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THE RUTHENIAN JOURNEY FROM THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAINS TO THE PANONIAN PLAIN*

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Abstract

Although the Ruthenians / Rusyns in Serbia (less than 15 000 members of the Ruthenian (Rusyn national community today) were cut off from their brethren in the Carpathian area they have managed to survive on the Panonian Plain. Comparing to the Ruthenians in all other countries the Ruthenians in Serbia have the highest level of minority rights. The Serbian / Vojvodinian authorities do their best to implement international conventions and there is a hope for the Ruthenians in Serbia / Vojvodina to preserve their culture, language and national identity in the future.

Keywords: Ruthenians in Serbia / Vojvodina, Carpathian homeland, ethnocultural development, Ruthenian language, national minorities

For centuries Ruthenians / Rusyns lived within the borders of Hungarian Kingdom. They lived in the northeast Hungarian counties, namely, in Zemplén, Saros, Abauj-Torna, Borsod, Szabolcs, Ung, Ugocsa, Maramaros and Gemer. Some 260 years ago, groups of Ruthenians began migrating south from their homeland in the Carpathian mountains to the Srem and Bačka regions of what is now Vojvodina in Serbia and Eastern Slavonia in Croatia (Fejca, 2010: 112-113).

After the defeat and retreat of the Ottoman Empire from Bačka, Srem and Banat in 1699, the Austro-Hungarian authorities needed more population in the south of their state and supported colonization of Germans, Hungarians, Slovaks and others, among them Ruthenians as well (Gavrilović, 1977: 153). That is why the ancestors of Vojvodina Ruthenians, citizens of free status under Habsburg Monarchy ("Ruthenus Libertinus", as they were called) and of Greek-Catholic (Uniate) faith, in total number of around 2 000 were allowed to settle under the contract with the state authorities in the "dessolata possessio Keresztur" and

nearly locality of Kucura in the central Bačka region in the mid of the 18th century (Хорњак, 2006: 25).

The first Ruthenians in Bačka who settled down with their families in Kula were Petro Homa, Janko Homa and Janko Makovski. It happened somewhere between 1743 and 1746. 1745 – is the year that has been taken as the year of Ruthenian settlement in Bačka. The 17th of January 1751 is a special date. On that day Franz Joseph de Redl, councillor of empress Maria Theresa and administrator of the Bačka Royal-State District in Sombor signed the first official document – the contract concerning settlement of 200 Ruthenian Greek-Catholic families on the heath named Big Krstur. The contract concerning settlement of Ruthenians in Kucura was signed in 1763. It is obvious that Ruthenians were settled to these parts on the same or similar conditions as the other nations (except Germans who had the best settling conditions). It is important to point out that Ruthenians were Greek-Catholics, and that was one of the reasons they were allowed to settle in the Southern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy (Лабош, 1979: 77).

In the new world, the newcomers built houses, economic establishments, churches, schools and other public institutions (for example the first Ruthenian library was founded in Ruski Krstur in 1876). The Ruthenian population increased in the course of time. They even migrated from the central villages – Krstur and Kucura – to Novi Sad, Đurđevo and Šajkaš, Šid and Srem, and, later, to Slavonia and the region around the river Sava. Ever since they first settled in these parts and up to the First World War, the Ruthenians were predominantly farmers. Their craftsmen were organized in a guild, while there were very few priests and teachers. In time, Ruthenians even made progress in their economic, national and cultural life. They succeeded in preserving their identity. They formed their language and raised it to the level that they could use it to print books.

Both Ruthenian and Slavic linguists are indebted to Havrijil Kosteljnik: as the codifier of the Ruthenian language of the Ruthenias in Serbia / Vojvodina – he wrote the first grammar of the Ruthenian language (Костельник, 1923) – and as the creator of the Ruthenian linguistic terminology he approached such linguistic geni as Karadžić, Štur or Puškin in the Slavic world. Havrijil Kosteljnik also wrote the first book in Ruthenian – the poetic wreath *From My Village* in 1904.

