cultural practices (including religious) which are closely related. They share emotional ties with particular places and interest in their families’ past, connected with the history of the region. I will now address the various modes of “homecoming” pilgrimages performed by Ukrainian Greek Catholics: those who were expelled from Subcarpathia to Poland during Operation Vistula in 1947, only to later return with their descendants and those Ukrainian Greek Catholics and Orthodox who were the offspring of Greek Catholics from the eastern Poland resettled in Soviet Ukraine between 1944 and 1946. These acts of “returning” and the religious experience it generates helps to heal the old wounds rooted in dislocation, expulsion, and the silence of the Soviet era.

Nowadays the site at Kalwaria Paławska where the Greek Catholic church stood, before being demolished in the 1950s, is private farmland, where the remnants of the church foundations can still be seen. During the Roman Catholic Marian feast of the Assumption, the area is used by pilgrims from Poland who will often pitch tents and park trailers near the very foundations without any knowledge of the local history.<sup>16</sup> There is also a memorial cross on the remnants of the church foundations, erected through the grassroots efforts of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Przemyśl.

Other such form of grassroots pilgrimage seeks to engage with both Ukrainian Greek Catholics from Polish Subcarpathia and Ukrainian Galicia, being the descendants of those expelled from the area during the post-war resettlements. Greek Catholic and Orthodox pilgrims from Ukraine, and members of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic minority from Przemyśl, seem to be completely subaltern in this regional religiouscape, dominated, as it is, by the Roman Catholic Church. Despite this, this localized border-shrine allows

Greek Catholics and Orthodox to gain meaningful experiences without having to negotiate for more.

From 2015 to 2017, I attended a Greek Catholic liturgy near the memorial crucifix. This liturgy is not part of the official pilgrimage program organized by the Franciscans, and is not advertised in shrine literature and sermons, being absent in the official Roman Catholic narration. The first time I attended in 2015, a Greek Catholic woman undertaking pilgrimage invited me to this liturgy and, in subsequent years, I followed both Greek Catholic and Orthodox pilgrims journeying to their place of memory. The liturgy was held on August 14th, the last day of the pilgrimage program at Kalwaria Paławska. After the morning mass in the main cathedral and the general Roman Catholic pilgrimage program, Greek Catholics and Orthodox attended a Greek Catholic mass celebrated by a priest from Mostys'ka, on Ukraine's western border, originally from a family of Ukrainians who were resettled from Subcarpathia in 1946. Taking part in the masses, I observed how deeply my respondents were engaged in the liturgy, and how profoundly touched they were when the priest talked during the sermon about the forcible waves of resettlements from Subcarpathia, and about Greek Catholic priests murdered by the NKVD. After the liturgy pilgrims were crying, kissing the memorial cross, and the priest's vestment.<sup>17</sup>

Those Greek Catholics and Orthodox who took part in this liturgy, engaged in the act of pilgrimage mainly because they had wanted to see the place recognizable from family stories. They called the whole Roman Catholic site "our Kalwaria", highlighting that their grandparents or parents had taken part in Greek Catholic pilgrimages to Kalwaria Paławska before the Second World War. The Orthodox pilgrims turned out to also be the descendants of Greek Catholic families forced to leave Subcarpathia between 1944 and 1946 and resettled in various regions of Soviet Ukraine. My respondents became acquainted during their pilgrimages to Kalwaria Paławska. This strong need to attend a place where the church connected to their family stories had once stood, and their desire to take part in their own Greek Catholic liturgy, can be interpreted as an act of commemorating the memory of their ancestors resettled from that area, but also as a way to find their own identities.

Since the revival of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, and the efforts of the Ukrainian minority in Poland to become more visible and regain some of their own community's buildings and churches, there have been attempts to restore the famous pre-war pilgrimage route and site at Kalwaria Paławska. However, as mentioned above, these efforts proved to be unsuccessful in the face of the national influence wielded by the Roman Catholic Church in

Poland. Therefore, the Greek Catholic clergy, together with active members of the Ukrainian minority in Poland, started to develop a new pilgrimage route in Subcarpathia, connected with a Marian Apparition cult, around mountain of Zjavlinnia. In official narratives of the Greek Catholic Church in Poland, this is presented as a “reborn Ukrainian Kalwaria Paclawska”. However, this sacred place is completely unacknowledged within the regional religioscape, being only visible to the Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in eastern Poland.

