

UKRAINE

Wooden Churches in Danger

In the Ukrainian Carpathians more than 1000 wooden churches have been preserved, the oldest dating back to the late Middle Ages. Most parts are log constructions, except the ridge turrets and the often free-standing church towers which are post-and-beam constructions. Before the Soviet era most of these churches belonged to the Greek-Catholic Church later forbidden by the Soviets. Nowadays, about 17% of these wooden churches are listed monuments, some of which were used as museums during the Soviet era (e.g. the Church of St. Parasakewa in Oleksandrivka), others as storages. In the early 1990s these churches were given to the Russian-Orthodox and the Ukrainian-Orthodox Churches, because the Greek-Catholic confession was only re-acknowledged much later. Afterwards, fierce disputes about the ownership followed that culminated quite often in church fires and wilful destructions: Since the 1990s between four and six wooden churches have been destroyed by fire every year!

The acknowledgement of many confessions has led to an enormous growth of the parishes. On the whole these parishes prefer

Church in Oleksandrivka, wall painting with partly detached strips of cloth on the east wall of the sanctuary (photo: A. Kutnyi)



newly built churches, because the old wooden churches are considered to be too small and unpractical. In Oleksandrivka, too, a new stone church was erected only a few hundred metres from the wooden church. The negative impact on the abandoned old church is already obvious, as the first damages to the roof cladding and the roof itself have occurred. Penetrating humidity can cause structural damage to the log construction, which may lead to a complete decay of the church. Damages caused by humidity are also recognisable on the paintings inside, as the cloth strips used for sealing the joints are beginning to lose their connection to the walls, while the paint layers increasingly show phenomena such as brittleness, detachment from the painting ground and scaling. Furthermore, the churches built of fir wood are often infested by a fungus (*fomitopsis rosea*) that can lead to the destruction of the wood. In such cases the affected wooden parts have to be completely replaced.

Serious threats also exist if the parishes decide to “restore” their churches at their own expense. Since they want their churches to look “like new” and often choose the most cost-saving method, the wall paintings are treated by ordinary painters rather than by professional restorers. One example is the church in Isayi, erected in 1663 and painted inside around 1800. Here, the saints were repainted with oil paints. Only gradually, people are beginning to recognise that such a method destroys the original paintings. In some cases, the new medallions are now painted on cloth which is then placed above the original surfaces.

Similar problems exist regarding the renovation of the roof covering. Frequently, the time-consuming and costly covering by hand with wooden shingles is given up and the shingles are replaced by a cheaper tin covering, as the church in Busovysko shows.

In summary, the preservation of wooden churches in the Ukraine is problematic, partly for economic reasons and partly due to an insufficient training of conservationists, to the loss of independent craftsmen in Soviet times, to a lack of publicity and the weak status of legal regulations. In 2002, ICOMOS Ukraine had proposed ten wooden churches to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, but nothing has happened since. However, at the moment a joint nomination of wooden churches belonging to the Greek-Catholic Church in Poland and the Ukraine is being prepared.

(For more detailed information see also A. Kutnyi, “Zur Erhaltungsproblematik ukrainischer Holzkirchen”, in: E. Emmerling (ed.), *Toccare – Non Toccare*, ICOMOS Journals of the German National Committee XLVII, Munich 2009, pp. 154–164.)



Wooden church in Stebkivka, destroyed by fire in 1994 (photo: A. Kutnyi)



Roof damage on the south side of the church in Kolodne (photo: A. Kutnyi)