

# When Pilgrims Emigrate

## The Skaro Pilgrimage to Our Lady

*Henriette A. Kelker and David J. Goa*

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Polish immigrants in Alberta, Canada, have, since their arrival 100 years ago, established shrines and initiated pilgrimages as a way to re-establish a cultural and religious rhythm which had been temporarily interrupted by their journey. In this paper, the pilgrimage to the Lourdes Grotto at Skaro, Alberta, is explored against the background of the Polish immigrant history in Alberta, and of a changing pilgrimage tradition in the Western world. The phases of pilgrimage as discussed by Victor and Edith Turner are also the key phases of immigration. While its old heritage anchors the Albertan pilgrimage firmly in the European tradition, the immigrant journey which is shared by the Polish pilgrims adds a dimension to the Albertan pilgrimage which is uniquely Canadian.

*Henriette A. Kelker, Research Associate, Provincial Museum of Alberta, 12845 - 102 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 0M6, Canada*

*David J. Goa, Curator of Folklife, Provincial Museum of Alberta and Adjunct Professor, St. Stephen's College, University of Alberta, 12845 - 102 Avenue, Edmonton, Alberta T5N 0M6, Canada. E-mail: DGoa@mcd.gov.ab.ca.*

“Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne  
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,  
And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages);  
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...”  
(The Canterbury Tales)

Immigrants bring with them to Canada a living tradition, a cultural memory and their own ways of satisfying their daily needs. Domestic crafts, culinary specialties, celebrations, and worship patterns are all part of this wealth of skills and knowledge. In the Polish community, initiating pilgrimage was a way to re-establish a cultural and religious rhythm which had been temporarily interrupted by immigration. However, there are now many annual pilgrimages to shrines erected by pious Catholics who sought this particular kind of religious experience. In Alberta, where the first Protestant clergy arrived only 155 years ago, and the first Catholic

priest four years later, Christian pilgrimage can hardly be called a tradition. But the increasing popularity of pilgrimage in Alberta stems from motivations and experiences which are markedly different from those contributing to recent increases in popularity of pilgrimages in Europe.

The development of pilgrimage in Alberta raises a number of interesting cultural anthropology and social history questions. To consider these questions, first we will place the Polish-Canadian community's pilgrimage to the Lourdes Grotto at Skaro against an historical background of both pilgrimage in general and the pilgrimage tradition in Poland. Second, we will consider the Skaro pilgrimage in the context both of the Polish immigrant community in Alberta and of a changing pilgrimage tradition in the Western world. Third, we will review the process of pilgrimage and discuss the similarity between the process of pilgrimage and the process of immigration. Fourth, we will examine the pilgrimage to Skaro in terms of its function

within the Polish-Canadian community. Both the contextual description as well as the functional analysis are based on interviews with immigrants conducted during 1994 and 1995, as well as on the scholarship about immigrant and religious history in this province.

Prior to World War I many Polish immigrants were motivated to come to Canada by extreme poverty at home and by an abundance of cheap land in Western Canada. The Honourable Clifford Sifton, Canada's Minister of the Interior, promoted Eastern European immigration in order to develop Western Canada. While many in Poland were poor, only those in the provinces which were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were free to emigrate. From 1895 to 1914, farmers from Galicia settled in the rural areas around Edmonton. At the same time, mining companies in Alberta recruited skilled labour from Silesia. Thus, Southern Alberta received many Polish people from this region. After World War I, although many still came from poor rural areas, increasing political tension became a major motive for immigration.

The Polish-Albertan pioneer period has been extensively documented by Joanna Matejko in her collection of interviews and memoirs of Polish settlers in Alberta (Matejko 1979). The early immigrants worked as farm labourers (Edmonton area), in logging camps, in mines (Banff, Crowsnest Pass, Drumheller), and on the railway (Calgary). The recorded stories speak of a life of determined hard work, isolation, and the building of close communities.

After World War II, immigrants came to Canada to build a new life free from the communist government. Veterans, survivors from concentration camps, military prisoners, and displaced persons arrived after several years of travel, battle, and detainment. During the 1960s and 1970s Polish people continued to come to Canada to seek freedom from communism. Many were accomplished scientists, whose professional opportunities were limited in their own country. Some were sponsored by relatives who had settled in Canada in a previous generation, which explains why extended families with similar regional backgrounds tend to live in the same areas of Alberta.

A dramatic increase in immigration occurred in the 1980s when Poland came under martial law. Between 1985 and 1994, a total of 3,500 immigrants were sponsored by the Immigration Commissions of the respective branches of the Canadian Polish Congress in Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta's two major cities of around 500,000 inhabitants each.

While life in the early part of the century was hard, it was characterized by an elemental simplicity. Immigrants built up a new life literally with their own hands. Many who have arrived here more recently experience greater difficulties adapting, because of a different social infrastructure, political system, and work condition.

Polish identity is marked by a deep Marian devotion, a rootedness in the land, and a history of war, oppression, and boundary changes. "Matka Boska" is celebrated as the patron saint of seeding and planting, hay-making, and harvest (Przybylski 1966), while as "Queen of Poland" she has inspired the Polish nation during centuries of battle, as well as during its proud intellectual and artistic development. The life of the Virgin Mary moves through the life of the Polish people and orients them in time and place. People participate in pilgrimage because it is time to do so. The liturgical calendar is part of the popular and local spiritual rhythm which announces pilgrimages as regularly as it announces summer and winter. Resistance to social reorganization by the communists was effectively accomplished through reinforcement of the established patterns of the Church and the rhythms of popular piety. Communal participation in pilgrimage throughout the year is one significant place where religious and national consciousness reinforce each other. The congruence of ecclesiastical forms and popular piety sustained in many a deep sense of patriotism and expressed the unity of the Church and the Polish people (Piwowski 1982).

