

## LEMKOS AND THEIR RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN WESTERN AREAS OF POLAND

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**Abstract:** *After finishing 2nd World War in Lower Silesia territory happened the total exchange of the population. On Germans place, both Catholics and Protestants (Jews were exterminated by Nazis earlier), the Polish population, mostly catholic, flowed in, and also Jews group remaining from the Holocaust. After two years arrived numerous group Lemkos (Rusins). Traditionally Lemkos are the greek-catholic confession, however the part of them before the 2nd world war passed on Orthodox Church. Settlement of this ethnic group on the west of the Poland, where the confessor of churches orthodox and greek-catholic few so far, altered considerably religious relations in this region.*

*Lemkos is the population living the south-east Poland and east Slovakia (in Slovakia called Rusins). After 2<sup>nd</sup> world war they together with Ukrainians were the victims of very brutal displacements (Action code name "Vistula"). This had on the aim cutting off the subsidiaries for underground army fighting about the independence of Ukraine. From among 50 thousands Lemkos the majority was estate in years 1947–1948 in west part of Poland, mostly between Legnica and Zielona Góra. This population was in majority poor and the faintly educated. After displacement many Lemkos changes confessions to orthodox church. Now in Lower Silesia live about 30 thousands Lemkos, fifty-fifty orthodox and greek-catholics. After political changes in 1989 part of Lemkos returned to the motherland, in Beskidy Mts. The largest centres of the Lemkos culture in Lower Silesia are Legnica and Przemków.*

**Key words:** *Lemkos, Eastern Orthodox Church, Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Lower Silesia, Lubusz Land*

### THE ORIGIN OF LEMKOS AND THEIR HISTORY UNTIL 1945

Lemkos are an ethnic group that until 1947 inhabited the Sącz Beskid and the Low Beskid mountain ranges – a land in the Polish-Slovak borderland. In their own language this area is referred to as Lemkovyna (Łemkowszczyzna in Polish). They are an indigenous group – the westernmost branch of Rusyn people (Misiak 2006), but formed from a variety of cultural elements (Olszański, 1988). There are several theories about the origin of Lemkos. Ukrainian scholars regard them as a residual population of Rusyn people settling the Carpathians. Polish scholars, on the other hand, consider Lemkos to be a group of Poles who in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries merged with Vlach settlers, arriving in large numbers in

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these lands between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Kowalczyk, 2009). The Lemko culture contains Polish, Slovak, Rusyn and Vlach elements. The area of the Low Beskid was also inhabited by Romani and Jewish people, but both of these groups tended to isolate themselves from the remaining inhabitants of the region. Therefore, linking Lemkos with Jewish or Romani roots is unjustified. Lemkos themselves do not deny their connection with Carpathian Rusyns, although most of them renounce any links with Ukrainians. In spite of this, numerous politicians and some Polish scholars (Chałupeczak, Browarek, 1998; Żerelik 2000) regard Lemkos as Ukrainian people, distinguished from other Ukrainians only by their dialect.

Linguists usually derive the proper name *Lemkos* from the Slovak word *lem* meaning *only*, which was used to refer to this group by other Rusyns (Misiak 2006). According to Reinfuss (1998), the word *Lemko* stood for ‘someone who spoke bad Rusyn’ and it entered common use in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Lemko language is a Rusyn dialect, although it contains far more Polish and Slovak elements than other Rusyn languages. It started to evolve in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but its written form developed on a larger scale much later. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Lemkovyna was one of the most neglected regions of Europe, both culturally and economically. Its inhabitants were occupied mainly with cattle grazing or, more rarely, farming. Many of them lived in abject poverty. There were almost no educated people, with the exception of clergymen, who were always highly respected by the inhabitants of Lemkovyna. This is also the reason why Lemkos often lacked national awareness. However, owing to their language and religion, they felt emotionally closer to Ukraine or Russia than to their Catholic neighbours. Starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous inhabitants of Galicia, including Lemkos, emigrated to North America for economic reasons. Today, in the USA and Canada there are still organizations uniting people with Lemko roots (Misiak 2006). Starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, numerous Ukrainian agitators tried to convince Rusyn people (including Lemkos) to declare themselves Ukrainian. However, most Lemkos did not show any interest.

