Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay

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Abstract: Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay was insignificant until the mid-1930s, when immigrants from the Second Republic of Poland began to arrive in considerable numbers. Most of the newcomers were Orthodox from Volhynia, but there emerged in Paraguay a strong Protestant movement among the settlers. A minority were Greek Catholics from Galicia. Most settled in the province of Itapuá across the Paraná River from Misiones, Argentina, where Ukrainians had settled before 1914. This paper examines the religious, economic, social and historical geography of Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay and compares it with Ukrainian settlement elsewhere in the Diaspora. It also considers the evolution of the cultural landscape of Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay.

Introduction

Between 1880 and 1914 hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians from the eastern provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire emigrated to western Canada and the eastern seaboard of the United States. In the same period tens of thousands more settled in southern Brazil and northern Argentina, and a few drifted across the Argentinean border to locate in south eastern Paraguay, founding a small community of Ukrainians in South America’s most bilingual (Guarani – Spanish) country. This small community of Ukrainians in Paraguay is a little known element of the Ukrainian Diaspora, yet it is one that displays some significant contrasts with other elements of the Ukrainian pioneer Diaspora in Brazil, Argentina, and Canada. The intention here is to offer a brief description of Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay in order to permit some comparisons with the better-documented and more widely known Ukrainian settlements in Brazil (Boruszenko 1971; Lehr and Morski 1999; Morski 2000) and Canada (Kaye 1964; Lehr, 1985, 1991; Luciuk and Hryniuk 1991; Martynovych 1991).
The Beginnings

Mass migration out of western Ukraine began in the 1880s in response to a depressing social and economic situation. Farms in the two provinces then controlled by Austria – Hungary were mostly small, highly fragmented, and inefficient. The system of inheritance whereby land was divided between all the children worsened this situation with the passing of each generation (Himka 1988; Hryniuk 1991). Seasonal migration to the estates of Prussia developed into migration to the factories and mines of the United States’ eastern seaboard by the mid 1880s. Ukrainian agricultural settlement in Brazil began in 1891, to western Canada in 1892, and to Argentina in the early years of the last century. Before the outbreak of the First World War, Canada received over 170,000 Ukrainian immigrants, Brazil absorbed between 40,000 and 45,000 while several thousand settled in Argentina (Boruszenko 1971; Martynovych 1991; Lehr and Morski, 1999). In contrast, Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay was inconsequential before 1914, but during the inter-war period Ukrainians became a part of the mosaic of ethnic settlement there.

Whereas Ukrainian settlement in western Canada has been the subject of a wide range of analysis ranging from historical (Martynovych 1991) and sociological (Swyripa 1993) to geographical (Darlington 1991, Lehr 1991), the geographical literature in English dealing with ethnic settlement in the southern cone countries of Latin America - Brazil, Bolivia, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile and Argentina - is surprisingly limited. Boruszenko (1971), for example, provides a brief overview of Ukrainian settlement in Brazil, and Lehr, Hryniuk and Pickniki (1998), Lehr and Morski (1999) and Morski (2000) provide some further information and interpretation but most scholarly works are purely historical in their approach and accessible only in Ukrainian or Portuguese. Information about Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay is even less abundant (Cipko and Lehr 2005). Ukrainians are only one of several ethnic groups that settled in Paraguay during the period of frontier settlement from the late 1890s until 1950. The literature concerning settlement of Mennonites and ethnic Germans in Paraguay is quite extensive (Fretz 1953; Kaspar 1980) but material in English that considers the settlement of other groups such as the Ukrainians, Italians and Japanese is still very limited. In part this can be attributed to the difficulty of conducting field research in relatively remote regions, but a greater barrier for Anglophone scholars is the obvious need to have a command of Spanish or Portuguese as the languages of the host cultures as well as the language of the immigrant group being studied.

Ukrainian settlement in Paraguay began in 1910, when Omelian Illia Paduchak, born in 1885 in Rohatyn County, Galicia, entered the country.
He worked first as a labourer laying tramway rails, then purchased a homestead, in which cattle ranching and lumbering were the primary economic activities. In 1923 he married and later settled in Asunción where he later played an important role in the organizational life of the Ukrainian community (*Ukrainske slovo* 1961).

