ETHNOLOGIA POLONA TOM 46 (2025), PP. 67-88

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PL ISSN 0137-4079; e-ISSN: 2719-6976

DOI: https://doi.org/10.23858/ethp.2025.46.4070

https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/285431

Jak cytować:

Bartash, V. (2025). HOW MANY MILES TO WARSAW? : POPULAR CATHOLICISM, WOMEN'S AGENCY AND EVERYDAY RESISTANCE IN THE BELARUSIAN SOVIET COUNTRYSIDE. Ethnologia Polona, 46. https://doi.org/10.23858/ethp.2025.46.4070

Ethnologia Polona, vol. 46: 2025, 67–88
PL ISSN 0137 -4079, DOI: 10.23858/ethp.2025.46.4070

HOW MANY MILES TO WARSAW? WOMEN'S AGENCY AND UNDERGROUND CATHOLICISM IN THE SOVIET BELARUSIAN COUNTRYSIDE

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This article draws on oral history interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with Catholic women in the Belarusian countryside. Using a gender lens, it offers a fresh perspective on how rural women under Soviet rule organised themselves into an underground religious community in Little Warsaw. Through their religious practices – family rituals, secret gatherings and Marian devotions – these women showed resilience and agency despite state pressure and anti-religious propaganda. The study highlights the unique leadership role women played in the underground community. It argues that female religious solidarity flourished in the countryside as male religious authority weakened and as rural women were marginalised within Soviet structures. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how these women's quiet but determined efforts sustained religious life during Soviet times and paved the way for the religious revival of the 1990s.

KEYWORDS: popular religious practices, silent resistance, Belarusian Soviet countryside, underground church, women's agency

On the evening of 17 May 2015, three elderly women met in the centre of Brohauschyna, a small Belarusian village, and slowly made their way to the cross at its entrance. They stopped to fix fallen flowers and decorations and, after making the sign of the cross, began praying in Polish in front of the cross. They carefully enunciated each verse of the long Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary with a sense of ceremonial reverence. After reciting the litany, the women began to sing the old Polish Catholic hymn "Serdeczna Matko" ("Beloved Mother"):

Serdeczna Matko, Opiekunko ludzi,
Niech Cię płacz sierot do litości wzbudzi!

Wygnańcy Ewy do Ciebie wołamy,
Zlituj się, zlituj, niech się nie tułamy…[1]

They interrupted their singing with short pauses to take a breath and, obviously, strained their ears to hear other voices. Normally, neighbouring village prayer groups would sing simultaneously with them. But the women did not hear their fellow prayers and were less enthusiastic. After an anthem, they decided to cease and agreed not to meet any longer, since two of them were no longer physically capable of coming to the cross every day.

For more than twenty years, the Catholics of Little Warsaw had gathered at the crossroads to devote their May prayers to the Virgin Mary, whom they respected as their main patron. By the time I conducted my ethnographic fieldwork, the outdoor Marian devotions tradition was dying out. The popular religious practices I will discuss in this paper are the phenomenon of a sole generation – people born in Little Warsaw in the 1920s and 1930s. Their parents were members of the congregation belonging to the St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova, where some of my interlocutors attended catechesis classes and received their First Communion before the war. The annexation of Western Belarus from Poland in 1939 and World War II put an end to their religious education. After the war, the Soviets reestablished their power structures and started anti-religious propaganda. The church had been used as a storehouse but was eventually fully deconstructed.

In the absence of a priest, the Catholic community around the church went underground, giving birth to several village communities that secretly gathered for group prayers in their homes, celebrated religious holidays and observed family rituals. Going underground, the local Catholicism also acquired a more popular interpretation and spiritual nature. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by a religious revival in the 1990s, which gave visibility to the local religious practices. The generation of old believers initiated the establishment of new crosses on the roads, gathered for group prayers outside and took an active part in the religious education of the youth.

Ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was carried out in several Catholic villages in central Belarus (Minsk region, Maladzyechna district), which have been locally known as *Malaya Warszawa* (Bel. Little Warsaw) since the mid-2000s. A starting point for my research is that the Soviets had never succeeded in entirely suppressing

1 Beloved Mother, Guardian of the Nation,
Hear orphans weeping in their supplication.
We are Eve's exiles. Do you hear us praying?
Show us your mercy when we begin straying…

religion in the countryside. Throughout the Soviet period, places like Little Warsaw remained islands of tradition in a sea of state-sponsored atheism.

In her *The Wedding of the Dead*, Gail Kligman shows how Transylvanian peasants of Greek Catholic background use the ritual to "express a certain resistance" to state pressure (Kligman 1987, 275). Along the same research line, this paper intends to address whether everyday religiosity in an atheist state may be seen as a form of resistance. Answering this question would advance our understanding of the historical role of the rural population. Many anthropologists have proposed viewing peasant conservatism and "stubbornness" as a self-defence mechanism against both conservative and progressive orders (Hann 1993, Pine 1993, Scott 1985). According to James Scott, everyday peasant resistance is "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interests from them", and it may take such forms as "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott 1985, xvi). Peasant resistance is often less visible but may be effective in the long run. In her ethnographic study of the *Górale,* a population of the Podhale region of the Tatra Mountains, Frances Pine demonstrates how the local inhabitants make the state sector of the economy work for their family and community interests (Pine 1993, 236). Likewise, my study reveals the variety of ways in which the population of the Soviet countryside escaped state policies, including anti-religious propaganda.