### LEMKOS AND RELIGION

The religious situation of Lemkovyna was complicated. Settlers arriving there in the Middle Ages were usually members of the Orthodox Church. After the proclamation of the Union of Brześć (1596), the majority of the Carpathian population accepted it (or they were administratively incorporated into the Greek Catholic Church). However, part of the population stood by the Orthodox faith. At the time of the Austro-Hungarian rule (until 1918), the number of Greek Catholics in this territory became even higher. It was due to the fact that the Catholic Habsburgs clearly favoured Greek Catholics, while the Orthodox believers were discriminated or even persecuted. The icon of the Orthodox Lemkos’ resistance to Catholic Austria was a young Orthodox clergyman from Żdźnia – Maksym Sandowicz. In 1914 he was executed (without a court trial) by Austrian gendarmes in Gorlice, under the accusation of spying for of Russia. In 1994 he was canonised by the Polish Orthodox Church as the saint martyr Maksym Gorlicki (Rydzanicz 2008). In the period between the two world wars, the inter-religious relations in the region underwent big changes. In 1924, Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church was proclaimed (formerly, all Orthodox believers in Polish lands were formally dependent on Moscow Patriarchate). This church launched a massive campaign aimed at convincing Greek Catholics to

‘return to the only true Church’. It achieved considerable success, as adherence to Greek Catholic religion was at that time increasingly associated with a declaration of Ukrainian nationality. As a result, just before the outbreak of World War II, approximately half of all Lemkos declared themselves Orthodox, and the other half – Greek Catholic. Because of poor education, most of them probably did not notice any difference between the doctrines or liturgies of these two churches. At the same time, most Greek-Catholic Ukrainians refused conversion to the Orthodox faith. The relationships between the members of both churches were tense from the very onset of Brześć Union and violent acts were not uncommon. Even today, members of both churches in Poland are still unfriendly towards each other, even though they often inhabit the same area.

### OPERATION “VISTULA” AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In September 1944, as a result of an agreement between PKWN (the interim Communist government of Poland) and the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, a large number of Ukrainian and Rusyn people (including Lemkos) were forcibly relocated from Poland to Ukraine. In the period between the world wars, Ukrainians had opted explicitly for recognizing Lemkos as members of the Ukrainian nation (and they still uphold this stance). It is estimated that about 60–70% of the Lemko population were then forced to leave Poland (Misiak 2006). After the end of World War II, guerillas from Ukrainian Insurgent Army were still active in south-eastern Poland. They fought for independent Ukraine, but were also responsible for numerous crimes against Polish civilians. The most appalling murders were committed in Volhynia, where in August 1944 r. Ukrainian militants killed – according to various sources – between 20,000 and 150,000 Poles, often women and children. Even today this tragedy causes serious animosity between Polish and Ukrainian people.



Fig. 1. Directions of relocate Lemkos und Ukrainian population (authors own drawing)