At the end of the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed. All branches of the Ruthenian people had, until the year 1918, lived and developed within the framework of a single state, the Habsburg Monarchy. Now for the first time several branches of the Ruthenian people were somehow cut off. Ruthenians in Bačka had to

find their own way. In 1919, the Yugoslav Ruthenian ethnic community decided to elevate its colloquial language to the level of a literary language. In that same year, the first cultural-educational organization was formed and a resolution was adopted to use the language in the education, cultural life and the press. This decision was based on the fact that books of religious and literary character had already been published in this language (Medješi, 1993: 146). They felt that the founding of the Ruthenian Popular Educational Society, the so-called Prosvita, was the first step in which Ruthenians manifested their striving for an independent national cultural life.

Within Serbia (or the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, or, later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), Ruthenians were permitted to form national cultural institutions by virtue of the collective rights of all national minorities, which was not the case in their homeland. So, the first printing house was founded in 1936. The Ruthenian Home (Ruska Matka) Society was established for all Ruthenians in Yugoslavia in 1945. In the same year, the first high school in the Ruthenian language was established in Ruski Krstur. Society for the Ruthenian Language and Literature was established in 1970.

After the Second World War the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina enjoyed only the small level of autonomy within Serbia, but gained extensive rights of self-rule under the 1974 constitution, which defined Vojvodina as one of the subjects of the Yugoslav federation. Five of the Vojvodina's peoples were given the status of official nationalities – Serbs, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, and Ruthenians. The Ruthenian language became one of the five official languages of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina. With liberal funding from the Yugoslav government, press (Ruske slovo), elementary and secondary school system, and radio and television programming came into being. A series of school grammars, a codification of grammatical norms (1977), and a terminological dictionary (1972) were prepared by Mikola Kočiš. In order to enhance further knowledge and use of the Bačka-Srem, or Vojvodinian variant of Ruthenian (Фейса, 2004), in 1973 – a professorship, and by 1981 – a Department of Ruthenian Language and Literature was established at the University of Novi Sad. The creative potential of Ruthenians had resulted in doubtlessly notable results in culture and education. The readers for elementary and secondary schools in Ruthenian (printed after 1984) prove that the Ruthenians in Yugoslavia are neither an exotic culture nor cultural outskirts. In fact, by their educational and academic maturity, they are in the very centre of European trends and achievements. Aleksander Duličenko from Estonia described Ruthenian as a sociologically complete distinct Slavic micro-

language (Дуличенко, 2009: 12). The latest Grammar of the Ruthenian Language was published by Julijan Ramač (Памач, 2002).

It is hard to understand how such a small population managed to preserve its language, religion, schools, customs – in short, its national being for 260 years. Journalist Miron Žiroš gives 14 factors which, according to him, contributed towards the final outcome – the existence of a small population of conscious Ruthenians, the establishment of their national language, the maturity of the Ruthenian literature, journalism, folklore, and drama. These are: 1) the existence of the two Ruthenian centers – Krstur and Kucura; 2) the firm recognition of belonging to the Ruthenians of the Transcarpathian region; 3) the strong inclination to "stick together" among foreigners; 4) the Greek-Catholic Church and the preservation of the national identity; 5) the Ruthenian school (Ruthenian is taught in Krstur, Kucura and Djurdjevo. All subjects in these primary schools are in Ruthenian. Apart from the three schools, there are 12 more that provide instructions to their pupils in the Ruthenian language in addition to all the rest of subjects instructed in Serbian); 6) the constant contacts with the Hornjica (the Carpathian homeland, the Upper Lands of Austria-Hungary); 7) receipt of books and a printing press from Hornjica; 8) the education of the Ruthenian intelligentsia; 9) the preservation of traditions and national customs (for example Church holidays – Christmas, Easter, Kirbaj), the Ruthenian wedding and the public life; 10) the foundation of the Ruthenian Popular Educational Society; 11) the new restoration, post-war development from 1945 to 1990; 12) the role of the Society for the Ruthenian Language and Literature; 13) the Cultural Festival Red Rose; 14) the Stage Memorial of Petro Riznič Djadja and the Ruthenian Amateur Theatre Djadja (Жи-рош, 1998: 463).

Bearing all above mentioned in mind, we would like to draw a parallel to the factor-assumption analysis made by Miron Žiroš at the beginning of the nineties of the 20th century. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the analysis should be expanded with several factors which, by all means, contribute towards the final outcome – the existence of a small population of conscious Ruthenians. So, the 15th factor is: the foundation of the National Council of Rusyn National Minority (2002); the 16th factor is: the foundation of a professional Ruthenian theatre (Ruthenian National Theatre Petro Riznič Djadja) (2004); the 17th factor is: the establishment of the Institute for Culture of the Vojvodinian Ruthenians (2008) together with formation of the National Museum, the National Gallery and the National Archive; the 18th factor is: the establishment of the Apostolic Exarchate for Greek-Catholics in Serbia and Montenegro (2004).