The study of popular religious practices in the Soviet countryside could potentially contribute to our understanding of ritual and silence as means of agency. According to the definition by Anthony Giddens (1979), agency refers to the power of an agent to act in a transformative way. Nevertheless, most studies associate agency with having a public voice that allows for the articulation of social problems. Based on her fieldwork among members of an informal Catholic fundamentalist group and a new religious movement, the Brahma Kumaris, Agnieszka Kościańska (2009) discusses silence in ritual and everyday life as a form of agency. Along the same research line, my study shows the agency of Catholic women from Little Warsaw who never gave visibility to their religious practices and social activities. Given that the underground church was primarily a women's initiative, gender appears to be an important analytical category of this study. In my paper, I will try to interpret this phenomenon and answer the question: how did women become founders and leaders of the underground religious community in Little Warsaw?

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork and combines participant observation, informal daily conversations and in-depth interviews with elderly women from Little Warsaw. The research focuses on women's intergenerational experiences, religious practices and the roles of faith and identity in their lives.

My engagement with the community spans several decades. Some of my earliest observations date back to the 1990s and early 2000s, when I spent my summer holidays in Little Warsaw. During this time, I participated in seasonal celebrations and family rituals alongside elderly women from the village. These experiences offered me an intimate introduction to local traditions and the ways in which women maintained cultural and religious practices.

In the summer of 2015, I returned to Little Warsaw, driven by both academic and family circumstances, with the intention of conducting a more systematic study. This paper focuses on three key respondents, all born in the early 1930s, who shared their life stories – recounting their childhood and youth in interwar Poland, wartime experiences, years of labour and motherhood in the Soviet countryside, and their reflections on life "in the old days", "under the Soviets" and in the present day. Although their *vera* ("faith") was not the explicit focus of the interviews, it emerged organically in their narratives, revealing a set of values that framed their understanding and evaluation of life events (for more on the significance of faith in the identity of rural Belarusians, see Engelking 2013).

Additionally, I interviewed two women born in the 1950s and 1960s, representing the generation of children who did not receive formal religious education due to Soviet policies but learned prayers and holiday observances from their mothers and grandmothers. Once they left their homes and integrated into Soviet society, religion faded from their daily lives. However, the reopening of churches in the 1990s prompted their re-engagement with religion, grounded in the religious knowledge they had inherited in their youth. When I conversed with them in 2015, these women were actively involved in church life.

The return of religion in the 1990s not only reshaped the spiritual landscape but also reactivated the memories of the older generation. Their religious practices suddenly became valuable resources for a new community of believers seeking to reconnect with their faith.

The study also benefits from insights gained through conversations with a broader network of participants linked to the main interviewees by family and religious ties. My participant observation extended to various religious settings, including ceremonies and masses held in a makeshift church in Khazhova, a former *selsovet* (from Russian *selskiy sovet*, meaning "rural council"). Notably, during these events, I observed intergenerational interactions among women – with almost no men present – offering a striking example of the gendered nature of religious practice in the community.

In this article, I situate my analysis at the intersection of gender, agency, religiosity and silent peasant resistance. I explore how women in Little Warsaw navigated their roles within Soviet society and how faith, even when suppressed, continued to inform their identities and actions. By bringing together ethnographic vignettes, life

stories and observations of contemporary religious practices, this article aims to illuminate the nuanced ways in which women have preserved, adapted and reclaimed their spiritual heritage.

LITTLE WARSAW AND ITS POPULATION

On the map, Little Warsaw appears as a five-kilometre-long chain of villages, separated from other settlements by vast fields and forests. Today, these villages are part of the Maladzyechna district in the Minsk oblast, located thirteen kilometres away from Maladzyechna. Under Polish rule – a period often mentioned by my interlocutors in their narratives – this distance felt even greater, as the city expanded significantly following Soviet transformations. The fact that my interlocutors often crossed this distance, for instance, to visit the local market, mostly on foot, added a further sense of separation between the city and Little Warsaw.

Geography clearly played a significant role in shaping its destiny. As this article will demonstrate, Little Warsaw's relative remoteness limited its female residents' access to the Soviet distribution system, healthcare and leisure facilities. At the same time, however, it afforded them greater freedom to practice their beliefs within an atheist state.

It would be difficult to describe the twentieth-century history of Little Warsaw better than Longina Bryleuskaya (Zakharkevich), a native of Little Warsaw and, later, an active member of the Belarusian community in Florida, did in one of her interviews: "My grandfather Jacob and my dad were born in Russia. My brothers and I were born in Poland. My brothers' children were born in the USSR. Their children were born in independent Belarus. But just imagine that most of these people were born in the same house" (Gardzeenka 2008).

Like many other inhabitants of Little Warsaw, Bryleuskaya experienced and, later, followed the rapid transformation of the micro-region from abroad. Nevertheless, the history of Little Warsaw in the first half of the twentieth century was, to a certain degree, a swift reiteration of its historical past. After more than two centuries in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795), these lands were incorporated into the Russian Empire, which proceeded with its assimilation policies throughout the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of Little Warsaw found itself under Polish rule yet again due to the Soviet-Polish War and the Treaty of Riga (1921). However, World War II and Soviet transformations changed the micro-region's landscape forever.