In this situation, in 1947, Poland's Communist authorities decided to relocate all the Ukrainian population to northern and western Poland (fig. 1), in order to deprive the UIA of the support of local people. Lemkos also fell victim to these deportations, although most of them dissociated themselves completely from UIA activities (in Lemkovyna UIA did not operate almost at all). These resettlements (known as 'Operation code name "Vistula"') were extremely brutal. Even nowadays the victims remember them as an exceptionally traumatic ordeal. Operation Vistula has been the subject of a lot of historical research (including works of Žurko and Žerelik 2000, or Dudra S. 2008). The Lemko people were resettled as a whole to western Poland, to the territories which had been assigned to Poland by the Potsdam Conference and whose German population had been displaced. At first, the Germans were replaced by Polish soldiers returning from the frontline and settlers from the areas annexed by USSR during World War II. It is estimated that a total number of about 140,000 people were relocated during Operation "Vistula" (Dudra S. 2008). About 20,000 people, 70 per cent of whom were Lemkos, were deported to Lower Silesia. About 5,000 of these people adhered to the Orthodox Church, while the rest were Greek Catholics (Žerelik 2000). According to Misiak (2006), 4292 Lemko families were settled in Lower Silesia (18,804 people), 7819 people – in the Lubusz (Zielona Góra) Voivodeship (province), and several hundred people in each of the other provinces of northern and western Poland. The deportees were settled at least 30 km away from the state border and from province capitals. The largest numbers of settlers were sent to Legnica, Szprotawa and Strzelce Krajeńskie counties. During the deportations, Lemkos were treated by the authorities as brutally as Ukrainians. The only difference was that Lemkos were rarely classified as 'particularly dangerous' (this status was attributed to everybody who had been directly involved in UIA activities). Therefore, the rule of not settling more than 2 families in one locality did not apply to them as it did for Ukrainians. Lemkos formed larger groups, in some places they became the majority of residents. It was also relatively easier for them than for Ukrainians to obtain a permission to move to another place, e.g. to be closer to other relatives. However, it was a common practice to send Ukrainian and Lemko families to places previously settled by people coming from the areas where UIA had committed many crimes against Poles (e.g. from Volhynia). Consequently, Polish settlers often demonstrated enmity to Ukrainians, and they regarded Lemkos by Ukrainians too (Pudło 1987). Therefore, Lemkos usually concealed their national and especially religious identity from other people. The only positive aspect of Operation Vistula was the fact that the deportees obtained buildings and farms left by the displaced Germans as their new homes. Although they were usually the poorest farms in the villages (more attractive ones had already been taken), they represented a higher economic and cultural level than those left in Lemkovyna. In the late 1950s, rich deposits of copper ores were discovered in Lower Silesian areas inhabited by large groups of Lemkos. The newly-founded copper plant (mines in Lubin and Polkowice and foundries in Legnica and Głogów) provided well-paid jobs for many members of this ethnic group. During the approximate 20 years of their stay in the new places of residence, the majority of Lemkos had assimilated culturally into Lower Silesian society and stopped evoking negative emotions in most of their neighbours. However, Lemkos were still reluctant to reveal their national and religious identity, as diversity was not considered a value in the totalitarian Communist state – to the contrary, cases of minority discrimination were widespread, in spite of official declarations. In 1957

a secondary school providing Ukrainian medium education was opened in Złotoryja, in 1960 it was transferred to Legnica. Until the 1990s, it was the only school in Poland where maturity exam (equivalent to A-level) could be taken in Ukrainian. However, most of its pupils were native Ukrainians, often coming from very remote parts of Poland. Lemkos were reluctant to send their children to that school, fearing that studying there could result in their Ukrainization.

### **RELIGIOUS SITUATION IN THE NEW PLACE OF LIVING**

Resettlements further complicated religious relations in Eastern Rite churches in Poland. In 1946, in compliance with the decision taken under the pressure of the USSR by so-called Lwów council, the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church was administratively incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church (Czech 2009). Also, the Byzantine-Ukrainian Church in Poland was meant to be altogether dissolved. Numerous Ukrainian and Lemko activists and members of the intelligentsia, including Greek Catholic and Orthodox priests, were sent to prison or the infamous concentration camp in Jaworzno (Misiak 2006). They were usually accused of ‘nationalism’ and often also of ‘aiming at overturning the socialist system’ or ‘violating national borders’. Most of them were not released until 1956.

