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Janice Broun

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EAST SLOVAKIA--ORTHODOX VS. GREEK CATHOLICS

by Janice Broun

Janice Broun (Scottish Episcopal) is an author of many articles on religion in eastern Europe. In May 1993 she examined relations between the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Slovakia on behalf of Keston Research and of the Scottish Episcopal Church, which is trying to establish links with minority Orthodox churches.

East Slovakia is a melting pot of diverse national groups and faiths. Although Slovaks and Catholics are in a majority in most areas, there are still signs of its colonial past. The Germans have cleared out of their old mining settlements, the Spis towns, but along the Hungarian border in places like Roznava in the south little but Magyar is spoken. Because Protestants were protected by the Hungarian Protestant aristocracy they had not been targeted for the kind of re-conversion to Catholicism¹ which almost obliterated the Czech Reformation, all these three groups contained flourishing Protestant communities.

Košice, where there were 6,000 Jews in the first Czechoslovak Republic, still has a small Jewish community which has warm ecumenical relations with local churches and acquired a rabbi again last year. The ubiquitous Romanies, now in their turn Slovakia's scapegoats, fear state promoted limitations on the size of their families not without justification.

The Rusyns, estimated at around 150,000, speak a distinct western dialect of Ukrainian, that comes from the wooded foothills of the Carpathian north and east of Prešov. As a result of being bracketed with the Ukrainians by the Communist government, most of them identify themselves as Slovaks. A considerable portion of both Greek Catholics and Orthodox are Rusyns, but are now usually so Slovakized that they won't admit their origins.²

The Greek Catholics and the Orthodox are still engaged in a bitter dispute over church property awarded en bloc to the Orthodox by the Communists in 1950 and en bloc back to

¹Paul Mojzes, Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR (Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 1992), p. 157.

²Andrew Sorowski, "Ukrainian Catholics and Orthodox in Slovakia," Religion in Communist Lands, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1987), pp. 54-55.

the Catholics since the Revolution. Eastern Slovaks are notorious for alcoholism, and drink has no doubt made matters worse, according to Bratislava doctor Katerina Hudacova who noted that many of the Orthodox delegation sent to protest to the Christian Democratic government in Bratislava in 1990 brandished empty bottles.

After forty years of Communist persecution, the Greek Catholics seemed to me to be on the crest of a wave again. They have moral advantage of having refused to co-operate with the Communists, who turned the Orthodox Church, though nominally autocephalous, into virtually an obedient appendage of the Moscow Patriarchate; they are justly proud of the record of resistance of their priests, three quarters of whom refused to compromise.³ Most of these were deported to Bohemia, like the grandfather of my interpreter from Prešov's newly re-opened Catholic faculty, Peter Labanik. Some were sentenced to forced labor in the uranium mines. Some were martyred.

The church had had the advantage, as compared with its Romanian and Ukrainian sister churches, of legal rehabilitation during the Prague Spring. This was followed by parish-level referenda, with the result that by 1971 they had reclaimed two-thirds of their churches and priests, though a new Commission in 1970 tried to enforce common usage, threatening to close Catholic churches which did not comply. Nearly sixty parishes tried sharing churches with the Orthodox, but it was not a satisfactory solution and there were arguments over who owned what.⁴

However, until three years ago Greek Catholic ordinands could only train at the Roman Catholic seminaries at Bratislava and Litomerice, which were subject to a strict numerus clausus. They had permanently lost many members to the Roman Catholic Church, while many more of the older generation were still afraid to claim membership. Even two years after the Revolution in 1991 only 179,600, as compared with 225,000 in 1950, declared themselves as Greek Catholics, while 34,200 identified themselves as Orthodox, as compared with 8,000 before 1950.⁵ They were also weakened by tensions between their Slovak and Rusyn elements, with Rusyns resentful of a Slovak, Jan Hirka, being given precedence as bishop by Rome over the late Vasyl Hopko, a Rusyn who was already a bishop before the Communist takeover.⁶

³Ibid., pp. 58-59.

⁴Ibid., pp. 63-64, 66.

⁵Printed statistics provided by Fr. Hilary Greenwood, Prague.