If a religious map of Belarus were drawn, Little Warsaw would be marked as a small Catholic spot in the heart of the country. Though the percentage of Catholics in present-day Belarus is approximately 15 per cent of the total population,

most concentrate in the Belarusian-Polish-Lithuanian borderlands. As Catholicism is strongly associated with Poland and the Polish language in the Belarusian popular imagination, the name "Little Warsaw" does not seem surprising. Nevertheless, the fact that the six villages – Bruskauschyna, Zharlaki, Drani, Machynouschyna, Brohauschyna and Kuleuschyna – were labelled "Little Warsaw" during Soviet times is remarkable. From 1959 to 1965, the villages were part of a larger rural administrative district or a *selsovet* with a predominantly Orthodox population. The story goes that the head of the *selsovet*, who often visited the Catholic villages on business, was the first to call them Little Warsaw. This unofficial name remained popular and is still used by both residents and inhabitants of neighbouring places, for instance, when saying "*paehat' na Warszawu*" (Bel. "to go to Warsaw").

The history of the villages currently united under the name Little Warsaw can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, when they became part of the Russian Empire. According to records from that time, the overall population of the micro-region was as many as 250 people; an average village consisted of several households of extended families. The villages were owned by several noble families for whom the local peasants continued to work until 1939. From an agricultural viewpoint, the soils of Little Warsaw are sandy: farming demands significant effort, and thus, harvests were quite poor. For a long time, the region remained underpopulated. The first significant population increase happened only at the beginning of the twentieth century when Little Warsaw doubled in number, reaching 600 people (Pashkou 2002, 727-760).

The population increase, however, gave rise to new social problems such as poverty. Households with a limited amount of land were unable to provide for growing families, and according to local inheritance rules, the land was divided among married sons. For many young women who had not succeeded in marrying, this meant that they would stay in their brothers' households and work for them. In search of a better future, young people left Little Warsaw en masse for work in North America and Western Europe, where they settled. It is difficult to say how many people left Little Warsaw in the first half of the century, but its population decreased from over 600 in 1909 to approximately 450 by 1939.

It is worth noting that in the 1920s, the area was home to a significant Belarusian population. In the village of Bruskauschyna – the "border town" of Little Warsaw, marking the beginning of a gradual shift toward a predominantly Catholic region – there were 178 residents, of whom 132 were Orthodox and 46 Roman Catholic; 129 identified as Belarusian by nationality, while 49 declared themselves Polish. In the nearby village of Zharlaki, this shift toward Catholicism becomes even more apparent: of the 155 inhabitants, 107 were Roman Catholic and 48 Orthodox, with 104 identifying as Polish and 51 as Belarusian.

These figures also underscore the influence of religion on national self-identification: Catholics typically identified as Poles, whereas Orthodox Christians tended to identify as Belarusians. In the Belarusian countryside, the terms "Catholics" and "Poles" were often used interchangeably well into recent times. However, a closer look at the local names for religious holidays – as well as the fact that all my respondents consider Belarusian their mother tongue – suggests that they were likely Belarusians of Catholic faith rather than ethnic Poles.

The geographical remoteness of Little Warsaw largely determined its plight during World War II – its population suffered equally under German occupation and from requisitions by Soviet partisans and other partisans of various pro-nationalist orientations. Because of the rapid approach of the German troops, not all men from Little Warsaw had been drafted into the Red Army; some of them later deserted and formed armed groups in the forests. Several young people from Little Warsaw were driven to Germany for forced labour, and a few peasants were killed in the village of Zharlaki, a centre of the occupation administration (Pashkou 2002, 743). Nevertheless, the demographic situation of Little Warsaw was severely affected by the war, as well as by the postwar anti-Soviet resistance and Soviet counterinsurgency. Every household was regularly robbed by the fighting parties, fourteen houses were set on fire and all the villages suffered from typhus and pneumonia epidemics.

It took decades for the population of Little Warsaw to recover. Only in the late 1960s, when Soviet society had achieved a certain degree of well-being, did the population of Little Warsaw reach its pre-war numbers (Pashkou 2002, 727-761). However, the 1970s marked a turning point in the local history as many young people began to leave the countryside. Most moved to the nearby city of Maladzyechna to work in industry, and a few continued to pursue further professional training and studies. The first generation of urban dwellers maintained their family, emotional and even economic bonds with their small homeland throughout their lives. Nonetheless, their decision to leave proved to be a crucial moment in the history of Little Warsaw, the full effects of which are only now becoming visible. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the local older population continued running private subsistence agriculture, helping the new urban families of their children survive the economic challenges of the 1990s. Little Warsaw looked especially lively in summertime because of the children who came for holidays.

When I returned to Little Warsaw in 2015, I found its cultural landscape largely transformed. The region's cultural peculiarities, including the local dialect of Belarusian, had gradually been disappearing along with their last representatives. Once a predominantly Catholic region at the beginning of the twentieth century, Little Warsaw gradually transformed into a typical post-Soviet countryside beset by demographic problems such as falling birth rates and alcohol abuse among younger population groups.

According to the older generation of Little Warsaw, the religious homogeneity of the local population was previously maintained through marriage rules – marriages within one denomination were preferred. Several typical family names – Zakharkevich, Bazhko, Chartovich, Shupliak – can be found inscribed on the gravestones in the old cemetery; my interlocutors also bear these names as their maiden names. The first significant change in the religious makeup of the micro-region occurred in the post-war years. Due to a shortage of men in the local households, the geography of marriage began to extend to nearby Orthodox villages. Most newcomers, however, did not mind marrying and having their children baptised in the Catholic Church. A third wave of change in Little Warsaw's population occurred between the 1960s and 1980s, with the arrival of several Orthodox families and families of other religious backgrounds from other Soviet republics.