Immediately after the resettlements, the Polish Autocephalous Orthodox Church started building its structures in the new territory. Very often empty Lutheran churches were adopted for the needs of the Orthodox church (until 1945 most of the region’s inhabitants were Lutheran). Members of the Orthodox church often met with negative reactions of the Catholic milieu, but their church was legal, unlike the Greek Catholic Church. Therefore, in the following years, lots of Lemkos deported to the western territories changed their religion to Orthodox so that they could perform religious practices without risking sanctions. Conversions to Roman Catholicism were also frequent. This usually pertained people who had married Catholics. The Byzantine-Ukrainian Church in Poland did not exist legally until 1958. The Vatican did not acknowledge Stalin’s decision to dissolve it and obliged the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church to take care of Greek Catholic believers. However, as Czech proves it (2009), not all Roman Catholic hierarchs were friendly to Greek Catholics. In the areas whose population had been deported during Operation “Vistula”, the Roman Catholic Church took over most churches of both rites, many of them were also vandalised or destroyed. In Lower Silesia, on the other hand, Roman Catholics often helped Greek Catholics, e.g. by letting them use their own churches for secret services. For many years, the main centre of Greek Catholic Lemkos’ meetings in Lower Silesia was the RC st. Hyacinth church in Legnica. After 1958, state authorities stopped persecuting Greek Catholics, but the latter remained under the pressure of both RC and the Orthodox Church. The Byzantine-Ukrainian Church was not officially registered in Poland until 1989. On the all-Polish scale, the vast majority of its members are people of Ukrainian origin, although in the described area these are mostly Lemkos. Greek Catholic services are often held in RC churches (e.g. in Modła). However, in the recent years, Greek Catholics have received several churches for their own use (including St. James Church in Wrocław, which became the Greek Catholic cathedral) and have built a few new churches, e.g. in Legnica, Przemków or Zamienice. Currently, a church is being built in the village Patoka (Gromadka municipality), which is inhabited almost exclusively

by Lemkos. For many years, scholars occupied with the problem have agreed that Greek Catholic Lemkos are reluctant to integrate into the surrounding society and tend to isolate themselves. For instance, marriages with people from outside the Lemko community are normally disapproved of. Orthodox Lemkos, on the other hand, are much more willing to integrate into local communities, although they do not give up their religious and cultural identity.

Interesting material for research into inter-religious relations in the region could be collected by studying cemeteries. In Lower Silesia there are only two Orthodox cemeteries: in Zimna Woda (an old Lutheran cemetery taken over by the Orthodox, closed down in the 1960s) and Kęblów (still used). In other places, the deceased of all the three religions (also Roman Catholics) are buried on municipal cemeteries or RC parish cemeteries. The Orthodox and Greek Catholics usually have separate plots on them. Visually, Catholic, Orthodox and Greek Catholic graves found on these cemeteries have only minor differences. Although most Eastern Rite graves have an Orthodox cross and a Cyrillic inscription, it is not always the case. Moreover, year by year, an increasing number of graves show that mixed marriages are becoming more and more common. What is characteristic, the formerly tense relationships between Orthodox and Greek Catholic Lemkos have been 'thawing' in the recent years. A growing number of Lemko activists are declaring that both churches equally contribute to the preservation of Lemko culture and language. During the 'Lemko Watra' in Michałów in August 2009, a collection was carried out towards the rebuilding of a Greek Catholic church in a Lemkovyna village. The organisers asked the participants to support this initiative regardless of religious differences.

Currently, in the Western Territories of Poland there are over 20 Orthodox parishes operating within 5 deaneries. The vast majority of believers, particularly in the northern part of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, the whole Lubusz Voivodeship and the southern part of the West Pomeranian Voivodeship, are Lemkos.

Orthodox parishes in the areas of Lemko resettlement:

Wrocław Deanery: Wrocław (2 parishes), Malczyce, Oleśnica, Wołów Stary, Żmigród, Samborz.

Lubin Deanery: Lubin, Głogów, Legnica, Michałów (Fig. 2), Rudna, Studzionki, Zimna Woda.

Zielona Góra Deanery: Zielona Góra, Buczyzna (Fig. 3), Kożuchów, Leszno Górne, Lipiny, Przemków, Torzym, Słubice.

