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Lemks as an Ethnic Group¹

Asking today who the Lemks are we should remember that the postwar period and especially their native territories and deportations into strange environments influenced the present condition of the group. Up to 1947 Lemko people lived in Niski and Sądecki Beskid, both in Poland and Slovakia, in the region called by ethnographers Lemko Territories (Łemkowszczyzna). Lemks, the Carpathian mountaineers, constituted there an enclave of Ruthenian culture that was the most standing out to the west. Still nowadays when we wander along this mountain range, that is partly depopulated, even the eye of an unskilled observer can notice some traces of somebody's presence: abandoned orchards, decayind farms, three-armed crosses hammered either in metal or stone, overgrown with weeds graveyards, and of course, Orthodox churches, both those remaining and the devastated ones. The specific character of the places was once fulfilled by Ruthenian speech that can be heard even today and the Orthodox liturgy in which native people praised Lord's name. And although that cultural borderline *non omnis moriar* because Lemks still live there. Some of them came back to the old houses from compulsory deportations after 1956, few others managed by a miracle to survive in their places the stormy years of 1944—1947. Despite that the Lemko place in its primary

¹ The reflections on the subject of the present situation of Lemks that are included in the text come from local researches realized between 1987 and 1990. The studies included the area of Lower Silesia and territories of former Lemko land. M. A. — B. Pactwa and Dr B. Siewierski were co-realizers of the project of those sociological studies.

shape and cultural character does not exist any longer. Moreover, the problem of Lemks' themselves, their national self-determination, cultural heritage and the tragedy of displacement, together with polonization still remains.

The interests in Lemks reaches the last century but apart from purely cognitive motivation they were accompanied by some degree of ideologization and competence disputes and even obsessive will to prejudge the "true" descent of Lemks all the time. As a result, the views on the subject are expressed by the following competing theories:

- The concept that stresses common roots of all Ruthenians and that treats all Lemks as a fraction of Ukrainian nation. This concept has been developed first of all by Ukrainian ethnographers and historians. Nowadays it is used for advancement of the national option that is also called "native".
- The concept of "Lemko nation" that postulates Lemks' separatism in relation to other east-Slavonic nations. It is also called the concept of the "fourth east-Slavonic nation" of Lemks who derive their origins from White Croats who lived until the 7th century in the Upper Vistula river-basin. This thesis strongly stresses Lemks' distinct character towards Ukrainian people, and at present it constitutes one of the elements that are called "Lemko separatism".
- The concept defined by the name of "Wallachian trace", postulated and promoted most often by circles of Polish ethnologists (for example K. Dobrowolski, R. Reinfuss). It accepts that sheperd's people of Wallachian origins together with Ruthenian element were predominant within migration that populated those little populated areas in the 14th and 15th century. They were just the Wallachian people (nomadic tribes from the present Romania) from who contemporary Lemks descended; it should be testified by both the elements of material culture, similarities of customs and languages. This attitude *de facto* shows a distinct character of Lemks when compared with other groups of Ruthenian mountaineers (for example Hucules or Bojks) and emphasises "ties of blood" that separate them.

So we should remark here that those three concepts of Lemks' descent are sensible if we treat them in the categories of specific ethnic ideology (that is, we should perceive them through different Lemks' environments). The attribution of values of purely scientific statements to them would be an interpretational mistake. The study of ethnicity must lead not through speculative theories of origins of a group but through the specificity of its culture.

The names of "Lemko" and "Lemks" themselves were given to the group relatively late because in the half of the 19th century. Originally the people defined themselves by the notion of "Ruthenian people". The new names had originally an derogative character and derived from the word "lem" (in

English "only"). It was characteristic for their dialect. The word is not heard in ethnolects of neighbouring groups. After some time this facetious discriminant penetrated into the language of science, journalism and literature. And although the name of the group has in this case linguistic grounds, it is the fact that its popularization among the Lemks themselves occurred in the period of differentiations within ethnic awareness in this part of the Carpathians.

They were the people almost entirely rural who were employed in not too effective agriculture, cattle-breeding and forest administration. Handicraft, mainly stone-work and smithing and mobile trade, complemented the professional structure of the society. The main part of the small group of intellectuals was composed of the clergy, mainly Greek Catholic.