Nevertheless, most current inhabitants of Little Warsaw are somehow related to the natives of these villages and have inherited their homes through family ties. Purchasing properties without any local mediation is a relatively recent development – a few young urban families have recently moved to Little Warsaw because of the low cost of living, and several houses have been purchased for summertime use.

FEMALE VOICES OF LITTLE WARSAW

It is a phenomenon well known to oral historians that our memory of the past is greatly shaped by our present (see, for instance, Thompson 1978). In her study of Holocaust survivors from Belarus living in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Anika Walke (2015) demonstrates how their unfulfilled hopes for better lives in the Soviet Union, as well as post-Soviet transformations, lead them to look back nostalgically on their youth in pre-war Soviet Belarus. Similarly, the older generation of Little Warsaw perceives the decaying countryside as their personal tragedy, which prompts endless reflection and nostalgia for the "good old days" and the "old-style" people who cared for their land and families and lived dedicated religious lives.

The biographies of elderly women from Little Warsaw begin with accounts of "life before", referring to life under Polish rule (1921–1939). World War II and the post-war Soviet transformation of the countryside, which began in the western Soviet borderlands in 1946–1947, ended the "good old days". They usually portray this time as hard but simple, when each family worked to provide for themselves and family well-being depended on the amount of land, workforce and effort put into working the land (see also Engelking 2013). Some of my interlocutors were considered well-off, meaning they did not know hunger and could sell extra produce from their households at the farmers' market. Children from less well-off families worked as herders for landowners and spent the grazing season away from home, receiving payment in grain and cash in the autumn.

My interlocutors' socialisation in eastern Poland included a significant religious component. Together with their parents, they attended St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova, several kilometres from Little Warsaw, where they also received their First Communion. As part of their preparation for this sacrament, the children of Little Warsaw travelled to the church in large groups, enjoying each other's company along the way.

For children who had not yet started school, church services were often their first exposure to the Polish language, as they spoke Belarusian at home. Those who attended school learned to read and write in Polish since Belarusian schools were scarce in the Second Polish Republic during the 1930s. Religion lessons were part of the school curriculum.

The year 1939, however, put an end to their religious education and the "good old days". For most of the women I talked to, several years of either Polish or "Russian" (Soviet) schooling became their background in life, as they did not manage to continue their education after the war.

The war, obviously, brought chaos to the daily lives of people under occupation. It remains unclear whether there were any services in the church during the war because my interlocutors do not recall attending church themselves. Church records and the memoirs of the priest's sister show that Piotr Pupin served in Little Warsaw throughout the war, trying to protect his parish from both the occupiers' and partisans' robberies (Iz istorii gonenii katolicheskoi tserkvi 2013). The priest, who spoke German fluently, persuaded the Germans not to set the village of Haj on fire (Shukela 2013). Otherwise, the inhabitants of Little Warsaw remember the war as a competition for resources among several parties – invaders, partisans and other armed groups based in the local forests.

Even though the war slowed down the religious activities of the local Catholic community, faith and Christian solidarity persisted among the peasants during this time. The collective memory of Little Warsaw preserves miraculous episodes that happened to believers in these times of hardship. In 1943, for instance, many inhabitants were sick with typhus and suffered symptoms such as a high fever, hallucinations and a rash. As this disease is highly contagious and quickly transmitted through shared utensils, entire households were incapacitated for months. In the Chartovich family, ten people were sick. The mother remained the only healthy person to care for the entire family as other villagers did not dare to come into contact with them. With only one bowl and one spoon to eat from, she first fed her family, then crossed herself in front of icons before having the rest of her meal. The people of Little Warsaw believe that the faith and prayers of this woman protected her from the disease and gave her the strength to care for others.[2]

2 As ethnographers working in Belarus have pointed out, such miraculous sensibility is typical of the local Catholic population (See Zowczak 2013).

Because of the typhus and pneumonia epidemics and the lack of medical aid, many adults passed away, leaving behind multiple children. Although parentless children constituted a social issue in post-war Little Warsaw, none ended up in public orphanages. Extended families gathered to decide who would become a guardian for each child. The decision was based on available housing and the number of children in relatives' households. However, aunts and godmothers of orphans were more likely to become guardians. Families who had lost their homes to fire were also accommodated and supported by relatives and neighbours. One interviewee recalled how her mother went from one relative's house to another with a large basket, gradually replenished with sausages, eggs, bread and dairy products.

For my interlocutors in their early twenties, the post-war hardships and collectivisation coincided with significant changes in their personal lives. Finding a good match in post-war Little Warsaw was very difficult as there was a shortage of men of marriageable age – a consequence of the war and a broader nationwide phenomenon. Young women were often married off to other localities or, in some cases, married against their will to older house owners and widowers with children.

