

*Our churches came  
from the poverty  
of the region. The  
villagers chose  
wood because they  
could not afford to  
build with masonry.  
The paradox is that  
from this poverty  
has sprung a rich  
heritage. It is now*

*a matter of pride  
that we have such a  
heritage as a place  
where we  
still worship.*

*Bishop Jan Babjak, S.J.  
Greek Catholic Eparchy  
Prešov, Slovakia  
22 October 2003*

For nearly four centuries, adherents of Greek Catholicism, a branch of the Eastern Orthodox church that united with the Roman Catholic church, have sought refuge in an extraordinary, yet little known, suite of sanctuaries that dot the Carpathian Mountains of Central Europe. Though simple in form, these masterpieces, built in the so-called Lemko style, represent the apogee of a carpenter's art that was once widespread throughout much of Northern and Central Europe, its development prompted by abundant forest resources. Each church's timber frame is hewn from logs, which are protected on the outside by wood shingles, an appearance reminiscent of a plumed bird. The religious art on the iconostasis and interior walls and furnishings is an exquisite composition in folk art. These log buildings are unique not just for their architectural form, but also for the cultural and religious traditions that gave rise to them.

The Carpathian Mountains extend eastward between the Polish and Slovak borders, and southward between Ukraine and Slovakia. They border eastern Hungary into the heart of Romanian

# WOODEN WONDERS OF THE CARPATHIANS

by STEPHEN J. KELLEY & VINCENT OBSITNIK

Transylvania and form a geographic watershed between east and west and a cultural boundary between the Eastern and Western Christian faiths. However, the political borders that define the nation status of Carpathian peoples have fluctuated over time. As a result, national identity has often been used to unite, divide, or assimilate.

In A.D. 863, Eastern Christianity was brought to the general area of Slovakia—then known as the Great Moravian Empire—by Saints Cyril and Methodius. In 988, the Kievan Rus Empire accepted Eastern Christianity and claimed dominion over the Slavs then living in the Carpathians. The Russian Orthodox church would eventually conduct its rites and rituals in Church Slavonic developed by St. Cyril. In time, the region saw the fall of Kiev in 1240 and a reforming of the Russian Empire in Muscovy. By the sixteenth century, the northeastern Carpathian region—what is now southern Poland, eastern Slovakia, and western Ukraine—had fallen under the influence of the Roman Catholic church.



**CHURCH OF THE  
ARCHANGEL MICHAEL,  
ŚWIĄTKOWA WIELKA,  
POLAND**





### CHURCH OF THE PROTECTION OF THE BLESSED MOTHER OF GOD, JEDLINKA, SLOVAKIA

**BUILT IN 1763, THIS CHURCH WAS RESTORED IN 2001–2002. THE NEW WOOD SHINGLES AND BATTEN BOARD WERE FINISHED WITH A CLEAR SEALER THAT DID NOT COLOR THE WOOD, UNLIKE EARLIER SEALERS WHICH WOULD TYPICALLY COLOR THE SHINGLES DARK BROWN.**



Under the Polish/Lithuanian monarchy, the Orthodox church in western Ukraine and Southeastern Poland united with Rome, the partnership officially confirmed at the Council of Brest in 1596. In 1646, a number of priests in the nearby areas of eastern Slovakia and the western Ukraine region, which was under the Austrian monarchy, also proclaimed their solidarity and united with the Roman Catholic church in what is known as the Union of Uzhorod. These peoples took on the designation of Greek Catholics. In these unions, the formerly Orthodox Christians preserved the eastern rites, Julian calendar, chants, liturgical books written in Cyrillic, and rights of the clergy to marry. In addition to practicing their unique form of Christianity within the Catholic church, the Greek Catholics developed unique church architectural forms, which to this day can be found in Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania, most dating from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

The center of Greek Catholic society throughout its entire existence in the Carpathians has been the village and the use of wood as the primary building material. Domestic architecture was limited in its development to the modest utilitarian needs of the peasants. Hence, it was in wooden church architecture that local artistic and creative talent found an outlet.

Requirements of the Greek Catholic liturgy and tradition developed a conception of a longitudinal arrangement of wooden churches comprising three basic sections—the narthex (babinets), the nave, and altar (or apse)—on an east-west axis with the apse always to the east. These church sections were not equal in size although they were built on similar square bases. Thus two factors—centralness and symmetry—played a decisive role in the shaping of the spatial plan and the composition of the wooden churches.

Western influences evident in the Lemko church style can be seen in the unique and dynamic massing of the cupolas, which range in size from a small one over the apse to a midsized central tower over the nave, and, finally, to the high western bell tower in the Baroque style over the narthex.

