

we and they

The conflict about heritage in small towns in Podlachia (Poland)

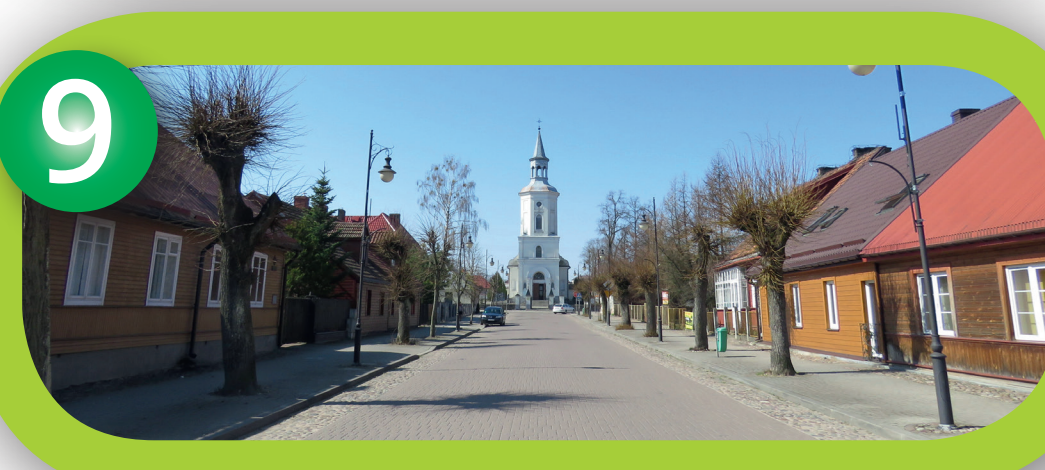
Podlachia in north-east Poland has a considerable number of small towns, which had a great importance in the past, but with the passage of time, their role decreased due to political and economic changes. Until the Second World War, they had cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, with residents of Polish, Russian, Belarussian, German, Jewish and Tatar origin. After the war, some of them were gone, but their heritage was preserved. One of them is Supraśl, a small town near Białystok, capitol of the Podlachia region, north-eastern Poland. The best known monument of the town is the Supraśl Lavra (The Monastery of the Annunciation), one of six Eastern Orthodox monasteries for men in Poland. Since September 2007 it is on Unesco's Memory of the World list. It was founded in the 16th century by Aleksander Chodkiewicz, Marshall of the Great Duchy of Lithuania. In 1516, the Church of the Annunciation was consecrated. Some years later the monastery was expanded with the addition of the second church dedicated to the Resurrection of Our Lord, which housed the monastery catacombs. Over time, the Supraśl Lavra became an important site of Orthodox culture.

In 1609, the Monastery accepted the Union of Brest in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Basilian Order (Unitas) took over its administration. In 1796, Prussian authorities confiscated the holdings of the monastery after the third Partition of Poland. Nevertheless, it continued to play an important role in the religious life of the region as the seat of a newly created eparchy for those devout Ruthenians under Prussian rule, starting in 1797 and lasting until it fell under Russian rule after the Treaties of Tilsit in 1807.

In 1824, the Russians gave the monastery complex to the Orthodox Church. In 1915, during the World War I, the monks fled from the monastery for the interior of Russia (Bieżeństwo), taking with them the miraculous icon of Our Lady of Supraśl, missing to this day.

In the period between the two world wars, the monastery was used by the Latin Rite Salesian Order. In 1944, the retreating German army destroyed the Church of the Annunciation, along with all of its precious frescoes. After the World War II the Communists turned the monastery into an agricultural academy. Thereafter, matter came up, who should be their owner – Catholics (due to the Unitas) or Orthodox. The media described it all over Poland. Finally, the Orthodox Church became the legal owner of the Supraśl Lavra (since the 1980s) and catacombs (in 2005).

In Supraśl, there are many monuments which, as the consequences of the World War II changed their owners, among other: former evangelical church and cemetery, now used by Catholics, the palace of Buchholtz's family used by Art. School and other sites. For today's inhabitants, whose developed them for their own use, their history is not a problem. While for the Supraśl Lavra and changes of its owners in the past (Orthodox, Uniates, Catholics) are still the hot-button issue for the conflict about the heritage between Catholics and Orthodox people of Supraśl town.



One can find similar problem in many Podlachia's small towns which had the heritage of the Uniates times. In their everyday life, people work together and live next to each other, creating the image of the idyllic small towns, visited by the tourists. However, in the background the question about the property of the cultural heritage is still present. "The fight for crosses" reborn every once in a while, caused by administratives procedures, unexpected discoveries (the Uniates cemeteries) or renovating works. It seems, more and more inhabitants are tired this situation, but the conflict's leaders still are able to involved many of them.

Local newspapers' expresions

"I feel the heir of the monks who are buried here. No representative of the Roman Catholic Church is here. What gives the the right to do that?"
[they put the Catholic cross – author's footnote]

"Supraśl catacombs divide again. The average Catholic from Supraśl, for the first time asks his neighbours for confession

"Yes, that's the answer for Catholic's symbol of the cross. We build the bigger one, because we don't want any others misconceptions

- 1: Church of the Annunciation (1503-1511, destroyed 1944, rebuild since 1985) in the Supraśl Lavra, hier view in 1907
- 2: The Monastery of the Annunciation during World War I, 1915, in the forefront: the camp of German Army soldiers
- 3: Church of the Annunciation in 1915. The photo was taken by the German soldier
- 4: View of the monastery with rebuilt church, monastery buildings and the main gate, 2018
- 5: View of the monastery from the city side. In the right, bottom corner of the photo, under green roof there are the catacombs of the monks. Property of that object remains controversial in the community in Supraśl
- 6: Former evangelical graveyard with burial chapel of Buchholtz's family (1904). At present, the cemetery and the chapel is used by the catholic community.
- 7: Two cemeteries on the both sides of the road symbolize complicate history of the town. In the background: former evangelical cemetery with the grave chapel, in the forefront – former uniates graveyard, later used by Orthodox and Catholics, also with grave chapel. Nowadays, both cemeteries are used by Catholic Commune.
- 8: The eclectic palace of Buchholtz's family, evangelical inhabitants of Supraśl. Since 1959 is home of the Art School.
- 9: The weavers' houses dated on the half of the XIX century, build by Fryderyk Zachert for workers of the textile fabrics in Supraśl.
- 10: Two churches down the street. On the foreground, the catholic church of Holy Trinity, on the background – former evangelic church, now used by the Catholics.