The Ukrainian community in Paraguay had its real beginnings in the 1920s when a number of Ukrainian families who had settled in Argentina re-migrated to Paraguay. Ivan and Iadokha Surkan, originally from the county of Tovmach, Galicia, left Misiones, Argentina in 1922 with their three children, crossed illegally into Paraguay and settled in Urú Sapucai, in the department of Itapúa (Semeniuk, 1999). In May 1925, another four Ukrainian families re-migrated from Argentina: all came from the village of Bludiv, in Volhynia (*Ukrainske slovo* 1971). Still more immigrants crossed from Argentina in 1925-26, The Prendeski family, for example, from the colony of Nueva Ucrania (New Ukraine) came to Paraguay from Argentina in 1926 along with the Datsiuk and Shomansky families, and settled close to Capitán Miranda in what was then all forested area. The Prendeskis, who came from Demydivka in Volhynia, had been told in Buenos Aires that there was no work in Argentina and to instead try their luck in Paraguay (Prendeski 1999). These first immigrants from Volhynia constituted the core of the future colony of Nueva Volyn, or New Volhynia (*Ukrainske slovo* 1971).

**Consolidation**

Most Ukrainians who settled in Paraguay immigrated in the second half of the 1930s and came directly from Europe. According to Polish statistics, which distinguish by the faith of the emigrants, but not by their nationality, 8,800 Orthodox and 900 Greek Catholics (all of whom were almost certainly Ukrainian) left Poland for Paraguay in the period 1927–38 (*Mały rocznik statystyczny* 1939, 53). One study has estimated that altogether approximately twelve thousand immigrants from Poland came to Paraguay in 1927–38, of which 90 percent were Ukrainian (Klarner-Kosinska 2000, 54). These figures suggest that the majority of the Ukrainian immigrants came to Paraguay from the Orthodox regions of Volhynia and Polisia in Poland, and that this group outnumbered their Greek Catholic compatriots from Galicia in the South American republic by about nine to one. This statistic is an unusual one, for rarely does one find cases of an overwhelming majority of Orthodox among Ukrainian immigrants in the New World Diaspora before 1947. Few Ukrainians came from Czechoslovakia (Subcarpathian Rus’) or from Romania (Bukovyna and
Bessarabia) (Anuarul Statistic al României). Even after the end of WW II Paraguay did not attract many Ukrainians, probably less than 200, who were looking for a new start in the Americas (Stebelsky 1992).

Many Ukrainians who had settled in Paraguay or who were born there later crossed the border into Argentina, sometimes illegally, so that by 1994 the Ukrainian community in Paraguay has shrunk to an estimated five to eight thousand people (Rubinec and Pawliczko 1994, 455). When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Paraguay failed to attract immigrants from Ukraine. As a relatively undeveloped country, its economy failed to lure those who were seeking economic opportunity in the West and its Ukrainian population was too small to trigger chain migration of relatives from the old country.

Settlement

In Paraguay, Ukrainians settled almost exclusively in the department of Itapúa, which lies on the border with Argentina, close to the town of Encarnación, which is separated from the neighbouring province of Misiones by the Paraná River (Fig. 1). The Ukrainians gave the colonies in which they settled such names as Nova Volyn, Nova Ukraina, Bohdanivka, and Tarasivka, but local laws stipulated against the use of foreign place-names, even transferred toponyms, so settlements were later renamed (Rubinec and Pawliczko 1994). A colony called Nueva Ucrania, however, still exists today, only a few kilometres from present-day Capitán Miranda.

Nueva Volyn was one of the first Ukrainian colonies, founded by largely Orthodox newcomers. It is not clear when the colony was so named, but in 1930 a colonist writing from a place called Boca Picada, “not far from Encarnación,” spoke about the desire of settlers to change the name to Nueva Volhynia. He also noted that the settlers had “built nice houses” with well-kept orchards. An Orthodox priest, Reverend Tykhon Hnatiuk, gave “spiritual guidance,” had “raised [the] educational level,” and had encouraged the settlers to found a Prosvita society2 (Ukrainske slovo 1930). By 1933 a colony bearing the name Nueva Volyn was described as

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1 Fifty-six Russians also immigrated to Paraguay in 1937 and another fifty-nine arrived in 1938.