⁶Sorokowski, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

Two hundred and four of their 246 parishes had reverted before 1990. Then the first Slovak government, which under Catholic Prime Minister Jan Čarnogursky was sympathetic towards restoring the Catholic Church to its former dominance favored Greek Catholics with total restitution of their property, in accordance with Hirka's insistence that nothing less than *restitutio in integris* would suffice, and that justice must be done to the wronged party. In Prešov the Orthodox have duly moved out and the Greek Catholics are back in their former faculty, which is part of Košice University and their seminary. Their main problem are healthy ones, lack of accomodation and libraries for the current boom as youngsters flock back. In May, ninety-three crammed into the seminary, fourteen to each combined study and dormitory. Because of lack of space twenty-six have had to study abroad. Forty-five more should have arrived this term.

Presov is the only Slovak Catholic faculty where laity, men and women, can study, so it is very popular, and students are willingly providing voluntary labor to help get extra accomodation ready. Two smart lecture halls have been donated by sponsors. However, Labanik told me that students have to rely on photocopying lecture notes since the Orthodox did not return the library. I felt at home with George Novotny, the Jesuit Old Testament lecturer, who had returned from forty years exile, including a spell in a parish in Fauldhouse, central Scotland. He said the only books available are in Hungarian, formerly the *lingua franca* of the area. He stressed the handicaps under which present students labor; their lack of foreign languages and their satisfaction with the traditionalist theology they are fed. He would have jumped at the offer of the libraries from German Catholics which were rejected by all the other Catholic faculties and seminaries in the two republics. Prešov was never given the chance.

Terezia Petrova, the capable diocesan manager who showed me round the seminary, was very concerned about the shortage of priests; only 252 (as compared with 340 in the 1940s) of whom 27 are retired. In 1993 (up to May) 13 had died. "A whole generation went missing." She said that Bishop Hirka had nine agents tailing him until 1990--"and we are not sure whether it's not still continuing."

Labanik and the Vicar General, New Testament lecturer Jan Gojdos, back from carpentering in Bohemia, complained of the unpleasant way the Orthodox had returned property. "In many cases they did it arrogantly, stripping all the icons and church furnishings, breaking windows." Twenty-three churches and 28 presbyteries had according to Gojdos still not been returned.

The Orthodox version of events is rather different. A young lecturer, son of a priest, Marian Nadzham, who had spent six months in a Scottish Episcopal parish in Glasgow's east end, interpreted for the Dean of the Orthodox faculty, Dr. Milan Gerka. Privately, Marian, who had also broadened his outlook through study at the Ecumenical Center at Bossey,

Switzerland admitted, "I think we had to say 'have our churches back' because that is the way of Christ. Instead, we started to resist. This led to some nasty situations. Greek Catholics often tried to take churches by force." When I took the issue with him over Orthodox refusal to return church furnishings, Gerka explained that the Orthodox drew a distinction between moveable and immovable property. "Thus we are under no obligation to return moveable property acquired since 1950. We spent a lot refurbishing churches damaged during the war, and some of the donors are still alive."

Moreover, the Orthodox regarded the handing over of Greek Catholic property to them in 1950 as redressing an ancient injustice. Before the Union of Uzgorod of 1646-49, all Slavs in the region north and east of Prešov were Orthodox. As impoverished peasants in a backwater of the Hapsburg Empire, they had no choice and according to Gerka, "they believed they were Orthodox. Until this century only priests' office books mentioned the Pope. Marian's mother, a Greek Catholic, told him that in her church the priests would say, 'God bless you, all Orthodox.'"

Marian explained the differing conceptions of church property. "By Orthodox canons a church belongs to the community which built it, so if they opt to join another confession it still belongs to the original church. By Catholic canon law, any church building they appropriate belongs to them irrevocably." The Orthodox stressed the fact that they were historically less privileged in comparison with the Catholics and could only rarely trace title deeds to their churches in the old Hapsburg land records. In the diocese of Mihalovce alone they have returned 25 churches since 1989, leaving them only eight churches. Twenty-five congregations are worshipping in temporary premises and five new churches are under construction.

As full toleration was established in 1920 in the wake of Czechoslovak independence, a few thousand Slovaks reverted to Orthodoxy. They joined the newly established Czechoslovak Orthodox church (then under Serbian jurisdiction) partly in reaction to the Magyarizing and Romanizing tendencies of the Catholic Church. The Slovak Orthodox movement lost ground, however, as a politically and socially conscious Slavophile movement reasserted itself within the Greek Catholic Church, which, significantly, opposed the pro-Nazi President of independent war time Slovakia, Monsignor Jozef Tiso.⁷

After a tour of several towns and villages I felt that a law which took no account of particular local situations was not just, a view shared by some Parliamentary deputies, according to Marian. He claimed to know "many Roman Catholic priests and some laypeople and Evangelicals who say that morally we have right on our side." The Greek Catholics I met did not seem bitter; rather, full of hope for the future. But Hirka, whom I did not meet,

⁷Ibid., p. 55.

accuses the Orthodox of continued collusion with hostile Communists who still wield considerable power.