With respect to politics, current views divided Lemks into the followers of national-Ukrainian orientation that was identified with Greek Catholicism. But it is hard to say to what a degree human common people (and not only political picks) identified themselves with those divisions and how much they were indifferent to them. However, it is a fact that in the past both options led to clashes and local conflicts and influenced temporary changes of religion of the whole villages and finally they attracted repressions on civil people, first from the authorities of Austrian Empire and later, after 1918, from Polish authorities.

Also a precise statement of the number of people brought many difficulties in the past. And so in the mid-war years the number of Lemks was stated as 150,000. But this valuation was not precise because of the lack of clear criteria of distinguishment of ethnic groups in official statistics. Therefore in such cases criteria of language and religion were used. And so, some problems were brought about by not clear differentiation between Ukrainian and Ruthanian language. Because we should remember that still in the beginning of the 20th century both names were used interchangeably. But the distinct character of Lemks was accepted also on official levels which can be proved by the fact of the establishment of the Apostolic Administration of Lemko Territory for Uniate congregations in 1934 by Vatican Jurisdiction.

For better illustration of Lemks' situation in mid-war period we could finally present a few fundamental features:

- external political center: Austrian Empire (18th—20th century), the Second Polish Republic (1918—1939);
- type of community: rural;
- spatial coherence: full concentration on traditional territory (Lemko territories);
- structure of religion: bi-religious community — Greek Catholic (about 85%) and Uniate Church (about 15%);

- language situation: bilingual group of people who speak Polish and their own ethnolect, the efforts to codify and unify lexically the Lemks;
- autonomous spheres: clear sense of cultural distinctness, from 1934 autonomy of religious structures for Greek Catholics;
- grounds of cultural identity: language and religion and attachment to specified territory;
- constitutional position: the absence of clear legitimate position, freedom of cultivation of language and culture, gradually limited by Polish authorities in the 1930s;
- national ideologies: Ukrainian-national and old-Ruthenian (great-Ruthenian).

Lemks' tragedy was completed by two succeeding waves of migrations that took place between 1944 and 1947. First, as a result of bilateral agreements about 500,000 Ukrainians, Russians, Belarussians and over half of Lemko population were repatriated from Polish territories to the former USSR. At first, that migration had a voluntary character but as a result of the break of the whole action because of the lack of volunteers to leave, soon compulsory deportations were started.

Deportations of non-Polish people from south eastern territories in 1947 had even more dramatic course. A military operation known to historians under the cryptonym "Wisła", according to official version was to stamp out the field units of Ukrainian Insurgent Army through separating them from social subsidiaries. Not entering the controversies and arguments that still appear as for the valuation of principality, motives and efficiency of those actions, we should remember about their social and cultural results. As a result of deportations carried out in a very short time and very cruelly (from April 28 to July 1947 and with the use of the army, militia and secret services) almost all the Lemko community from Beskid Niski and Sądecki was dispersed in the belt of western and northern territories of Poland. In this way not only Lemko territory ceased to exist as an enclave of Ruthenian culture but also all the fundamental structures of social ties underwent disintegration. They were religious, neighbourly and in extremal situations even family structures. Additionally, Greek Catholic community was separated from a clergyman for over a decade. They were deprived of Uniate churches that had always constituted the center of spiritual life of Lemks. The unfavourable living situation of displaced people was also influenced by accompanying them almost from the beginning, the awareness of the rejection in new areas by other groups of settlers who had come there before them. That distance that was created by local propaganda and repatriated settlers from eastern borderlands of Poland contributed to the strengthening the stereotype vision of Lemks as bloody and cruel bandits and incendiaries. *Nota bene* the word "Ukrainian"

itself even nowadays can bring to our mind similar associations in some parts of our country.

Even if we count that false generalization into the sphere of interpersonal relations, it did not bring about direct repulsive behaviours from Polish majority, in the best case it led to Lemks' isolation. Because just the language and different religion constituted in the new space the values that revealed strangeness, social actors shaped a whole number of showy behaviours intended to hide their real identity from strangers very quickly. As we can see the process of adaptation to new places, so different in relation to geography, economics and culture from traditional center, proceeded very painfully in such conditions. It included a few characteristic phases.