2 The Prosvita Society is a Ukrainian self-help society that promotes literacy and the maintenance of Ukrainian culture and identity. Prosvita Societies were widespread in western Ukraine before 1914 and were also established by Ukrainian migrants when they settled in Canada, Brazil, Argentina and the United States.
neater in appearance than others in the district founded more than a decade earlier. Their economic standard was reportedly no worse than that of other colonists in the area, and they embraced co-operative labour and mutual help. Alcoholism and crime were claimed to be unknown (Hnatiuk 1933). By 1935 sixty families were living in Nueva Volyn, some sixteen kilometres from Encarnación, residing “happily in little houses of the Malo-
Russian [Ukrainian] type.” About half the settlers there had bought lots paying from 50 to 60 pesos per hectare, with a 20 per cent cash deposit and the balance on easy terms. The other half leased the land, while a few had been able to buy small holdings of 15 to 20 acres, with a farm house for 1200 to 1800 Argentine pesos (Burr 1935).

With experience, a settler family was able to clear five to six acres of virgin forest a year. Trees would be felled in the summer, allowed to dry, then burned. Once cleared, the ground would be fenced, and then the process of cultivation would begin. The principal crops were corn, manioc, potatoes, oranges, bananas, and rice. Tobacco and cotton, the latter called “white gold” in promotional literature, were the staple cash crops (Ryl’nyky! nd.). Spring wheat was introduced in the mid 1930s. Poultry and domestic animals were kept for family consumption (Burr, 1935).

**Religion**

Rev. Hnatiuk, who had come to Argentina in 1908 to serve Ukrainian Orthodox settlers in the adjacent Argentinean province of Misiones, visited Ukrainian settlers in Paraguay from approximately 1925 onwards (Lavrychenko 1988, 156). After his death in 1943, a period of uncertainty ensued, until Rev. Horlenko, a postwar refugee, came to Paraguay by way of the Philippines. In 1999, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in Paraguay had seven parishes: one each in Encarnación, Capitán Miranda, Alborada, Colonia Fram, Santo Domingo, Uru Sapucay, and Natalio. Migrants from Fram, who moved to the district in around 1970 after buying land there, founded this last parish in the mid-1990s. A new church was built in Fram in 1988 to mark the Millennium of Christianity in Ukraine (988), and consecrated as the “Sv. Bohoiavlennia” (the Epiphany of the Lord) (Fig. 2) (Semeniuk, A. 1999; Semeniuk, N. 1999).

Ukrainian Catholic settlers used “the spiritual guidance of Basilian fathers from Argentina” until 1948, when the first permanent Ukrainian Catholic priest, the Rev. Ivan Bugera, arrived (Kryvinsky 1969, 125-26). Rev. J. Risinger, a German priest fluent in Ukrainian, has recently served the six Ukrainian Catholic parishes in Paraguay (Rubinec and Pawliczko 1994; Zub Kurylowicz 2002).

Ukrainian settlers also have belonged to other denominations; for example, either faction of the Russian Orthodox Church. Before the close of the 1930s, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia in Argentina, Archpriest Konstantin Izrastsov, founded parishes in Encarnación and Asunción (Izrastzoff 1968). Ausencio Semeniuk, a Ukrainian immigrant from Volhynia who came to Paraguay in 1937 and
settled in the Fram district, when interviewed in 1999 recalled that a Russian émigré priest, Rev. Kliarovsky, would come to the colony to celebrate the Divine Liturgy in Old Slavonic at the end of the 1930s, but that also a Rev. Semeniuk—no relation—would visit as a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church Moscow-Patriarchate (Semeniuk, A. 1999). Currently, there is a single Russian Orthodox church in the department of Itapúa, the St. Nicholas Church in Encarnación (Zub Kurylowicz 2002).

Protestants were among the immigrants of the 1930s, and a Baptist influence became increasingly more pronounced as time progressed. At first Ukrainians, who constituted the majority of the Slavs in Paraguay, joined a Pan-Slavic Baptist association, which in 1947 became known as the Association of Slavic Christian Evangelical and Baptist Churches, but in the 1950s a split occurred, mirroring one in Argentina, which resulted in Ukrainophiles forming their own Union of Ukrainian Baptist and Evangelical Christians in Paraguay. It currently has churches in Encarnación, Fram, and Nueva Ucrania (Fig. 3) (Zub Kurylowicz 2002).