The story of three sisters, Regina, Janina and Józefa, who lost their home and both parents during the war, is rather typical. Their relatives gathered to decide where the girls would stay, and everyone pointed to their childless aunt, who had a house. Immediately after the war, the sisters' aunt, together with their godmother, tried to arrange marriages for the older girls. Regina, the eldest, was married off to a man in the city who was with a mobility impairment and much older than her. She was obviously married against her will, but her bitter lamentations did not stop her relatives. Józefa, the middle sister, was more stubborn. Before the war, she had been in a romantic relationship with a local man who subsequently joined an armed insurgent group and perished during one of the postwar clashes with Soviet forces. After surviving this personal tragedy, Józefa refused all attempts by her aunt to arrange her family life. She chose to leave Little Warsaw to search for work in the city and never married. The wedding of the youngest sister, Janina, was arranged by her stepbrothers. She was married to a young man from another locality who came to live at her aunt's house and thus became head of the household.

Susan Bridger (1987), who conducted research in Soviet Belarus during the 1980s, pointed out that women in the countryside were involved in every kind of work – labour on collective farms, childcare and subsistence food production and agriculture in their home. Although women's labour constituted a significant portion of the Soviet economy, working conditions were very poor. In the post-war decades, most of the food produced by collective farms remained inaccessible to rural dwellers, and collective farm workers were paid in equivalents of *trudodni*, conventional workday units. A brigade chief was responsible for registering *trudodni* for each worker by drawing sticks in a registration book. As my interlocutors recalled their

early years on collective farms, "What a life it was in the kolkhoz… They would draw those sticks and give us some grain at the end of the year."

Besides their main jobs at collective farms, peasant women maintained household subsistence farms to meet their families' needs. Despite their official roles in collective agriculture, Soviet peasants never fully relied on collective farms to sustain their families; they continued to cultivate their orchards and raise farm animals throughout the Soviet period. The state's stance on subsistence agriculture was ambivalent. While the government expected collective farming to gradually suppress individual domestic economies and launched several campaigns against private farming, it simultaneously permitted regulated household plots (*sotki*) to help villages partially supply themselves with food. Thus, people did not work on their plots *against* the system but rather within the boundaries it set.

The second aspect of women's labour, as noted by Susan Bridger, was the lack of facilities and social benefits for working mothers in the countryside. The first two decades after collectivisation were especially difficult in this regard. There was no paid maternity leave, and the daycare situation in the Belarusian countryside was among the worst in the entire Soviet Union (Bridger 1987, 114). Working mothers had to rely on traditional family and social structures, arranging childcare with the help of the *babka* (Belarusian for grandmother) and other female relatives. One of my interlocutors, who gave birth to her fourth child in 1960, recalled, "After Josef was born, I stayed home until noon, nursing him and washing nappies, while my aunt was in the field. In the early afternoon, she came home, and I took her place in the field."

Rural women's access to medical aid was also limited. Until the mid-1960s, most women in Little Warsaw gave birth at home, particularly in winter when ambulances could not reach their villages due to heavy snowfalls. Women had to be assisted by a local midwife or arrange transport to Khazhova, where they could be picked up by ambulance. Since there were no qualified paediatricians at the local medical point, families had to rely entirely on themselves to care for sick children. Parents brought doctors and nurses from the city, but many cases went without proper treatment. Several women in the village are remembered to have lost young children during epidemics of pneumonia, measles and other childhood diseases in the 1950s and 1960s.

Poor living conditions and a lack of social benefits led many young peasant women to retreat into family life; few left the village for the city, and even fewer became Soviet activists. While at least some men pursued opportunities for training and took positions in the kolkhoz, finding a degree of self-realisation there, most women remained confined to the domestic sphere. Stripped of its public significance, religion was also pushed into the private, largely female realm. Throughout the Soviet period, women acted as transmitters of religious tradition to younger generations,

teaching children prayers and ensuring religious observances at home: "With the closure of churches the role of women has been extended in the unofficial church. At the same time women believers continue to play an important part in preserving religious belief in their own families" (Bridger 1987, 186).

IN THE UNDERGROUND

According to Anna Engelking (2012, 720), state atheisation and collectivisation were interconnected. In line with this view, this article argues that the underground movement of the local Catholic community was a response to both these state campaigns.

Until 1939, the region was under Polish rule and thus remained untouched by Soviet reforms, unlike Eastern Belarus (Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic). A few years after World War II, the Soviets began pressuring local peasants to give up their land and join collective farms. First, they were required to lend money and grain and, later, to bring their horses, dairy cattle, pigs and agricultural equipment to the collective farms. The methods of persuasion used in Little Warsaw were rather typical, ranging from village meetings and psychological pressure, such as threatening one's children's future and night visits to peasants' homes, to physical abuse, arrests and the forced resettlement of well-off families (for a more detailed discussion of the methods used to persuade peasants, see Kligman and Verdery 2011). One of my interviewees recounted collectivisation in their village:

> The kolkhoz took everything from us – a horse, a cart, a plough, a threshing-floor, everything… and endlessly "lent" moneys, bread, eggs, meat, etc. Of course, they exerted huge pressure on us to make us sign those loans. They had appointed a village headman, and he arranged meetings in his home. Our aunt had to attend them as head of our household. One time, she had refused to sign a loan and came back home. They came to our home at night. As we did not let them in, they knocked on our door and on our windows all night long. In the morning, our aunt was back to sign the paper. There was no other way. We did not have any rights.

The peasants' responses to collectivisation were very diverse, ranging from delays and endless negotiations to occasional killings of Soviet activists. For instance, the agent responsible for food requisitions in Little Warsaw was found dead on the road from Brohauschyna to Kuleuschyna in 1949 (Pashkou 2002, 503). Official sources attributed such crimes to the activities of "bandits"; however, local collective memory points to acts of resistance.