The floor layout is defined by a triple horizontal log-frame in which the narthex, nave, and apse each have their own set of logs that are laid out square in plan. Like the heights of the cupolas, the size of the spaces from the apse to the narthex step upward in size. A



**WORLD MONUMENTS WATCH SITE 2004**  
**ST. NICOLAS, BODRUŽAL**

BUILT IN 1658, THE CHURCH OF ST. NICOLAS IN BODRUŽAL, SLOVAKIA, WAS RESTORED IN 2004. IN ADDITION TO COMPLETE REPLACEMENT OF THE EXTERIOR SHINGLES AND BATTEN BOARDS, SOME OF THE LOGS WERE SELECTIVELY REPLACED BECAUSE OF LONG-TERM DAMAGE FROM WOOD WORM, A COMMON INSECT INFESTATION IN THIS AREA OF THE WORLD.



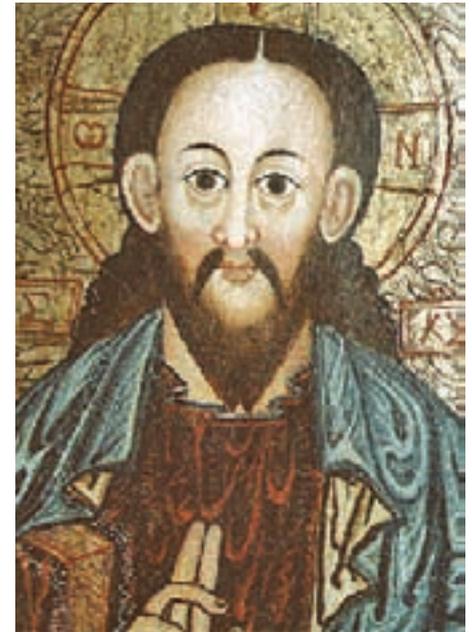
highlight of the interior space is the iconostasis that separates the nave from the apse. Some churches have a second-story choir loft along the west side of the nave. In some cases the exterior walls of the apse may have a polygonal shape. The apse and nave typically have small windows facing north, south, and east. The nave and apse spaces are finished at the ceiling with a stepped pyramid made of hewn logs. The belfry is not structurally related to the log-frame of the central nave and apse, but is constructed on a braced frame of large hewn timbers or logs.

To preserve the timber logs and frame from rotting, the roofs and walls were typically covered with hand-hewn wooden shingles, which resemble layers of feathers. The shingles vary in design and size and may have ornately decorated ends. They were also used to decorate the edges of the roof, window trimmings, bell towers, and cupolas.

A main feature of the interior was the iconostasis that separates the nave from the apse. This wood-carved and polychromatic-painted piece of folk art was fabricated specifically for each individual church and represents a high degree of artwork and craftsmanship. Other furnishing features include the altar table within the apse, pew-type seating, and independent icons.

The charm of these churches lies not only in the dynamic composition of the towers but from the moss-grown timbering and shingles covering the roofs, cupolas, roofing eaves, and walls of the church. This picturesque quality is increased by the harmonious relationship with the landscape. Lemko churches dispersed through mountain valleys are often sited close to rivers and creeks, usually on small hills or slopes of larger rises overlooking the village. They are always surrounded by a circle of trees out of which domes and turrets emerged presenting an impressive landscape image. The churchyards are encircled by wooden framework fences constructed from logs or stones and covered by shingle roofs. Wood gates—even if there is no fence—lead to the churchyard where there are often many stone, wood, or iron cemetery markers. Wrought-iron crosses crown the gate, cupolas, belfry, and free-standing bell towers.

Although these extraordinary structures have endured for centuries, most are now in a poor state, having succumbed to damage wrought by the effects of humidity, fungal decay, insect attack, or fire. Yet the most pressing threats these structures face are a lack of maintenance, improper restoration techniques, vandalism, and uncontrolled