Society and Culture

That the Ukrainian community in Paraguay has maintained its unique identity is remarkable given that it never possessed the cultural homogeneity of many other ethnic groups that settled there. The Mennonites in the Chaco, for example, who have maintained a very strong cultural identity, were isolated from mainstream Paraguayan society both by their inaccessible and remote location as well as by their religious unity (Goodman 2003). Unlike Mennonite settlements, Ukrainian settlements were closer to larger urban settlements such as Encarnación and the town

Figure 2: Sv. Bohoiavlennia Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Fram, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr, 1999).
of Posadas across the Paraná River in Argentina. They were not protected from ‘alien’ influences by allegiance to an ‘ethnic’ church that held hegemony within the settlement area. In Paraguay however, Ukrainians were not subjected to legislation designed to suppress their language and culture, as were Ukrainian communities in Brazil from 1930 to 1945 during the time of the repressive Vargas regime (Lehr and Morski 1999). Their retention of their unique cultural identity was nevertheless remarkable given the small size of the Ukrainian community in Paraguay and the absence of religious hegemony by one of the Ukrainian national churches.

Contrasting the evolution of the Ukrainian settlements in Paraguay with that of Ukrainian settlements in western Canada, where the community was plagued by religious factionalism for decades, also offers insights into the role of religion and homeland relationships in determining social stability and cultural identity within newly-founded ethnic settlements. In western Canada, from the onset of mass-immigration of Ukrainians in 1896, conflict between the Greek Catholics and the Greek Orthodox was a feature of Ukrainian life. When immigrants from predominantly Orthodox Bukovyna settled adjacent to the predominantly Greek Catholic Galicians, their two churches vied for their allegiance. The result was religious factionalism, splits within communities and social dysfunction (Martynovych 1991; Lehr 2003). Although immigrants from both provinces settled in Paraguay, it was at a later time, when events in Europe had

Figure 3: Ukrainian Pentecostal Church, Nueva Ucrania, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr 1999).
completely changed the religious and political situation in the homeland and so the religious and social situation in Paraguay remained far more stable.

In Canada, Protestant attempts to proselytize among Ukrainian communities further disrupted communities and inflamed passions (Martynovych 1991, 214-236; Lehr 2003). In contrast, within the Ukrainian settlements the religious milieu in Paraguay was relatively harmonious. Evangelical Protestants were Ukrainians from Volhynia, so acceptance of Protestantism did not carry the same connotations as it did in Canada, where Protestantism was seen as an alien force and acceptance of its precepts conflated with attempts at assimilation by the Anglo-Canadian majority. In Canada acceptance of Protestantism was often perceived within the Ukrainian community as synonymous with rejection of Ukrainian heritage (Kanadijskyi Rusyn, 3 July 1918; Lehr 2002).

Ukrainians in Paraguay, whether they are Orthodox, Protestant, or Greek Catholic, belong to the Prosvita society. Established in Paraguay in 1937, today it has its headquarters in Encarnación with several branches outside of the city. A pro-Soviet movement, which had adherents in such places as Domingo Bado (where a Ukrainian-Belarusan Reading Club was formed) and Carmen del Paraná (where a Ukrainian-Belarusan Committee to Aid the Fatherland operated), it existed during the World War II years, but declined in the following decade owing to a combination of government repression and re-settlement in the USSR in the mid-1950s in response to a Kremlin-inspired “Return to the Homeland” campaign (Zub Kurylowicz 2002).

Today the Ukrainian community in Paraguay appears to be culturally robust. Many of those who live in the smaller centres are trilingual, speaking Spanish, Guarani (an indigenous language) and Ukrainian. Although the Ukrainian community in Paraguay is perhaps more fragmented along religious lines than are the Ukrainian communities in Argentina or Brazil, the Ukrainian churches still play a significant role in retaining ethnic cohesion. The vibrancy of cultural life is also bolstered by the community’s proximity to the larger Ukrainian community across the Paraná River in Misiones. Cultural activities that consciously strive to maintain Ukrainian identity, and which are not associated with religious institutions, include folk dancing and, of course, consumption of traditional Ukrainian dishes such as *pyhory* (*varenyky*) and *holubtsi*, which have become icons of Ukrainian ethnicity, as they have elsewhere in the Diaspora.
Landscape

The immigrants who pioneered in Paraguay before the Second World War transferred many elements of their material culture to the areas that they settled. Most obvious, even today, is the distinctive architecture of the Ukrainian Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholic churches. Even the religious buildings of the evangelical groups proclaim their ethnic affiliation, though through signage rather than architecture (Fig. 3).

