

The Polish Minority in Bukovina – the Ukrainian-Romanian Frontier

Europe in Miniature



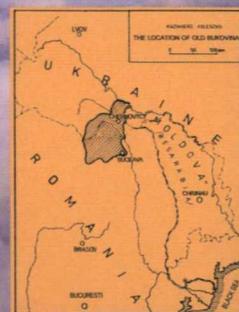
Prof. Rzetelska-Feleszko studies the dialectology, onomastics, and history of the Polish language

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From the mid-18th century until 1945, the Carpathian land of Bukovina was the home of a richly diverse multinational community. Research on the region's Polish minority language and culture is helping reveal the secret behind the peaceful and happy homeland it once was

Bukovina is a Carpathian region situated along the southern border of Ukraine and the northern border of Romania, with its capital in Chernovtsy (Ukr. Chernivtsi). Historically this region was long a part of Moldavia, which came under Turkish rule in the 16th century. In 1774 Bukovina was incorporated into the Hapsburg monarchy, Austria-Hungary. Moldavia, and particularly its northern portion, remained under Polish influence through bonds of kinship, estates, family ties, etc. The name "Bukovina" was first registered as denoting this portion of Galicia in 1775; in the mid-19th century the

Bukovina is a land of extraordinary beauty situated in the Carpathian region along the southern border of Ukraine and the northern border of Romania



Andrzej Polec, www.shteti.info

area became an autonomous administrative unit within the Hapsburg monarchy.

“Family of Nations”

The Austrian state pursued a policy of encouraging the settlement of more sparsely-populated areas by ensuring favorable conditions for new settlers, as a result of which Polish and German settlers began pouring in to Bukovina. These newcomers mostly included members of the Polish rural population from Galicia, chiefly subsisting from farming; some of them were highlanders of Polish origin who migrated to this submontane area from the Čadca region in Slovakia. Individuals of a higher social status likewise began to arrive, such as craftsmen, teachers, priests and civil servants.

Statistics for the Bukovina population show nearly 800,000 people living there in the mid-19th-century, including: 38% Ukrainians, 33% Romanians, 13% Jews, 8% Germans, 4.5% Poles and a number of other smaller minorities.

Bukovina’s economy was largely agrarian, with some three-quarters of the population engaging in farming, some in forestry and shepherding. The most influential group in Austrian-Hungarian times were the Germans, working in administration, the armed forces, education, culture, etc. German-speaking Jews gained considerable prestige as well, and apart from them also the Poles, who held a number of important positions. The Polish rural population inhabited 193 villages, making up separate settlements or parts of them, with the wider rural community being dominated by the Ukrainian and Romanian populations.

Yet all this, including the proportion of nationalities and their social hierarchy, changed when Bukovina became part of the Kingdom of Romania after World War I.

A large number of historical accounts, sources and scholars’ opinions attest that in Austrian times, spanning nearly 150 years, Bukovina with its rather lenient form of government was a land of peaceful coexistence among all its nations and ethnic groups. This period laid the foundation for the myth of Bukovina as a happy, peaceful, liberal homeland, where everybody lived at peace with one another in universal tolerance.

The Polish researcher Kazimierz Feleszko has called Bukovina a “Europe in miniature,”



Photo: Janowski / Agencja Gazeta

the “Switzerland of the East,” and a “Family of Nations,” thus emphasizing the positive traits of the Bukovinian model of coexistence, its stability, and the mutual respect and understanding of its different communities. Under this coexistence of various cultures and languages, free from the official imposition of one as clearly dominant, each national or ethnic community organized its own education, associations and enjoyed religious freedom. This was conducive to the natural formation of mixed communities of language communication, the mutual adoption of certain cultural features and the borrowing of vocabulary from different languages.