**WORLD MONUMENTS WATCH SITE 2000**  
**ST. BASIL THE GREAT CHURCH,**  
**KRAJNE ČIERNO**

ERECTED IN 1730, ST. BASIL THE GREAT IS BEST KNOWN FOR ITS EXTRAORDINARY BAROQUE ICONOSTASIS, WHICH SEPARATES THE INTERIOR SPACE OF THE NAVE FROM THE SANCTUARY AND IS ADORNED WITH NUMEROUS PAINTINGS. UNTIL RECENTLY, HOWEVER, THE CHURCH WAS IN DIRE NEED OF RESTORATION. WITH FUNDS PROVIDED BY WMF THROUGH ITS ROBERT W. WILSON CHALLENGE AND SUPPORT FROM AMERICAN EXPRESS AND THE HEADLEY TRUST, THE CHURCH AND ITS ICONS WERE RESTORED, AMONG THEM THOSE DEPICTING CHRIST THE TEACHER, FACING PAGE TOP, THE VIRGIN AND CHILD, ABOVE, AND TWO OF THE APOSTLES, LEFT. FACING PAGE, THE EXTERIOR OF THE SANCTUARY BEFORE AND AFTER RESTORATION. IN ADDITION TO SHORING UP THE BUILDING AND REPLACING DAMAGED ELEMENTS, A SUITE OF DRAINAGE CANALS WERE DUG AROUND THE BUILDING TO REDUCE WATER INFILTRATION. A PLAN FOR THE LONG-TERM MAINTENANCE OF THE BUILDING HAS ALSO BEEN DEVELOPED.



**ST. MICHAEL THE  
ARCHANGEL CHURCH,  
LADOMIROVÁ**

THE POLYCHROMED ICONOSTASIS IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL IN LADOMIROVÁ, SLOVAKIA. A MAIN FEATURE OF THE INTERIOR, IT REPRESENTS A HIGH DEGREE OF ARTWORK AND CRAFTSMANSHIP. THE CHURCH, WHICH IS LOCATED IN THE DUKLA PASS LEADING INTO SOUTHERN POLAND, HAS A BELL TOWER THAT STANDS INDEPENDENT FROM THE STRUCTURE.

tourism. Unfortunately, the economic realities of the region have made it nearly impossible for their sovereign nations to provide adequate funding for maintenance and repair.

Yet there is hope thanks to the private international preservation community, which has embarked on several major restoration projects. In 2000, WMF included the extraordinary church of Basil the Great in Slovakia on its list of 100 *Most Endangered Sites*. The church was in need not only of structural stabilization but of complete restoration of its fantastic seventeenth- and eighteenth-century icons. With funds from its Robert W. Wilson Challenge, and grants provided by American Express and the Headley Trust, WMF was able to substantially contribute to the restoration, which was completed late last year.

In 2002, a joint project of the Diocese of Prešov and the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad and underwritten by WMF through its Kress European Preservation Program surveyed four Lemko-style churches in Poland and 28 Greek Catholic churches in Slovakia. We, the authors, carried out conditions assessments of the Polish churches while our colleague, Ivan Gojdi, a Slovak expert on wooden churches, was contracted to survey the Slovak churches. Following our survey, the Association for Preservation Technology held an international workshop in October 2003 to develop a restoration masterplan for the repair and maintenance of the Slovak and Polish churches. Held in Prešov, Slovakia, and sponsored by WMF and Kress, the symposium brought together representatives of the Greek Catholic Diocese in Prešov, the Society of the Lovers of Kremplna, Poland, local contractors, and international experts. As a result of our survey and lively workshop discussions, three of the wooden churches in the most dire condition were inscribed on WMF's 2004 list of 100 *Most Endangered Sites*—Sts. Cosmos and Damian in Lukov-Venécia, St. Nicholas in Bodružal, and St. Michael the Archangel in Topo.

In 2004, through the efforts of the U.S. Commission, major contributions were received from U.S. Steel Kosice and the First Catholic Slovak Ladies Association for the restoration of St. Nicholas Church, which was completed this past September. The restoration of Sts. Cosmos and Damian, built in 1708, will be carried out later this year. Plans for the conservation of St. Michael, as well as the other Lemko treasures we have surveyed, are now in progress. ■



### **CHURCH OF STS. COSMOS AND DAMIAN IN KREMPNA**

**IN THE 1950S, THE ROOF AND CUPOLAS OF THIS 1778 CHURCH WERE COMPLETELY RECLAD WITH PAINTED SHEET METAL INSTEAD OF THE TRADITIONAL WOOD SHINGLES.**

### **CHURCH OF STS. COSMOS AND DAMIAN, LUKOV-VENÉCIA**

**THE 1708 CHURCH WITH THE SAME NAME IN LUKOV-VEVECIA, SLOVAKIA, IS SLATED FOR RESTORATION LATER THIS YEAR. SITED ON A HILL, THE CHURCH FEATURES A PIDDASHYA (OPEN GALLERY) ON THE NORTH AND SOUTH SIDES OF THE STRUCTURE PROTECTED BY THE SLOPING ROOF.**