And so, the first phase was characterized by a few years isolation of Lemks in local communities. Apart from economic exchange Lemks did not enter wider neighbourly and social contacts with other settlers. The sense of temporariness brought to them both "inhospitality" of new places and also prohibition of free movement. Impetuous attempts to come back to the mountains performed by desperate families were not seldom in that situation. But they usually ended in repeated deportations. Finally, the chance to come back to one's own place was completely shattered by the State's decree from July 27, 1949 about the State's taking possession of properties and realties that were not in a real possession of their owners. In this way fatherlands went to the hands of Polish settlers, or they became the objects of collectivization, or the simplest, they constituted the area of none's land — not managed and left out of crop. Many places of religious cult were also left for devastation.

In this situation the necessity to accept the new places marks the second phase of adaptation. Life in a diaspora becomes a fact but it is accompanied by gradual appeasement of restrictions and growing normalization of attitudes of authorities towards Lemks. The year of 1956 had certainly an essential significance there. It brought critical opinions on the action "Wisła". One year later, the prohibition of free change of one's own dwelling place was repealed and the Greek Catholic parishes were permitted to act within organizational structures of Roman Catholic Church. But the lack of own church hierarchy and direct interspersions from Vatican, unclear status of property of sacral objects, guest-conducting services in Roman Catholic churches, the refusal to legitimate registration of religious associations by communist authorities made impossible the functioning of the Church. That state of lack of independence and legitimate marginalization lasted until 1991. The two kinds of spatial behaviours typical of the phase were the following: reemigration to areas of former Lemko territories and reintegration, that is creating local concentrations of those people in the place of their displacement.

The process of reemigration itself had rather a limited range. It is estimated that finally no more than a few thousands Lemks came back to their former houses. It means that only in a few cases it was possible to reconstruct partly the primary village structure.

So the fundamental group of Lemks remained in the areas of their displacements where in succeeding years there appeared (as a result of local migration between villages), a specific spatial integration. It happened even that they distinguished something of the kind of cultural center in, for example, the city of Przemków and Szprotawa surroundings that were defined as local capital cities of Lemko people. Also urban concentrations of those people in Wrocław, Legnica, Zielona Góra and Głogów, among others, underwent cultural activation.

The reconstruction of symbolic behaviours on the grounds of religious tradition and common language is the principal extension of that phase that has been lasting until today. And although democratization of life in Poland after June 1989 has not withdrawn the negative results of deportations (because of the irreversibility of many processes), it created a new situation for functioning of all the minorities within Polish State. Finally, contemporary Lemks have not assimilated with Polish people and the process of preservation of cultural separateness is characterized by a few characteristic features.

First, if in the field of realized studies it is difficult to accept the thesis of assimilation, so how can we define the present state? In spite of all the factors that favour assimilation such as: diasporization of a group, education in Polish schools, growing number of mixed marriages, difficulties in contact with native culture, divisions within communities, we should speak about marginalization of Lemko community. Marginalization of the ethnic group is completed here in three dimensions: strangeness, bi-culture and the sense of relative result of an actor into different surroundings. An individual feels alienated in the new conditions and that what has constituted the grounds of his normality and obviousness of social world suddenly generates prejudices and xenophobia of others. Bi-culture defines the fact of the span between two cultures. Nowadays Lemks more than ever before function between the world of their own and of strangers; native speech and Polish speech, traditional Lemko territory and area of residence marked by the law of deportations. Generally, in the case of the ethnic that is the conveyor of elements of Ruthenian-Byzantine culture, that functions in the surroundings dominated by the tradition of Latin west, the feature of bi-culture fully manifests itself. And the state of relative deprivation may concern both the wrongs of objective character (loss of land, houses or churches) and the subjectively felt situation of humiliation or collective harm. The sense of stigmatization is a symbolic dimension of different manifestations of deprivation. Then the attachment to an ethnic

group generates immediate attribution of some features, most often pejorative, to an individual. Maybe just because of that reason still nowadays, speaking Lemko language is very rare beyond orbis interior, so that not to attract attention of strangers redundantly.

Only being aware of the borderlines of that what is public and private, formal and informal, somebody else's and own, dangerous and safe we can realize that what could have been perceived for many years as lifelessness or decline of cultural separateness is, as a matter of fact, experiencing one's own ethnic identity in new conditions, in the situation of the break of the traditional universe and marginalization of the group.

