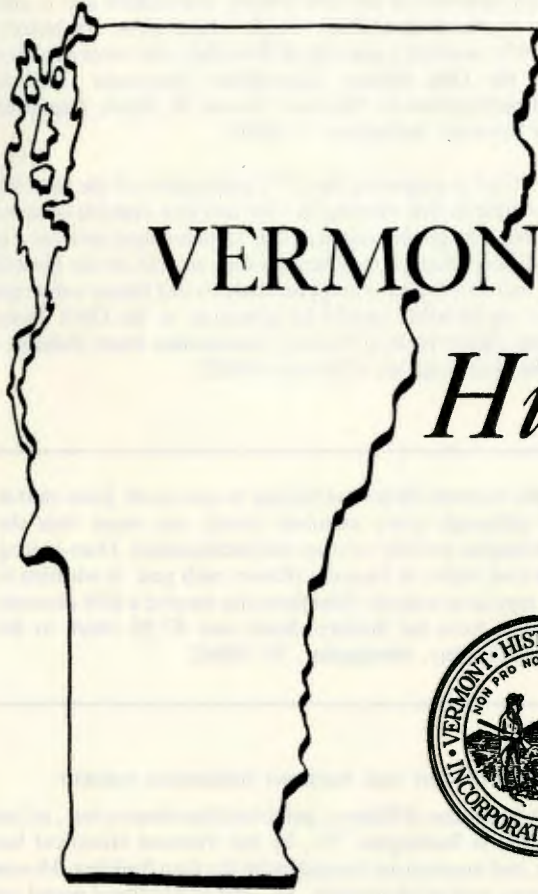


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A little known sect, now facing extinction. . . .

Immigrants from Eastern Europe: The Carpatho-Rusyn Community of Proctor, Vermont

By PAUL R. MAGOCSI

ONE SUNDAY MORNING in February, 1973, during a trip to Middlebury we pulled off the road in Proctor and stopped before a group of people to ask directions. A polite old gentleman stepped forward to show us the way. When he returned to his friends, we overheard them speaking a Slavic language. Attracted by their speech, we followed them into a nearby white clapboard building where the group was headed for religious services. Somewhat familiar with the colorful rituals of Eastern Europe, we expected to find an elaborate interior decorated with saintly images so typical of Slavic Orthodoxy. But to our surprise there were no icons, no crosses, not even an altar. Such puritanical steadfastness whetted our curiosity so that we took a seat in the back of the room.

In lieu of a priest, one person stood to face the rest of us and began to read the Bible. Soon the parishioners sang a few hymns. The Bible reading was resumed, then again the singing. It became evident that the language being read and sung was Russian, but the pronunciation was hardly that of the Great Russian people of Moscow or Leningrad. Just who were these people? We eagerly awaited the end of the two-hour service to talk to some members of the group.

Afterwards the gentleman who first gave us directions on the street came up smiling, "Not going to Middlebury?" I admitted that we still planned to go, but that the language of his group and this strange religious service truly intrigued us. Upon our request, the man introduced himself as Paul Lengyel and began to tell us about his sect.

Mr. Lengyel and the six or seven other worshippers that Sunday were the last of about twenty families who had immigrated to the United States in the years just preceding and following the First World War. They came from the southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, an area which until 1918 was part of the Hungarian Kingdom. Old Hungary was a multinational state where Slovaks, Croats, Germans, Rumanians and Carpatho-Rusyns or Ruthenians, as well as Magyars lived. Mr. Lengyel recalled that "we Rusyns were the poorest, so we came to America to find a better life."

Most other Rusyn immigrants settled in industrial and mining centers like New York, Cleveland, and especially Pittsburgh and Scranton, Pennsylvania. The Proctor group was attracted by employment possibilities with the Vermont Marble Company and thus found its way to New England. From the standpoint of geography, there was hardly any change from the "old country" — Vermont's Green Mountains and the Carpathians being very similar — but the economic, social, and religious transformations were to be great.