The inhabitants of *khutors* (remote farms) were among the most difficult to convince and, ultimately, the most affected by collectivisation. They were forced to leave their plots of land and move to villages. Were they to refuse, the families were denied "all the advantages of civilisation", such as electricity at home, and their children were not admitted to school. Nevertheless, several families avoided collectivisation and remained outside the kolkhoz throughout the Soviet period. For example, one childless couple continued to live in their *khutor* without modern facilities, earning their living from domestic agriculture and natural resources. Another couple, who had not joined the kolkhoz, was known for actively participating in the underground church in Little Warsaw. Respected as knowledgeable people, they often acted as advisers on customs and family rituals. The wife was a locally renowned singer of religious anthems, while the husband was frequently invited to lead funeral processions carrying a cross.

The history of the underground Catholic community in Little Warsaw begins with the closure of the St. Anthony of Padua Church in Khazhova. The wooden church, where my interviewees attended catechesis classes and services, was erected in the first half of the eighteenth century. At that time, there was also a hospital and a school supervised by the Trinitarian order. After the Kastus Kalinowski uprising (1863), the tsarist government handed the church in Khazhova over to the Orthodox Church, as happened elsewhere in the western provinces of the Russian Empire. The Catholic community reclaimed the church only in 1919, and it remained open until 1947. In the post-war decade, the building was used as a kolkhoz store. It was eventually deconstructed in 1956 (Pashkou 2002, 694).

Father Piotr Pupin was arrested in 1949 and sentenced to ten (according to some sources, twenty-five) years in labour camps for "anti-Soviet propaganda" and "anti-partisan activities". He was sent to work in Vorkuta, near the Arctic Circle. After Stalin's death, the priest was rehabilitated and returned to Belarus. Until his death in 1978, Piotr Pupin served in the church in Rubiazhevichy and several other churches in the surrounding region (he was not allowed to return to the Maladzyechna region). Local authorities repeatedly fined him for such "violations of the law" as performing baptisms at home, erecting crosses and making religious inscriptions (Iz istorii gonenii katolicheskoi tserkvi 2013).

This situation reflects the ambivalent position of the church in the Soviet Union. It was not a matter of complete liquidation but of tightly controlled existence, operating within strict state-imposed limits. In 1946, there were officially 238 Catholic churches in Belarus (Shybieka 2003, 374). However, as it was across the entirety of the Soviet Union, the state closely monitored priests' activities – from their financial dealings, such as collecting money for religious causes, to their interactions beyond local communities (see also Bohn and Einax 2018, Khiterer 2020). Gatherings

of believers were also surveilled, ensuring that urban residents, especially party members and those with secure jobs, were discouraged from participating in religious life.

The old church as well as other sanctuaries for the local Catholics were destroyed, such as smaller chapels and roadside crosses. The wooden cross at the entrance to the village of Brohauschyna was perhaps the only one that survived the Soviet era, standing in the shadow of a lilac tree. During the Soviet period, the inhabitants of Little Warsaw did not dare to pray outdoors, their homes seeming to provide a safer haven for community prayers. A woman born in 1931 recalled how the *malenne* (Belarusian for praying) had begun:

> Earlier we did not go to the cross but devoted our May and June prayers from homes. For instance, we [our family] hosted *Maiovyia* [May devotions] many times. We arranged a table with a cross and decorated it with flowers. It was our altar. Everyone from the village would come to our place; only those who were away for some reason would not. For instance, we would host the May devotions, while someone else would host the June devotions. Before Easter, people also gathered to recite litanies. So, we prayed at home and did not go to the cross.

According to the interviewee, from the 1950s to the 1970s, neighbours gathered to pray on Sundays, major Christian holidays and every evening during May and June. Since the mid-1970s, Sunday prayers have gradually shifted to the family circle, but May devotions have retained their communal significance.[3]

Nevertheless, the local cult of the Virgin Mary was not confined to May devotions. Mary was also celebrated during another important holiday — the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, or Our Lady of Herbs into Heaven (15 August). In local popular tradition, this holiday is known as *Aspazha*, a term that could be etymologically connected to both *Haspazha* (Belarusian for "Mistress") and *zhat'* (meaning "the act of harvesting"). This holiday, rooted in both agricultural and Christian calendars, was also considered a kind of women's day in Little Warsaw.

Throughout the Soviet era, local women maintained the tradition of a small pilgrimage to the church of Krasnaje (built in 1912), where an annual *Aspazha* feast took place and homegrown crops and herbs were blessed. In the collective memory

3 May devotions to Mary are an old Catholic tradition popular throughout Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Believers were encouraged by the Church to gather in small groups and families to sing Marian anthems and read from the Scriptures, reflecting on the life of the Virgin Mary. A distinctive feature of these devotions is the May altar, arranged in churches and homes with a Marian image, candles and May flowers. The devotions culminated at the end of May when the image of Mary was crowned (Mrówka 2010).

of local Catholics, this church holds a special place. Not only was it dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, but it was also the only church that remained open in the entire Maladzyechna region during Soviet times. Several generations of local Catholics were secretly baptised and married there.