Szczecin Deanery: Barlinek, Brzoza, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Ługi.



**Fig. 2.** Newly built Orthodox church in Michałów (a) and the Operation “Vistula” commemorative board (b) (photo M. Battek)



**Fig. 3.** Orthodox (former protestant) church in Buczyzna (photo M. Battek)

Greek Catholic Parishes:

Wrocław, Lubin, Chobienia, Sława, Oleśnica, Modła, Zamienice (Fig. 4), Wołów, Legnica, Środa Śląska, Zielona Góra, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Głogów, Międzyrzecz, Nowogród Bobrzański, Osiecko, Pożrzadło, Przemków, Skwierzyna, Strzelce Krajeńskie, Szprotawa.



**Fig. 4.** Newly built Greek Catholic church in Zamienice (b) (photo M. Battek)

It is very difficult to estimate the actual numbers of the members of both churches, as for many years they abstained from registering their believers for safety reasons, and some parishes still do not do that. The official statistics are often unreliable, as representatives of particular churches do not always provide true data, for a variety of reasons. Besides, the administrations of particular churches are generally very different from state administration, which also makes registration difficult. This is one of the problems that geographers of religion have to deal with in all Poland.

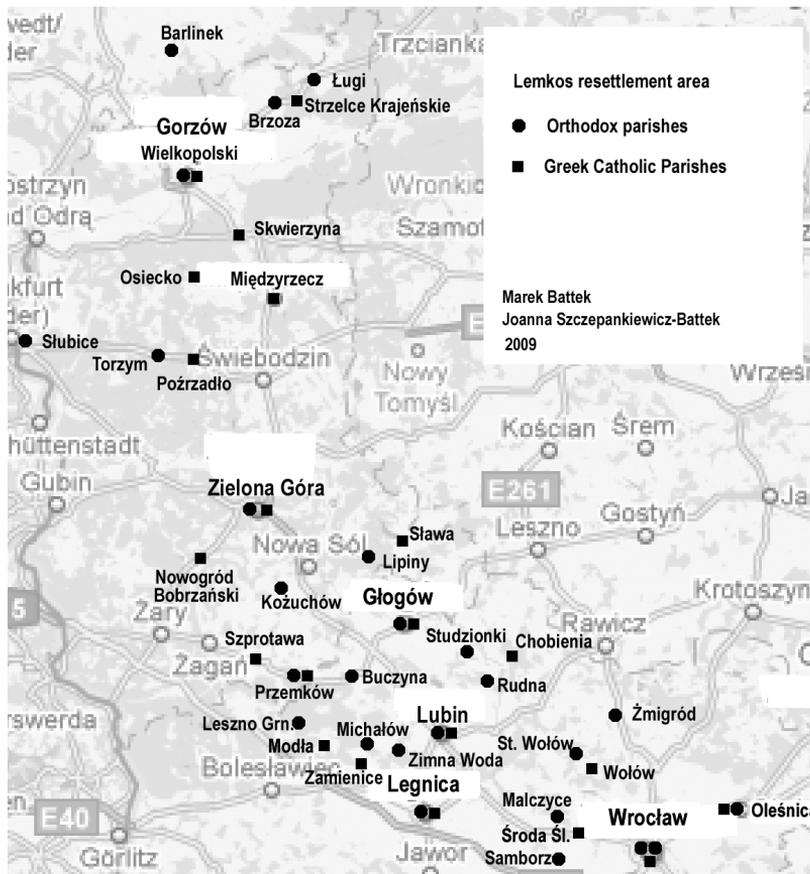


Fig. 5. Orthodox and Greek Catholic parishes in the areas of Lemko resettlement (authors own drawing)