The Orthodox, it should be noted, were not immune from Communist persecution in the past; Marian's sister had been barred from teaching, for example. Today, they have encountered considerable obstruction to their building new churches in some localities. It comes both from Greek Catholics and from unreformed local officials. In Nižny Svidnik, where 2600 Orthodox are having to build churches and the 2200 Orthodox Catholics are having to build themselves one, Gerks accused the Catholics of hindering its construction. In Telgart, a small congregation has had to appeal to the state since the village council swear they will never allow them to build a church.

Gerka told me that the timescale for restitution, two years, was too short, that the scale compensation subsidy of 1,200,000 kroner was too little, and that they felt under tremendous pressure in the face of 300% inflation and the necessity to complete buildings before 1994, because they doubt whether any further subsidies will be forthcoming. Unlike the Catholics they have no outside resources on which to draw. "Some Greek Catholics say we live like beggars," Marian said. From other remarks made to me as well as my own observations it seemed there was, as well as a more vital renewed life, both in the parish and also extra-parochially, considerably more cash and material comfort among Greek Catholic clergy, who, like the Orthodox, seem to run in families. The Czechoslovak Orthodox church as a whole is also handicapped by its lack of monastic tradition, which it was prevented from fostering under the Communist government, which attacked religious orders viciously. However, while the Catholics are renewing their Basilian orders through the members who maintained their vocation clandestinely, "we, Orthodox are in the tragic situation of having to wait for priests to be bereaved so that they can be eligible to become our bishops," as Marian pointed out.

The Orthodox have already had to modify designs of churches and opt for the cheapest model. In several villages where the great majority of the community is Orthodox they have been obliged to build new churches quite necessarily. I saw an imposing church in Jedlinka which they have had to vacate for the two local Catholic families (and which has had to have people from other villages bussed in for Mass). They worshiped in the firestation (a mere shack) while the new church is built. I saw shabby community halls and rooms in semi-derelict houses in run down areas of towns, in use as churches. There, they had leased but not had the option of purchase of the shabbier of the two Evangelical churches. Since this had belonged to the Germans and Magyars the Evangelicals reckoned these might try to reclaim it.

In the fine old German town of Bardejov they had already surrounded both of the churches on Gojdos' list. But they had encountered trouble when their congregation in the central one had refused to move out until after their St. John the Baptist festival liturgy in

1990. During the night Greek Catholics came, dumped all the furnishings in the local psychiatric hospital and changed the lock. One of the five Roman Catholic congregations there, in sympathy provided them with a church but the Greek Catholics put pressure in the priest concerned, on the grounds that both they and Roman Catholics were unhappy about this. So they were forced to leave and set about transforming a ramshackle hut from the local council into a pleasant chapel by working round the clock. The impetus of having to find money to erect a new church has enlarged their congregation.

Some congregations have obstructed agreements entered into by their respective church authorities. In Jedlinka where they greatly outnumber Catholics, the congregation made their resentment to carrying out their bishop's orders obvious. In Humenska they even refused to surrender their church. In Rusky Hrabovec and Dubrava, totally Orthodox villages, congregations claimed their ancestors had built the churches, not the Greek Catholics.

It was evident that a considerable amount of unofficial bargaining between the disputants was in progress and this could resolve most of the cases. The Orthodox are holding out in the small number of cases where they feel they could make a good case from the land records.

Marion was unhappy about the way churches, involved in disputes, were being caricatured in the local media. Although the Orthodox were the main victims, this brings Christians as a whole into disrepute.

The bishop's chauffeur who drove us round believes that the present difficulties are actually motivating Orthodox to make a fresh start, not only with their church building. Their commitment to building new churches is forcing them to take their religion more seriously.

As Orthodox Bishop Jan of Mihalovce observed, "the Orthodox church in Slovakia has lost much materially but been strengthened spiritually. Christ is with us in the storm. But the tensions of the last two years have brought to an end the relationship between Orthodox and Greek Catholics."⁸

⁸Syndesmos Ops, Presov.