As the 19th factor we see the existence of both Ruthenian High School in Ruski Krstur, and the Department of the Ruthenian Studies in Novi Sad. And it is not only the existence of these two educational institutions that is to be mentioned. They have developed their curriculums in the direction that there are some new subjects to be elected. As far as the Department of the Ruthenian Studies is concerned, apart from the Ruthenian Phonetics, Morphology, Syntax, Historical Grammar, Ruthenian Literature, Ruthenian History and Ruthenian folklore, new courses are: Carpatho-Rusyn Language and English-Ruthenian Contrastive Grammar (professor Mihajlo Fejsa's courses), and Ruthenian Children Poetry, Novel and Drama (professor Julijan Tamaš's courses). The professors work in special circumstances and they should both describe their subjects of research and teach them at university level. Several capital works have been published: Ruthenian literature: History and Status, Havrijil Kosteljnik *Between Doctrine and Nature*, Ruski Krstur – Chronicle and History (Julijan Tamaš), *Economic and Public Life of the Ruthenians in South Hingary (1745-1848)*, *School in Ruski Krstur (Janko Ramač)*, *Ruthenian Lexicon*, *SerboCroatian-Ruthenian Phrasal Dictionary*, *Havrijil Kosteljnik's Lexicon Dictionary*, *Serbian-Ruthenian Dictionary*, *Prepositional Constructions in the Ruthenian Literary Language*, *Ruthenian Language Grammar (Julijan Ramač)*, *The English Elements in the Ruthenian Language*, *Kucura in the Past and in the Present*, *Tense and Aspect in Ruthenian and English*, *Rusini / Rusnaci / Ruthenians (1745-2005) I*, *Functioning of the Vø Construction/Form in Expressing Temporal-Aspectual Relations in the Havrijil Kosteljnik's Stories*, translations: *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare, *Alice in Wonderland* by L. Carrol, *People From Nowhere* by P.R. Magocsi into Ruthenian, *The Ruthenians in Serbia* by the National Council of the Rusyn National Minority into English, editorship: *Orthographical Dictionary of the Ruthenian Language* and two journals, *Erato Above Kucura* and *Kucura Corncob (Mihajlo Fejsa)* (Фejca, 2010: 39). The Department is specific for a relatively small number of students because of small Ruthenian population in Vojvodina / Serbia (less than 15,000). Forty four students have graduated from the Department so far.

The 20th factor is the existence of not only one but several Ruthenian publishers and new Ruthenian journals today. The Newspaper Publishing Institution *Ruske slovo* from Novi Sad is no longer the only existing publisher. The NPI *Ruske slovo* publishes the weekly newspaper *Ruske slovo / Ruthenian Word*, the children's monthly magazine *Zahradka / Garden*, the literary, cultural and art journal *Švetlosc / Light*, the cultural-political journal for youth *MAK*, the annual almanac and several books yearly. As publishers also appear: *Institute for Publishing Textbooks*

in Belgrade – Department in Novi Sad (published around 1,000 titles by now), Greek-Catholic Church (publishes monthly *Dzvoni / Bells*), Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture from Novi Sad (publishes yearly *Studia Ruthenica*), Ruthenian Home from Ruski Krstur (publishes quarterly *Rusnak / Ruthenian*) and Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura from Kucura (publishes yearly *Erato nad Kucurom / Kocurom / Erato Above Kucura* and yearly *Kocurska čutka / Kucura Corncob*).

The 21st factor is that several new cultural manifestations are organized and even new cultural-artistic or cultural-educational organizations (for ex. Home - Society of the Ruthenians of Novi Sad in Novi Sad, Nongovernment Organization Ruthenian Forum GEA in Novi Sad, Nongovernment Organization of Young Ruthenians Pact Ruthenorum in Ruski Krstur, Youth Forum in Novi Sad, Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura in Kucura, Ethno Club Brought Out of Oblivion in Kucura) are formed. Let us mention only a few manifestations organized at the beginning of the 3rd millennium: Festival Vodova Fest in Ruski Krstur, Festival of Monodrama and Duodrama in Novi Sad, Fine Arts Colony Meetings at Boodnarov's in Gospodjinci, International Festival of Humour and Satire Kucura Corncob in Kucura, Festival of Authentic Singing Not to Forget in Đurđevo, Festival of Folk Orchestras Melodies of the Ruthenian Court in Šid and several others (Jakim, 2009: 34-48).

