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### Book Review: Krystyna Czerni, Nowosielski—Sacral Art: Podlasie, Warmia and Mazury, Lublin, translation from Polish by Alicja Gorgoń

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Krystyna Czerni, *Nowosielski—Sacral Art: Podlasie, Warmia and Mazury, Lublin*, translation from Polish by Alicja Gorgoń. Białystok: Museum of Podlasie in Białystok, 2019. ISBN: 978-83-950007-7-7-5.**

**Reviewed by Christopher Garbowski, Associate Professor, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin, Poland**

The most beautiful historical site in the city of Lublin and a major one in the country is the interior of a Gothic chapel with byzantine murals. The murals were commissioned by King Jagiello, a Lithuanian prince who was crowned king of Poland late in the fourteenth century after he had converted to Christianity. By the time of his reign the chapel at the castle was already a modest Gothic masonry building that had replaced an earlier wooden one. The king decided it needed murals. Jagiełło, a pagan before becoming king of Poland, had conquered a large swath of Ruthenian land, most notably including Kievan Rus, from the Mongols who were occupying it. This meant that a large number of the subjects of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were Orthodox Christians: in fact, they greatly outnumbered the Lithuanians and many from among the ruling class had married Orthodox Christians or taken on their faith. The chronicles of the period inform that the king had an affinity for Orthodox art, but in Lublin the entire chapel interior is painted in this manner.

In juxtaposing the magnificent, predominantly Orthodox styled murals with the vaulting Gothic interior architecture the entire chapel resonates to this day as a powerful symbol of the meeting of Eastern and Western Christianity, which at the time simply incorporated the serendipitous juncture of both religious cultures present in the kingdom through the whims of its patron, even though the leaders of the faith communities in Rome and Constantinople had mutually excommunicated each other a few centuries earlier. Now, with the barbaric invasion of Ukraine by Putin's Russian forces, the chapel can be considered a symbol of the relationship between Poles and Ukrainians that has been strengthened by the support that the largely Catholic former have extended to their largely Orthodox brethren across the border in their time of need, especially by taking in millions of refugees from the war-torn country.

What must be noted, the east-west duality of the Lublin chapel has been recreated in the city toward the end of the 1980s through a magnificent example of contemporary sacred art by the recently deceased Orthodox Christian icon painter Jerzy Nowosielski in the nineteenth century neo-gothic Chapel of St. Josaphat. The chapel is part of a religious complex of churches and buildings that serve as the Lublin diocese seminary. What is crucial

here is the chapel serves the Ukrainian Catholic seminarians: this eastern rite of the Catholic church originating in the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in the sixteenth century had been suppressed in communist Poland by the regime, and it was only after the more liberal approach toward the Church begrudgingly ensued upon the election of a Polish pope that its members were able to more openly celebrate their rite and the seminarians were no longer trained in it in secret. Toward the end of this period Nowosielski agreed to paint the iconostasis for the chapel. This iconostasis has been reproduced, along with much of his remaining sacred artwork in eastern Poland, in the richly illustrated book *Nowosielski—Sacral Art: Podlasie, Warmia and Mazury, Lublin*, with the text written and artwork selected by Krystyna Czerni, and published by the Museum of Podlasie in Białystok. After a presentation of the specificity of the Orthodox painter the book generously acknowledges, I will concentrate on the Lublin section for its symbolic significance.

The somewhat controversial painter and theologian has been called the “Andrei Rublev of our time” by Leon Tarasiewicz, one of the more renowned modernist painters of Belorussian descent in the country. However, this painter of Lemko descent—a Ukrainian people—has had problems getting his icons accepted within his own Orthodox community, especially in its churches. What created difficulty in the acceptance of Nowosielski’s icons within the walls of some Orthodox churches and at times even Catholic churches was his quite unorthodox approach toward the sacred art. For many of the Orthodox, icons are supposed to follow a canon. Not so for Nowosielski. The artist was cited as saying: “through its participation in the unearthly world, every icon is different, varies from the others, comes from an individual icon artist, who has given it glory in its own way... An image does not only convey a text with its universal meanings. It also conveys its underlying intonation... An icon juxtaposes the universality of words with the particularity of an image, always speaking of and for itself” (p. 17). This approach to the Orthodox icon placed the painter at the crossroads of east and west. And it was this approach that in all probability lost him the opportunity to paint the iconostasis for the largest modern Orthodox church constructed in post-war Poland, the Church of the Holy Trinity in Hajnówka, close to Białystok, completed in 1982. Among other things, the church is host to the most important festival of Orthodox choir music in Poland, attracting groups from far beyond the country’s borders. Nowosielski’s preliminary designs for the iconostasis were praised by the artistic community but offended the church authorities. The paradox is that he was friends with the architect who built the church and even helped him with its design.

For complex historical reasons tensions exist between Orthodox Christians and Ukrainian Catholics in Poland, but the artist was nevertheless very pleased to be assigned the task of painting an iconostasis in Lublin for the latter community. He was to later express his feelings for Lublin, relating them among other things to the existence of the Gothic chapel with its byzantine murals. “The Lublin Byzantium,” he stated, “is so different from the Russian Byzantium. It is here, it is to Lublin where you need to come to admire the work of master Andrey in the castle Chapel. Stop, admire the angels sitting on the vault and ‘study’ the spirit of the city” (p. 10).

In the Chapel of St. Josaphat, the marvelous two-level iconostasis was painted by the artist with oil on canvas on fiberboard and has four major icons across the wall: striking modernist versions of the traditional *Christ Pantocrator*, *Mother of God and Child*, *Saint Vladimir*, *Baptist of the Kiev Rus*, and *Saint Josaphat*—the patron of the chapel. On the Deacon’s Door is an icon of the *Good Thief*. In an interview Nowosielski has commented on its deep significance for him: “He is the Good Thief dying on the cross to the right of Christ and whom Christ himself brought to paradise. I prefer him to any other character traditionally located in this place. In our existential situation, as we are living the drama of faith, he seems the most important figure to me. I am just like him” (p. 305).

Ukrainian Catholic priest Father Stefan Batruch was a seminarian when Nowosielski painted the iconostasis. He recalls the deep impression it made on him. What was noteworthy for the seminarians was the darkness of the icons, which some had claimed gave them a pessimistic air; the artist replied to that concern that even in the pervasive darkness, the sunlight would prevail. “It was very important for me,” confesses Fr. Batruch, “because I was sensitive to the experience of evil, dismay, injustice—and he presented me with a different perspective. To me Nowosielski’s icons emanate light” (p. 314). The light must have helped Fr. Batruch, for among his initiatives already in post-communist Poland in the current millennium has been spearheading a joint Polish Ukrainian program taking place east of Lublin on the river that creates the border of both countries, through an event that features performances, fairs, common ecumenical prayer. At times before the Covid pandemic as many as thirty thousand people have participated. As he put it, “Our actions are meant to enhance rapprochement between the two nations, to mobilize communities.” A much-needed initiative in neighboring countries with complicated histories affecting their relationship, and in its own small way paving the path to the reconciliation that is now taking place between the two nations. One of the positive outcomes of an ongoing tragedy.