Second, if the borderlines of separateness cannot be spatially marked because there is no traditional Lemko territory, we should search for single identity correlates. Religion is certainly one of them. This community manifests a strong attachment to cultivation of eastern rites (Uniate or Greek Catholic) which is here not only a religious act but also the ethnic identity. The language, just like religion, is a cultural determinant that is still alive in everyday speech. And finally, there is the common past still living memory of dramatic events that led to annihilation of the old center. Nowadays, in the new circumstances it takes a new symbolic meaning that identity is manifested both on the occasion of some specific events from social-cultural life of the group (meetings in Lemko territories, folk culture festivals or recent celebrations of millenium of Christening of Kiev Ruthenia) and on the level of everyday life of small local communities.

Third, together with institutionalized base of spiritual life of Lemks, that is with Uniate Church, family and group of the same age are still the second important center of cultural transmission. Taking into consideration the post-figurative character of the whole Lemko culture, it is just here in the surroundings of "one's own", under the control of grandparents and parents, where fundamental values can be realized. They are native speech, fathers' religion, common past, community of places. So there is nothing strange in the fact that majority of Lemks who are aware of their roots and cultural separateness attach a big importance to homogeneous marriages. Both in cities and villages people used to perceive mixed marriages as "necessary wrong". Endogenous preferences are most often related to the care about constancy of family, natural inclinations to known people (one's own), attachment to religious values and the will to preserve ethnic separateness and moral orders of parents or leaders of associations and clergymen.

Fourth, the phenomenon of double affiliation is a specific dimension of the existence of Lemks who live in displacement. Although generation differences imply, among succeeding generations of Lemks the type of habitual ties, the traditional space — Lemko territory still remains the area of symbolic meaning and undergoes positive valorization. It means that in spite of long period

of time since the dramatic events (at least 50 years passed) the dispersed people function as if in two spaces. In actually given, pointed by historical realities, which preserves in the respondents' awareness first of all useful and existential value, that is the assimilation of the space that is accepting it in some respects as one's own. It finally constitutes the element of normalization and the loss of the sense of temporary character. The old Lemko territories are the center of symbolic reference of an actor. For those who experienced different kinds of deprivations, survived exodus in their new place, the vision of mountains, the panorama of native land constitute the factor that compensates the sense of compulsion and collective wrongs and homeland. For younger people, born and brought up outside Lemko territory, the old one is a fragment of cultural heritage, the source of national self-determination, the sphere of localization of national values. As we can see on this example, the choice of heterogenous environment does not mean the loss of ties with spatial tradition yet.

Fifth, actually Lemks manifest a specific heterogeneity in respect to ethnic identity. And so, taking into consideration two criteria: religion and the sense of national attachment we can distinguish four categories of Lemko people:

- Greek Catholic Lemks who do not consider themselves Ukrainians,
- Uniate Lemks who do not consider themselves Ukrainians,
- Greek Catholic who consider themselves Ukrainians,
- Uniate Lemks who consider themselves Ukrainians.

In the present state of our studies we cannot state a relative numerical proportion of those groups. But it is a fact that the segments separated from each other in this way express relatively constant and real decentralizing tendencies within the community. Those groups usually keep a distance from each other. That distance manifests itself in the attitudes of ill will, avoiding contacts, derisive relations and in the shape of open depreciation of the values of the opponent group (for example Uniates and Greek Catholic). We can even speak about the situation of hidden conflict that shows itself on two levels: on the level of ideological picks and in the sphere of everyday life. The division into four categories also doubts current opinions on the subject of Lemks and Ukrainians at all. We mean here stereotype convictions that Greek Catholic religion, as a national religion, completely implies the attachment to Ukrainian nation ("who is a Greek Catholic is a Ukrainian"). For example, all the Lemko people from one of the investigated villages defined Lemks as Lemks — Greek Catholics who do not consider themselves Ukrainians.

Of course, we should remember that repulsion of that what is Ukrainian not always comes out of the awareness and historical conditioning. But if it is so, that still both the language and religion generate in this community a negative vision of a Ukrainian that separation from the Ukrainian that assumes the form of social structure, the sense of acceptance in Polish surroundings.

But nowadays, if the creation of an open society brings the right to a different character, the Lemks are not as much afraid of Polish majority or assimilation as of the internal split, the split between Orthodox and Roman Uniate Church, of the Ukrainian inclusion and stronger expansion of Lemko separatism.