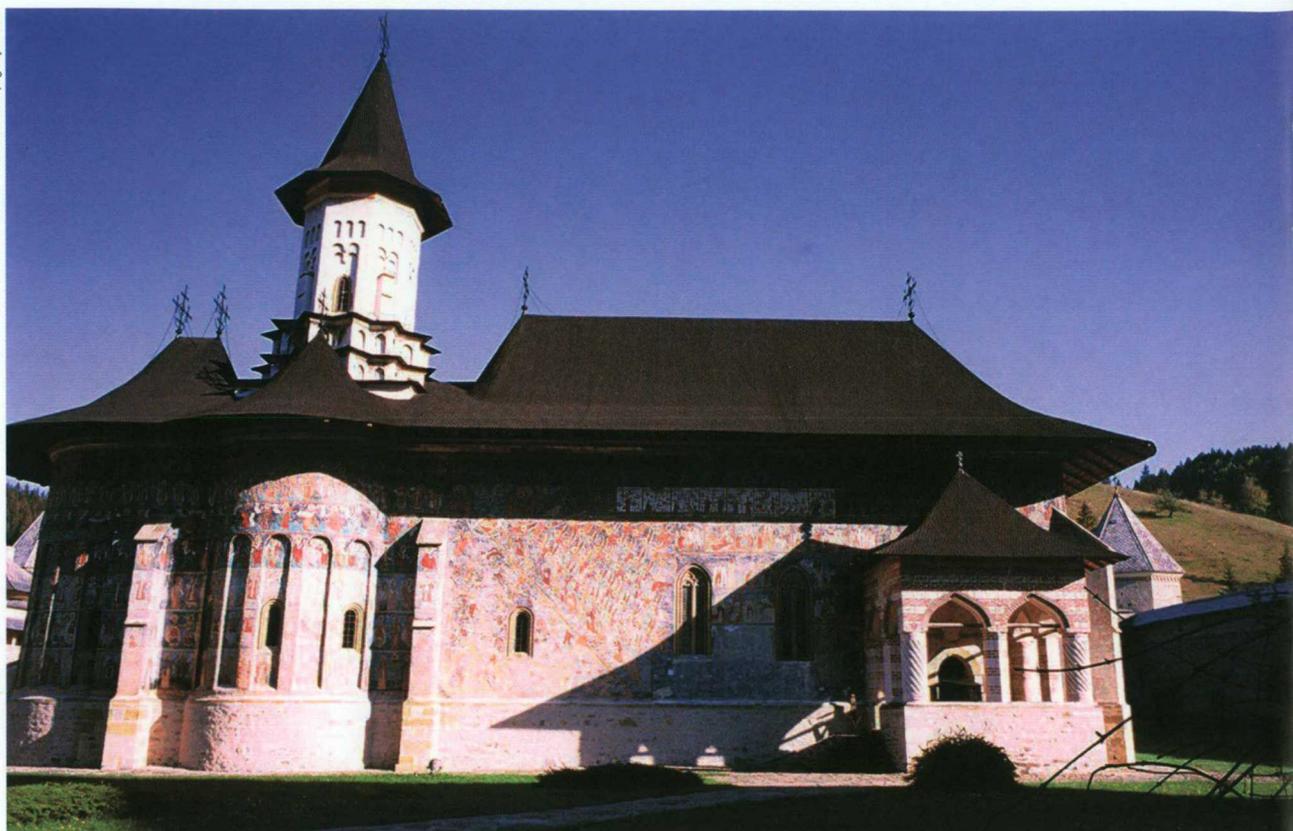
Linguistic code-switching

Poles who came and settled in Bukovina established their villages or set up separate clusters within Ukrainian or Romanian villages. The proportion of Poles in individual villages varied; as a rule around 20-50 families settled in one place. In the capital Chernovtsy, Poles occupied certain streets and districts. Poles’ national and cultural identity was fostered by the Church and school cultural associations (the *Dom Polski* Polish center and a Polish Choir). The Poles were Catholics, whereas the Ukrainians and the Romanians (i.e. the rural majority) were mostly Orthodox Christians. The most fundamental symbol of ties to Poland was the Polish language, brought in from the Polish homeland. Gradually, through the activities of the Church and the schools, the Silesian and Małopolska (Little Poland) dialects originally spoken in Bukovina began to adopt the

Bukovina’s economy still remains agricultural with a large proportion of the population engaged in farming

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Piotr Janowski / Agencja Gazeta



While the Orthodox church is now dominant in Bukovina, Catholics and Orthodox Christians still traditionally celebrate Easter and Christmas together in some villages

features of eastern frontier Polish, particularly of its south-eastern zone.