In settlements such as Fram and Nueva Ucrania, and in the countryside around them, Ukrainian elements are clearly visible in the design, layout and décor of domestic buildings. As did their counterparts in Canada, Brazil and Argentina, Ukrainian settlers in Paraguay built in the ways that were familiar to them in the old country. The sub-tropical climate necessitated some adaptation of traditional designs just as it did in Brazil. The indoor traditional clay stove (pich), for example, was impractical and redundant in Paraguay, so was placed outside of the house, removing the need for the central chimney that was a hallmark feature of the Ukrainian folk house in the colder climates of Canada and Ukraine (Fig. 4).

In the inter-war period many houses were built using the same construction methodologies that would have been found in Ukraine, or western Canada. Log-construction was common, using post and fill or horizontally laid corner-notched logs, but as elsewhere was concealed by whitewashed or painted mud plaster. The similarity to the architecture of the old country was sufficient to draw comment from visitors to the colonies in the 1930s. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the landscape of Ukrainian settlement still carries a strong ethnic signature, although as elsewhere in the New World Diaspora, older buildings are falling prey to the ravages of time and the pressures for modernization. The Ukrainian impress on the cultural landscape of Itapúa will fade as buildings are slowly replaced but it will be many years before it disappears (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). The traditional style of wagon brought from Ukraine, which in Paraguay, as in Argentina, is known as the ‘carro polaco’ is still widely used by farmers in the Ukrainian settlements (Fig. 7). Whereas in neighboring province of Missiones, in Argentina, the carro polaco is now seldom used and has become a Ukrainian pioneer icon of sorts, it is still widely employed by Ukrainian farmers in Itapúa (Lehr and Cipko 2000). Its endurance there is partly because of the slower pace of modernization in Paraguayan agriculture and also because Ukrainian farmers in Itapúa find its design to be well adapted to the hilly terrain of the region (Bratuz 1999; Prendeski 1999). The introduction of electricity into the rural areas of Itapúa in the late 1960s has accelerated the rate of change in material culture but it has not yet lead to the abandonment of traditional culinary
Figure 4: First house of Stefan Bratuz, built ca. 1930, Nueva Ucrania, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr, 1999).

Figure 5: Second House of Stefan Bratuz, built ca. 1955, Nueva Ucrania, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr, 1999).
Figure 6: Lisnichuk farm house, Capitán Miranda, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr, 1999)

Figure 7: Carro Polaco, Nueva Ucrania, Paraguay. (Photo: J. Lehr, 1999).
practices. In the rural areas, bread is still baked in the outdoor *pich* in the traditional fashion, albeit with a sub-tropical touch as the dough is placed into the oven on a banana leaf (Fig. 8).

**Conclusion**

The Ukrainian settlements in Paraguay remain a little known element of the Ukrainian pioneer Diaspora. Its location in a less-developed country that lacks the infrastructure and commercial institutions of neighbouring Argentina has made it a less attractive destination for prospective immigrants than other parts of the Diaspora. Although the Ukrainian community had set up a relief committee to assist postwar refugees to resettle in Paraguay, and the Paraguayan government was prepared to allow tens of thousands of Ukrainians to come to the country, more ended up going to other overseas destinations such as Australia than to the land-locked South American republic. Even fewer came in subsequent decades. Even after 1991, when the collapse of the USSR resulted in the lifting of restrictions on emigration from Ukraine, few Ukrainians immigrated to Paraguay.

Although it has not enjoyed the religious unity, nor the recent infusion of new immigrants as have its neighbouring settlements in Brazil and
Argentina, the Ukrainian community in Paraguay has nevertheless kept its cultural integrity to a significant and remarkable degree.

The Ukrainian community in Paraguay also offers a fascinating contrast to the Ukrainian experience in Canada where Ukrainian communities saw religious feuding and a measure of social dysfunction for decades. In any analysis of the Ukrainian pioneer Diaspora an understanding of the Ukrainian experience in Paraguay will be essential for a full comprehension of the role played by geography, history and religion. Even today geographical contiguity, its compact nature, and relative isolation still protect its fragile status as a Ukrainian community in the land that the indigenous people, the Guarani, call the Land of the Crowned River – in their language: Paraguay.

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