### LEMKOS IN POLAND AFTER 1989

In the late 1970s, the restrictive state policies towards Lemkos were relaxed. Numerous Lemko families moved to big cities, e.g. Wrocław and Lemko youth often went to university. In this way, Lemkos acquired their own intelligentsia. In the early 1980s and the 1990s, some Lemkos decided to return to their homeland. State authorities did not object, considering the causes of resettlements from 1947 a thing of the past. Most of

the returning Lemkos tried to recover their former land and make a living from farming (often eco-farming) or agrotourism. Lemkovyna is currently regarded as one of the most attractive regions in Poland. However, many farms in Lemkovyna had already belonged to Poles, and the lawsuits aimed at recovering them by the original owners are very arduous and not always successful. Many Lemkos returning to their homeland met with unfriendly reactions not only from their neighbours, but also local authorities. It is connected with the fact that for many years the political scene in the Subcarpathian Voivodeship has been dominated by right-wing parties, which are extremely unfriendly to national and religious minorities. For instance, in the recent months a large group of Polish inhabitants of the region (backed by local politicians) have opposed to attempts to introduce bilingual place names in Lemkovyna, although the law on national and ethnic minorities ensures this right to Lemkos (Smoleński, Kuraś 2009). In Lemkovyna there are Lemko organizations, e.g. the Lemko Union (since the 1990s having the reputation of being pro-Ukrainian) based in Gorlice or the *Ruska Bursa* Association, publishing the bimonthly magazine *Biesieda* (most articles are published in the Lemko language). Nevertheless, it could be estimated that 90% of Lemkos still live *na czużyni* (in exile).

State authorities for a long time negated ethnic distinctiveness of Lemkos, including them in the Ukrainian minority. In 1956, Lemkos and Ukrainians founded the common Ukrainian Socio-Cultural Association with a Lemko division. However, it did not foster the development of Lemko culture and literature, since these were Ukrainians who dominated the association's authorities, and they did not favour Lemko distinctiveness.

In 1989 the Lemko Association was founded in Legnica. Its aims include *uniting Lemko people regardless of their political and religious convictions (...), developing and popularizing their spiritual and material culture* (Statute of the Association). The best known cultural event organized by the Lemko Association is the festival *Lemkiwska Watra na Czużyni* (*Lemkos Campfire in Exil*) organized annually since 1990 (previously the festival had a local character) at the beginning of August in Michałów near Legnica. – one of the biggest Lemko villages in Poland. The last *Watra*, organized on 7–9 August 2009 attracted about 4000 participants. Around a dozen folk groups which performed during the *Watra* included two Rusyn groups from Slovakia: *Saris* and *Barvinok*. Apart from the best known *Watra* held in Michałów, *Watras* are also organized in late July in Ług near Gorzów Wielkopolski (the 18<sup>th</sup> edition, held this year, was visited by about 15000 people) and in Żdynia in Lemkovyna. The participants are people of Lemko origin, regardless of their religion, as well as a large group of Lemko culture lovers.

It is not easy to estimate the number of Lemkos living in Poland, because in spite of the political transformation, not all members of this ethnic group declare their national identity openly. This is usually the result of bad experience from the past. According to the national census in 2002 (but there were numerous irregularities during the survey, especially in the range of the nationality), only 5900 people declared Lemko nationality (Misiak 2006). However, one can presume that the actual number of Lemkos in Poland could be at least several times higher (according to the data from Operation “Vistula”, about 30,000–35,000 Lemkos were resettled to the Western Territories then). What is even more difficult to say is how many of them know the Lemko language, and how many speak it on everyday basis (e.g. at home). The Lemko Association promotes the teaching of the language. Most participants of the *Watras* try to speak Lemko, but they are not always fluent.

The law on national and ethnic minorities, passed by the Polish parliament in 2005, granted Lemkos the status of an ethnic minority (the status of a national minority was granted only to members of those nationalities which have their own states). It confirms the ethnic and cultural distinctiveness of Lemkos and, what is more, appreciates it. Poland's membership in the European Union obliges our country to enable national and ethnic minorities to freely develop their languages and cultures. Let us hope that the young generation, free of the burden of dramatic events 60 years ago, will make a fruitful use of these possibilities.

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