The 22nd factor is, according to us, the existence of radio and TV broadcast. Radio Novi Sad annually broadcasts about 1,500 hours of radio programming in Ruthenian. Every week there are 4 hours of talk- and music-format Ruthenian programming, complemented by several special programs in the course of each year, such as coverage of important cultural events and church services on important holidays. Radio-Diffusive Institution of Vojvodina broadcasts about 143 hours of Ruthenian-language TV programming annually. There is a ten-minute news broadcast in Ruthenian five times per week, and on Sunday there is a 60-minute magazine show. There are also several other special programs aired throughout the year. Within the Public Service – the Radio Diffusive Institution of Vojvodina, the Ruthenian Editorial Board exists more than six decades (since 1948) in the Novi Sad Radio and more than three decades in the Novi Sad Television (since 1975) (*ibid.*: 62-66).

The 23rd fact is represented by the revolutionary changes in Central and Eastern Europe that brought the rebirth of cultural identity for Carpatho-Rusyns. Mutual awareness and closer contacts between Vojvodina Rusyns and their brethren in the Carpathian homeland – a process initiated in 1989 – can in the future assist all Carpatho-

Ruthenians in their ongoing struggle to survive as a national minority. Today the Ruthenians of the Republic of Serbia / the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina are recognized officially as a distinct national minority with their own literary language. The Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic have acknowledged Rusyns as a distinct minority as well. The Ruthenians of Serbia are no longer alone. They have many opportunities for joint projects of different kinds. For example, a book containing Ruthenian poetry of all Ruthenian enclaves *Rusinski / Ruski pisnji* (1997), edited by Natalija Dudaš; a bilingual English-Ruthenian manual *Let's Speak English and Rusyn / Bešedujme po ruski i po anglijski* by Paul Robert Magocsi and Mihajlo Fejsa (1998); *Encyclopedia of Rusyn History and Culture*, edited by Paul Robert Magocsi and Ivan Pop, was published in English (Magocsi, 2002); Paul Robert Magocsi edited *Rusinskyj jazyk* (Magocsi, 2004). After 1989, Carpatho-Ruthenians have obviously risen like Phoenix out of ashes, and we may conclude that the Ruthenian question has not been solved in the Stalin way.

The 24th factor that ensures the existence of Ruthenians in Europe is the international factor. The Ruthenians are recognized in all countries in the world, but in Ukraine. As far as the Republic of Serbia is concerned it has adopted international standards concerning national minorities rights. The two most important international documents of the Council of Europe signed by our country are the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (signed by the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro in 2005) and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (signed by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 2001). The essence of these documents has been incorporated in the 2006 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia.

Our local national organizations – Ruthenian Home, Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture, and Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura – are expected to create many more projects of national importance. The National Council of the Rusyn National Minority, as the founder of *NPI Ruske slovo*, is expected to have more influence on the content of *Ruske slovo* and the Institution's publishing programme, as well as on the curriculum of primary, secondary and faculty education. The National Council of the Rusyn National Minority, the Institute for Culture of the Vojvodinian Ruthenians, the Ruthenian Home, the Society for the Ruthenian Language, Literature and Culture, and the Cultural Educational Society DOC - Kucura should join their efforts in order to preserve and improve the existence and life of the Ruthenians in Vojvodina / Serbia.

Everything that has been produced or created among Vojvodina Ruthenians / Rusyns so far is a product of the 24 factors discussed in

the paper. The factors, i.e. their roles interweave and complement one another in order to achieve the ultimate goal – the conscious Ruthenian / Rusyn, the one who cherishes his tradition and the culture of the people he descends from. The ethnocultural development among Rusyns living in Serbia / Vojvodina was interrupted during the mid-1990s war in former Yugoslavia, but it has gradually been renewed. Some aspects have even been improved.

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COMMENT

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