Apart from the ideological and linguistic identification of the Polish community with the Polish homeland, their neighboring coexistence with other ethnic groups led to a mutual adaptation of customs and various lexical borrowings. Again, it is fitting to refer to work by Kazimierz Feleszko, who determined that a lot of common vocabulary, which might be called *language parallels*, arose in the languages spoken here: Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian and German. Such vocabulary was used by the entire mixed community, irregardless of what a particular word's etymology might be, cf. the Polish *ah!*, Ukrainian *ah!*, Romanian *ah!*, German *ah!* - an exclamation of indignation, anger or surprise. There are plenty of such words which are very similar across the different languages of Bukovina. The local name of the mythical Carpathian woman who can summon a blizzard is in Polish *baba Jodocha*, in Ukrainian *baba Evdokha*, and in Romanian *Dochea*. Sideburns in Polish are *bakenbarty*, in Ukrainian *bakenbardy* and in German *Backenbart*. The Polish verb *hajcować* - to stoke, to heat - is in Ukrainian *haytsuvati*,

in Rom. *haițui*, and in German *Heizen*. Home-made alcohol is *cujka* in Polish, *tsujka* in Ukrainian, and *țuica* in Romanian.

Another portion of the common Romanian-Ukrainian-Polish lexicon consists of "Carpathianisms," i.e. jointly-developed Carpathian vocabulary relating to shepherding and topographic terminology - words of not only Vlach origin, but also from remote Balkan countries. From the submontane areas, this vocabulary also spread onto the lowlands.

Poles who subsequently resettled from Bukovina and are now living in Poland claim that it was a sign of politeness and respect for one's neighbor to start a conversation in his or her own language. Such customs were conducive to frequent "code-switching" (i.e. switching from one language to another). As a result, Bukovinian Poles were able to speak all four major languages of this region, i.e. Ukrainian, Romanian and German, in addition to Polish and not infrequently Yiddish as well. The mutual borrowing of words, phrases and entire expressions was a natural and spontaneous process within the larger cultural community of this region. Obviously,

in Austrian times more German vocabulary was borrowed (particularly as regards official matters), but once Bukovina became part of Romania (after 1918), the Romanian portion saw increased borrowings of Romanian words. Presently, since 1945, with Bukovina being divided into a northern part belonging to Ukraine and a southern part belonging to Romania, the Polish spoken in the northern part is dominated by Ukrainian borrowings, in the southern part by Romanian ones.

The coexistence of various religious denominations, folk traditions and customs fostered mutual influence and cultural interference. Thus, for instance, Catholics and Orthodox Christians celebrated Easter and Christmas together, twice according to the two different calendars. The Catholics embraced Orthodox funeral rites involving the so-called *pomana*, i.e. a ritual snack offered at the grave for the soul of the deceased, participated in the Ukrainian custom of *Malanka*, i.e. a dressed-up group of waits or neighbors going door to door on New Year's Eve, and took part in joint labor tasks, called *klaka* (old Pol. *łoka*).

The Polish Diaspora

Following World War I, many Bukovinian Poles, mainly members of the intelligentsia and inhabitants of Chernovtsy, left for Poland, which regained its independent existence in 1918. The Polish community in Bukovina was thus waned. A Romanian census before World War II revealed only 30,500 Poles living in Bukovina.

After World War II, a large segment of the Polish population (20,000) was repatriated to Poland, with some having been exiled to Siberia. Currently the Polish minority in both parts of Bukovina consists of slightly over 6,000 individuals.

The political changes touched off by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukrainian independence and the general liberalization, contributed to an explosion of grass-roots initiatives on the part of Bukovinian Poles. The Adam Mickiewicz Polish Cultural Society was established in Chernovtsy and has revived Polish schools, libraries, and folk groups.

The role of folklore events – the “Bukovina Festival” – in fostering the integration of Bukovinian Poles with Poles living in Poland can hardly be overestimated. Since 1991 these festivals have been accompanied by four international scientific conferences organized by K. Feleszko, presenting Bukovina-related research. Involvement by scholars from many different countries has been conducive to spreading a more profound awareness of Bukovina in former and contemporary times, and has led to the publication of four volumes. ■

Further reading:

- Feleszko, K. (2002). *Bukovina, My Love* (in Polish). Vol. 1. *The Polish Language in Bukovina Prior to 1945*. Warszawa: Sławistyczny Ośrodek Wydawniczy.
Krasowska H., (2002). *Bukovina. Little Homeland – Piętro- wce Dolne* (in Polish). Pruszków: Rachocki i Ska.

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After World War II many Bukovinian Poles was repatriated to Poland but many traces of Polish presence still exist here