Women from Little Warsaw did their best to attend the *Aspazha* celebration in Krasnaje, a major social event. On this occasion, they wore their finest garments and prepared baskets filled with garden flowers, fruits and vegetables. Travelling in groups of up to twenty, they either walked the approximately fifteen kilometres to Krasnaje or hired kolkhoz drivers. Given the distance and the season's heat, this journey was often a considerable effort, especially as the women were also involved in kolkhoz harvesting. As a result, planning and preparation for the event began well in advance. During the pilgrimage, the women chatted and sang Marian anthems.

Unsurprisingly, the underground religious community of Little Warsaw chose the Virgin Mary as their patron. Women were more active than men in sustaining everyday religious practices and organising family rituals and holiday celebrations, but they also served as leaders within village communities – as was the case in Brohauschyna. A woman named Jadviga is remembered as having led the local Catholics for several decades, acting "as a priest" during Sunday prayers and May devotions and overseeing religious observances in the village. After her death, Jadviga was succeeded by another female leader.

Women from Little Warsaw who worked in the city often served as mediators between their village and the church in Maladzyechna, which was housed in a barrack. These female mediators were asked to contact priests on behalf of their rural relatives, provide ritual food and objects and accommodate visitors from Little Warsaw coming for religious purposes. For instance, they might obtain holy water and bless *Svianconka* (Easter food) before Easter, purchase icons or lockets for children or arrange baptisms or funeral services with priests. Food and objects were usually delivered to the countryside through common acquaintances and distributed among relatives. Such networks were extremely important and helped maintain religious rituals since rural dwellers rarely had the opportunity to attend church themselves.

EVERYDAY RELIGIOSITY AND SILENT RESISTANCE

For Belarusian peasants who had earlier given up their land, their faith and traditions were the last things they refused to renounce. For the generation of my interviewees, these elements formed the cornerstone of their identity and served as a key component in continuity between generations. At the same time, religious rituals, as well as everyday expressions of faith, created a space for local solidarity and subtle resistance.

Observing major Christian holidays was essential to local religiosity during Soviet times. According to my interlocutors, they deliberately avoided working on these important days, despite the fact that such holidays were officially regular business days. They would arrange to be replaced by Orthodox acquaintances or simply not appear at work on those days. Local kolkhoz functionaries mostly turned a blind eye to these absences, with the harshest penalty being the denial of bonuses to their monthly wages. Because the decision to skip work was collective, the women felt secure and unafraid of facing consequences.

On the one hand, peasants occupied one of the lowest rungs within Soviet society, a fact they were fully aware of. On the other hand, this marginal position granted them a certain degree of freedom that employees in urban enterprises could not enjoy. Urban dwellers feared losing their jobs, party membership and social standing if they stepped out of line. In contrast, rural people generally were not party members. Among the entire older generation of Little Warsaw, only one man was a member of the Communist Party. He worked as an "ordinary" watchman, and the community did not take his party affiliation seriously. Another man is said to have been a party member for just one night – a story his wife recounted with a mix of humour and disbelief:

> No, there were no party people among us [dwellers of Little Warsaw]. My husband was in the party for one night. He worked as a storekeeper in Khazhova, and they harassed him there. One day, the main agronomist of the kolkhoz came to our place by car and took him away. When he returned home, I understood everything (that he had applied for membership in the party). I could not talk to him without crying. I did not want it: what was the purpose of being in the party for an ordinary storekeeper? It was unnecessary, it was a shame… and he changed his mind. In the morning, he took his application back. The party was for those in the cities who held important posts, but not for ordinary people.

The above interview is remarkable for several reasons. First, it again reveals women's agency and ability to stand up for traditional values in a critical moment. Second, it demonstrates the solidarity among local peasants and their own perception of their role in Soviet society – the woman does not want her husband to be a party member because the party is "not for ordinary people" and none of their neighbours are members either.

Other, more invisible, signs of solidarity among the local peasants were present throughout the Soviet period at a more everyday level. In Little Warsaw, older believers greeted each other with the words "*Niech będzie pochwalony Jezus Chrystus"* (Pol. "Praised be Jesus Christ"). Most children born in Little Warsaw between

the 1950s and 1970s were given Catholic names, such as Czesława, Katarzyna, Helena, Władysława, Józefa, Teresa and Irena for girls and Walentyn, Mieczysław, Stefan and Józef for boys.

A Christian greeting, crossing children before letting them go to school in the morning, or even marking a loaf of bread or freshly made butter with a cross – all were small demonstrations of faith that took on great meaning in extraordinary times. Repeated daily by believers, they not only fostered cultural identity but also clearly marked the boundaries between the local Catholic community and the outside "atheist" world.

Nonetheless, two questions that arise from my material are (1) what the state policy was towards the rural population and (2) how the state coped with demonstrations of religiosity, such as the refusal to work on religious holidays. It seems there were two levels in the organisation of Soviet atheist propaganda: the state level and a more everyday, local level. While official anti-religious policies mandated special atheist education in the countryside, local propagandists generally did not concern themselves with older believers. They assumed the tradition would die out along with its last representatives and therefore preferred to focus on children and youth. For instance, schoolteachers carried out their Sunday duty at church entrances, making lists of schoolchildren who attended Sunday services with their parents. While the whole family gathered at home for Easter breakfast, the schoolchildren had to leave for a *Voskresnik*[4] to perform work tasks for their school or kolkhoz. Though the women continued teaching prayers to their children and made sure they prayed before going to bed, the atheistic education also bore fruit. My interviewees recall receiving critical remarks about their religious observances from their growing children. Combined with the absence of religious institutions and the lack of quality time spent with parents, this gradually led to the decline of religious education among those born in Little Warsaw after World War II. As some of my interlocutors have acknowledged, "We observed everything at home but failed to bring our children to church."