If poverty was one important characteristic of Carpatho-Rusyn life in Europe, religious fervor was the other. These people were originally members of the Greek Catholic or Uniate Church, an institution jurisdictionally governed by Rome but which maintained the Slavonic liturgy, Julian Calendar and other traditional customs associated with the eastern Orthodox Church. It was also normal for Rusyns to pay a significant portion of their income to the Church, and not infrequently local priests abused this privileged position.

"But Mr. Lengyel," I queried, "why don't you have a Greek Catholic Church here in Proctor?" "We did," he answered, "but we had many disputes with the priest and soon decided that it would be better to have our own organization." I hesitatingly asked about the nature of these disputes. Mr. Lengyel was quite eager to explain. "In Europe we were lucky to go a year or two to school, though if you were clever even that was enough to learn Hungarian and our own Carpatho-Rusyn language. In America," he continued, "I earned sufficient money to buy a book, and my first one was the Bible. Since our families were still in the 'old country' and the duration of the First World War made it impossible for them to come here, we spent the long winter evenings reading the Bible and discussing its contents. We saw how our Greek Catholic Church, with its saints and other traditions, differed greatly from God's word and so asked our priest about this. He was evasive and suggested that we pray to him and not read 'our religious book.' It was clear to us already that there were profound inconsistencies between our Church and the Christianity as outlined in the Bible; it was only a matter of time before the break would take place."

The break actually came in 1917 when the distraught local priest thought he could head off opposition by locking the Church library where the "dangerous" publications were located. The parishioners responded by boycotting mass and within a few months the priest left town. As was typical with many other Rusyn Greek Catholic parishes in this country, the Proctor congregation invited an Orthodox priest as a replacement, but he, too, felt threatened by his intellectually probing flock and got out. In essence, this began the decline of Greek Catholicism and Orthodoxy in Proctor, but not of Carpatho-Rusyn religious activity.

Mr. Lengyel and eight of his friends — Michael Livak, Frank Burch, Charles Skuda, George and Paul Kotubei, Daniel, Andrew and George Kapitan — decided to organize themselves independently. In a house on Newton Street, these fervent leaders held Sunday bible-reading meetings, while in an adjacent garage they began to publish a monthly, *Prorocheskoe Svetlo* (*The Prophetic Light*). This journal, written in Carpathian dialect and Russian, was the only Cyrillic language periodical ever published in Vermont. (The New York Public Library holds a complete set of the journal since its first issue in 1920.) The Proctor group also published several religiously polemic pamphlets and a multi-volume study which proclaimed the falsities and hypocrisy of religious practices in the homeland. This last work was unfortunately lost (or destroyed) when it was sent with some fellow proselytizers who returned to Europe. From the beginning, there existed a missionary urge "to spread the word" so that small communities were established not only in the Proctor and Rutland area but as far away as Rahway and Passaic, New Jersey, and Naugatuck, Connecticut.

Ideologically, the Carpatho-Rusyns were strongly influenced by Dr. Charles Lee, an evangelist who lectured often to Proctor's Swedish community during the early 1920's. Accepting the fundamentalist principles of Lee, the Carpatho-Rusyns tried to follow the Bible to the letter. They rejected their own colorful and in many cases aesthetically uplifting traditions, and refused to recognize any ecclesiastical authority. Rather, they tried to imitate Christian societies of the first century; man should read the Bible and through Jesus communicate directly with God. Priests, monks, churches, saints and all the other paraphernalia were considered superfluous. In modern terms, they were interested in content, not form.

Some of their practices might be considered extreme. They adopted the dietary laws of the Old Testament and gave up — despite Jesus's later dispensation — shell fish and all forms of pork. The latter was a blow to their wives since pork was always the customary food at festive occasions. But this seemed no longer necessary since festivities, even in the relatively innocent form of dancing and movies, were frowned upon as being

potentially, if not actually, evil. A more serious limitation on their personal habits was the self-imposed restriction on alcohol and tobacco. Both were scorned as destructive to man. Was this a puritanical urge common to religious reformers or was it a convenient means to rationalize and help survive the depression of the 1930's?