The mountain of Zjavlinnia is located in a forest not far from Fredropol, the district administrative centre. According to a local legend prevalent among local Greek Catholic and Orthodox Ukrainians, while gathering herbs for her sick mother before the Second World War, a local girl claimed to have seen an apparition of the Mother of God (*Bogorodytsia*) on the mountain. After disappearing, the girl alleged that the *Bogorodytsia* had left her footprints on a stone, from a which spring had started to flow. It was believed that this spring had healing powers, therefore pilgrims going to Kalwaria Paclawska would stop at Zjavlinnia to collect some of the water.<sup>18</sup>

During the Second World War, there was a wooden Greek Catholic church and a chapel near the spring. In 1952, the church was dismantled by the Polish communist authorities, and the wood used for construction in a nearby village.<sup>19</sup> My interlocutor, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic man in his 60s, told me that in the late 1980s, he and his brother, inspired by their fathers’ stories about the “healing spring” in the forest and the site of a ruined Marian chapel, went there looking for it. Their parents were resettled from Subcarpathia in 1947 but returned in the 1970s, settling in Przemyśl. They told their sons that the church on Zjavlinnia must have been ruined, however a “*namolene mistse*” (place where generations of people prayed, and performed religious rituals) remained, and was still considered sacred. As Wanner emphasizes:

In some Orthodox Christian countries, a ‘place animated with prayer’ (*namolene mistse / namolennoe mesto*) is said to be filled with energy that links individuals to others and to otherworldly powers. [...] Orienting religious practices to such sites circumvents anticipated coercion from clergy and institutions alike, but retains the shared understandings, emotional involvement, and attachments to places these vernacular religious practices breed.<sup>20</sup>

The two brothers claimed to have found the place in the forest where the church once stood and “felt blessed” to discover that a chapel near the “healing spring” still existed. They cleaned up the area around the spring, and with the help of friends started to renovate the chapel. This later became of place of interest

to the whole Ukrainian Greek Catholic community in Poland and the revived Church.

For Greek Catholics in Poland the revival of old, abandoned, ruined places of worship became not only a means of religious, but also community, ethnic, and national revival. Understanding the impossibility of building a new church and restoring Greek Catholic pilgrimage to Kalwaria Paclawska, the community of Przemyśl has been reviving the Zjavlinnia sanctuary at a grass-roots level since the mid-1990s. The funds for this were collected from the across the Ukrainian minority in Poland, and from diaspora communities in Canada. These mainly consist of Ukrainians and their descendants resettled to northwest Poland in Operation Vistula who had subsequently emigrated to Canada in the early 1990s. Furthermore, in the early 2000s the Greek Catholic Church in Poland was granted official permission to renovate the stone chapel near the spring as well as building a church and a Way of the Cross in the forest.

A one-day pilgrimage from Przemyśl to the mountain of Zjavlinnia has been held since 1995. It is organized annually on August 15 by the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, which has since functioned as the main church for Greek Catholics in Subcarpathia since 1992. The new church on Zjavlinnia was built and sanctified in 2008. The pilgrimage itself is held at the start of Dormition Fast, preceding the Dormition of the Mother of God (*Uspinnia Bogorodytsi*), which the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (including Greek Catholics in Poland) celebrates on August 28, according to the Julian Calendar. From time to time, the pilgrimage is dedicated to a specific date relating to the history of the Ukrainian community in Poland. In 2017, for example, it was devoted to the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Operation Vistula.

Pilgrimages, in this regard, serve as a means of claiming continuity with a particular place and with the group who share a history of attachment or belonging to it. Sacred sites and restored shrines not only contain memories and therefore history, but also produce history with people and through people, who are engaged in those shrines' revival, restoration, and working to keep those sites alive. In anthropological research on religion, pilgrimage is perceived as a way for individuals and groups to orient themselves in space, time, and history. Greek Catholics and Orthodox converts from Greek Catholic families, both of which represent the Ukrainian minority in Przemyśl and pilgrims coming from Ukraine, seek to reconnect their bonds with denominational, ancestral, and territorial legacies that have become distanced from them due to Soviet-era population transfers and the post-war relocation of state bound-

aries. Being uprooted, they seek to re-root themselves through pilgrimages and by this find their identity and place in history.

## Notes

- 1 Buyskykh, “Forgive, Forget or Feign”.
- 2 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 47.
- 3 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, pp. 84–89.
- 4 Nora, *Between Memory and History*.
- 5 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*.
- 6 Buyskykh, “Routes to the Roots”.
- 7 The history of this region is extremely complex, and it is difficult to present it adequately in the relatively short format of an article. Therefore, what is presented is a necessary simplification.
- 8 Marynovych, *Kal'variia Patslavs'ka*.
- 9 Barcik *Kalwaria Paclawska*, p. 127; Marynovych, *Kal'variia Patslavs'ka*.
- 10 Zhurzhenko, “The Border as Pain and Remedy”.
- 11 Portnov, *Istoriï dlia domashnoho vzhytku*, pp. 113–116.
- 12 Snyder, *Bloodlands*, p. 328.
- 13 Zowczak, *Antropologia, historia a sprawa ukraińska*, pp. 50, 61–62; Baraniecka-Olszewska, “Stereotypes in the Service”, p. 95.
- 14 Litak, *Pamięć a tożsamość*, p. 103.
- 15 Ioannides, “Pilgrimages of Nostalgia”.
- 16 Bujskich, “Pomiędzy pamięcią a granicą”, p. 58.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–59.
- 18 Pidhirnyi, *Istoriia z'ivlinnia*, p. 45.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 20 Wanner, *An Affective Atmosphere of Religiosity*, pp. 70–71.

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