1990S REVIVAL

In his introductory essay on religion in the post-Soviet space, Douglas Rogers (2005) emphasises the interconnection between economic transformation and religious

4 In the Soviet Union, *Voskresnik* (from Russ. *Voskresenje* – Sunday) was a form of (obligatory) volunteer work, often carried out on weekends. Unlike *Subbotnik* (from Russ. *Subbota* – Saturday), *Voskresnik*s were also used as a tool of atheist upbringing and were deliberately scheduled on major Christian holidays.

revival through the expression "religion as marketplace". Indeed, religion provided a rescue from material hardship and social turbulence for many former Soviet citizens, and the competition among religions and denominations often resembled the post-Soviet developments in the local markets. The religious "marketplace" offered a lot of flexibility in the city, where conversions from Orthodox Christianity to Catholicism or Protestantism and vice versa were not rare (for a discussion of religion after socialism, see Naumescu 2007, Hann 2010 and Halemba 2015).

All of the above, however, cannot be fully applied to the countryside. The main change that occurred in Little Warsaw with the fall of the Soviet Union was that the residents started making their faith visible. Starting in the 1990s, May and June devotions were held before newly placed crosses on the roads. Those early wooden crosses were raised on the initiative and through the efforts of local Catholics. For the local women, the 1990s and the accompanying freedom of belief marked the beginning of a competition – every village woman not only arranged a home altar with old and recently obtained icons and a crucifix but brought something of her own (for instance, garden flowers) to decorate a village cross. After being blessed by a priest, the new crosses of Little Warsaw became small centres of local religious life, where May and June devotions took place, funeral processions stopped, and every believer, coming or going, paused to cross herself or himself.

In the 1990s, the local Catholicism retained its female face – the majority of devotion participants were elderly women who brought their grandchildren. Several grandmothers with up to ten grandchildren were a typical praying group. For my interviewees, the collapse of the Soviet Union coincided with their retirement. Though they still practised small-scale subsistence agriculture, they had more time to devote to their faith and family, including the religious education of the young. They rarely had a chance to bring their grandchildren to church. However, they did their best to convince the parents of the necessity of taking catechesis classes as preparation for First Communion.

In the middle of the 1990s, the development of the local Catholicism began a new phase. In 1995, Little Warsaw was included in the St. Josef Church District and, later, in the St. Kazimir Church District with a centre in Maladzyechna. The priests would visit their elderly parishioners at Christmas time, pray at the local cemeteries on All Saints' Day and come to their homes on various family occasions. Because of their age and health issues, elderly inhabitants of Little Warsaw could not go to church. A solution was found in the 2010s by establishing a makeshift community church in the former *selsovet* building in Khazhova. For the older generation of Little Warsaw, this has been especially meaningful, symbolising the return of the community centre to where an old church stood before the war.

According to the official data from January 2002, the overall Catholic population of Little Warsaw numbered approximately a hundred people, residing in fifty-nine

houses (Fibek 2002). During my fieldwork, the local Catholic community was even smaller. Nevertheless, many of today's parishioners of the churches in Maladzyechna and Krasnaje come from Little Warsaw. The generation of my interviewees' children, who are in their fifties and sixties now, is currently re-entering the church, viewing this process as their way of reconciling with the past and reconnecting with the generations that preceded them.

The underground efforts of my interlocutors during the Soviet period eventually bore fruit: on the morning of 15 August 2015 (*Aspazha*), I watched several women – none of whom had been known as believers in Soviet times – leaving their mothers' homes for the annual feast in Krasnaje. On their way, they shared memories of their mothers and grandmothers, for whom this day had been important.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on earlier scholarship on peasant resistance and forms of agency, this paper raises two main questions: first, whether everyday religiosity in an atheist state may be seen as a form of resistance, and second, how women became the founders and leaders of the underground church in Little Warsaw. Analysis of the collected material provided a positive answer to the first question. Despite the atheistic propaganda and anti-religious actions initiated by the state, ordinary people from the countryside continued praying individually and in groups, celebrating religious holidays and practising family rituals. These acts were also quiet demonstrations of solidarity, as community members supported one another in reproducing their shared values. Their silent resistance proved effective in the long run – the older generation of Little Warsaw, through their collective perseverance, managed to keep their family and religious traditions alive and thus secure generational continuity and the religious revival of the 1990s.

The second question requires a more elaborate discussion. Based on my analysis, two interrelated interpretations of female religious leadership may be offered. The first was suggested to me through the work of Agnieszka Kościańska, in which she makes the statement: "When men are present, women keep silent" (Kościańska 2009, 59). The Catholic community that existed through the old church in Khazhova was led by a priest and, to a great degree, was based on male authority. When those structures were removed, women might have felt more freedom in launching "their own" church. The Soviets also organised their work in the countryside through traditional male structures (for instance, the institute of eldership). They saw men as potential Soviet cadres, whereas women were often left aside. The religion that was no longer in demand by the state was gradually relegated to the women's space, along with family and child-rearing. Being denied a proper position within Soviet society,

rural women withdrew into their families and female circles, joining together in underground religious communities. From this viewpoint, the underground church appears as an embodiment of female solidarity in the Soviet countryside.

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