In fact, the Carpatho-Rusyns were not preoccupied with the concept of sin to the degree that American Puritans were. Rather, God gave man life and health; the least one could do was take care of the gift. Moreover, under the influence of drink (alcoholism was a serious problem among Rusyns and other immigrant communities), an individual might commit a harmful act that could be avoided in sober moments. Thus, preservation, not masochistic self-discipline was their goal.

Members of this sect had a particular aversion to ecclesiastical hierarchies. They detested the priest's role as interlocutor between God and man. Special wrath was reserved for Roman Catholics who with their richly adorned churches, bingo games and other social functions were, in the eyes of the Carpatho-Rusyns, violating the basic precepts of the Bible.

"We had some difficulty," recalled Mr. Lengyel, "when it came to the American legal system." In 1922, the Vermont Marble Company gave the sect a plot of land to hold as long as the group continued to exist. They built a church and claimed tax exemptions, but the government had to have a name and some representative body to deal with. "If we chose a name then we might be associated with an earthly organization and not with God. But the officials needed a name, so we came to be called the Independent Christian Church; they also had to have some governing board, so we reluctantly were forced to appoint five of our members." For lack of membership, that body has recently been reduced to three.

If the Proctor group was anti-Catholic, it was at the same time strongly pro-American — two ideologies which have complemented each other at various points in the history of the United States. The Carpatho-Rusyns remained deeply grateful for the opportunity to live in the New World. The original nine founders of the sect all worked in the Vermont Marble Company's plants in Proctor and Center Rutland, where they were engaged as drillers, polishers, lathe operators and copers. Their appreciation for the better life they found in this country was poignantly remembered the day we were at their religious meeting. From their hymnbook, they proudly sang *po-anglitsky* (in English) "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

Unlike other Rusyn-Americans, those in Proctor did not become involved in political or national controversies. For instance, in 1918 their brethren in the Pittsburgh area were instrumental in having the "old country" (Subcarpathian Ruthenia) incorporated into the new Czechoslovak Republic.

Vermont's Carpathian people, however, remained isolated from these developments, as well as from the national controversies in which Rusyn-Americans were struggling to decide whether they were Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak or an independent nationality. If asked, the Proctor Rusyn would respond that he was from Hungary or Czechoslovakia and of Russian or "Slavish" nationality. Actually, all were natives of the old Hungarian county of Bereg, a territory which had a variegated political history in the twentieth century. It became part of Czechoslovakia in 1919, was returned to Hungary in 1939, and was finally incorporated into the Soviet Union (as the Transcarpathian province of the Ukrainian SSR) in 1945. Indeed, their spoken language is a dialect of Ukrainian, though in Proctor they published texts in a mixture of local dialect and Great Russian. To satisfy all linguistic tastes (and abilities), the small table we saw in their meeting hall included items written in Russian, Ukrainian, Slovak and English.

The Carpatho-Rusyn community in Proctor has managed to survive until today, but it is only a matter of time before it will be extinct. "The old people are dying off," lamented Mr. Lengyel, "and the children have moved away." This, of course, is a partial explanation. More important is the fact that fundamentalist beliefs in the Bible could neither attract the younger people nor compete with the psychologically overwhelming forces of American society. In the dispersed communities where they now live, most have been assimilated into local Protestant churches. Vermont's Carpatho-Rusyns never had the strength of other traditionalist societies like the Amish in Pennsylvania; and tucked away in the Green Mountains they lost effective contact with their national co-religionists in the New York metropolitan area. Furthermore, they avoided nationality concerns and deliberately gave up their most distinctive cultural trait — the Greek Catholic Church. As a result, the second and third generations had no particular heritage to identify with and have either forgotten, never known, or been ashamed of the origins of their parents.

But a few retired widows and widowers live on. They continue to attend their Sunday meetings and speak their native, though heavily Americanized, Carpatho-Rusyn language. Vermont gave the Carpathian immigrants an opportunity to advance economically, and in their free moments they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to spiritual matters. Their little-known experiment deserves to be remembered as both a credit to their own ingenuity and as yet another example of cultural diversity in the United States.