Popular piety in many countries of the world has remained stubbornly unmoved at times of sweeping social and political change, offering the community the power to prevail and the courage to resist. Religious rites in general, and pilgrimage in particular, gained significance in Poland after World War II. Because "Poles had



Fig. 1. Building the grotto in 1918: a community effort. Courtesy of the Provincial Archives of Alberta.

no state of their own, they identified themselves with Catholicism, which not just guarantees identity, but also protects human dignity and hope” (Piwowarski 1982: 26).

Polish immigrants coming to Alberta at different times have all had to reorient themselves physically and spiritually in a new world. Few images connected them with the familiar environment they had left, and no received local tradition embodied the rhythm of life. The religious expression of the Polish community, both the language of gesture and the use of the mother tongue, made the church a particular cultural landscape largely separate from the public sphere of the local community. The need for priests knowledgeable of the customs of the different immigrant groups is well illustrated by an anecdote related by Fr. Anthony Sylla, a

priest who served the Polish community in its initial settlement:

“When Easter came, the pioneers, (not having a priest of their own) brought food to be blessed to St. Mary’s church, as was customary with the Poles and Ukrainians. Father Lacombe, who was then the parish priest, thought that the good people were bringing presents to him. He asked the lay brothers to gather all the food and bring it to the rectory. But the ‘good’ people refused to give the food and tried to explain, as well as they could, that they wanted it blessed. Father Lacombe was only too happy to bless it ...” (paraphrased, Matejko 1979: 350–351).<sup>1</sup>

Polish settlers started coming to Alberta in 1895. During the first years of settlement, the immigrants were occasionally visited by the

Fathers Wolciech and Kulawy from the Holy Ghost Parish in Winnipeg, over 1000 km away. In 1889, the diocese of St. Albert attracted Father François Olszewski to serve the new immigrants. Soon after his arrival the diocese secured land to build the first chapels in Skaro and Krakow, both about 100 km East of Edmonton. As more Polish people came into the province, the blessing of newly completed churches in the area around Edmonton came to be an annual occurrence. Many rural communities had built churches before Poles began settling in cities. The first Polish church in Edmonton was built in 1913.

In the summer of 1918, Father Antoni Sylla, *omi*, took the initiative to build a grotto at Skaro in east central Alberta named for the pilgrimage of Lourdes. Father Sylla was born in Popielów, Poland, in 1881, but left Poland as a young boy in search for work. At the age of 14 he chose to become a priest and received his education from the Oblate Fathers in Valkenburg and in Houthem, the Netherlands, and in Hünfeld, Germany. It is probably during these years that Fr. Sylla became acquainted with the many Lourdes Grottos built of rocks and cinders that were popular in the Western European mining districts. These shrines provided the model for the grottos he built in several Polish-Canadian communities on the prairies, where the local farmers gathered rocks as they cleared and prepared fields for cultivation. There was plenty of this hard won building material.

By local account it took 600 wagon loads and 300 bags of cement to build the Skaro grotto. The first pilgrimage took place on August 14, 1919, two months after placement of the first stone. Today, more than 75 years later, between 3,000 and 5,000 people come from all over Canada to its annual pilgrimage on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, which begins on the eve of August 14 and moves through the feast day on the 15th.

The shrine was built on donated land next to the church. This process of choosing a pilgrimage site was remarkably pragmatic compared to the apparitions and miracles which inspired many of the European pilgrimage sites.<sup>2</sup> This comparison does not faze Polish immigrants. As one informant pointed out: "Divine power man-

ifests itself in curious ways and the act of offering land may well be as much inspired by divine will as is the recognition of the Virgin Mary standing on a rock. After all, who selected Mount Sinai as a place for revelation — Moses or Yahweh?"<sup>3</sup> What matters is that the annual pilgrimage to Skaro shapes an annual journey to a sacred place, to visit historically significant ground, and to participate with thousands of others in worship.

John Huculak, the grandson of the donors of the Skaro grounds, wrote of the events preceding the building of the shrine (Huculak 1990). Huculak notes that an influenza epidemic struck the community in 1918, the same year in which the new Skaro church was dedicated to the Assumption of the Holy Virgin on August 14. Over 1,000 people attended this dedication — a huge number at a time in which church dedications were a common occurrence. No doubt such a crisis, to say nothing of the shadow of the Great War and the advent of Bolshevism, galvanized the Polish community. Against this historical backdrop, the Polish community re-created its pilgrimage tradition, a means of participating in the rhythm of life and death which had been established by their ancestors in the old country. After this unexpectedly large gathering at Skaro, the decision was made to build a shrine.

The shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes at Skaro is closely associated with the cemetery, and no pilgrim fails to pay a visit there during their pilgrimage. The monument to the Pioneers, located at the edge of the cemetery, reads: "In remembrance of our pioneers, who built our first church in the year 1900." The community actively maintains the connection with the first pioneers. School children in the Polish programs learn about their pioneer history and about Skaro. The pictures drawn by students from the Polish program at St. Basil's school in Edmonton, after their pilgrimage to Skaro, give remarkable prominence to the cemetery. During discussion, too, students commented repeatedly on the prayers at the cemetery for the repose of the souls of the people buried there. Here they encountered the names and burial spots of many young children and thus contemplate human mortality.<sup>4</sup>

The Skaro pilgrimage today draws people from Alberta and beyond. The numbers of pilgrims have varied over the years, with a marked increase in the past decade. Some of the increase can be attributed to the increased Polish population in the province. Since Father Strankowski became parish priest of Skaro in 1986, his publicity program also invites non-Polish churches in the Calgary and Edmonton dioceses to the annual event. In 1993 the Skaro church celebrated its 75th anniversary, which created some additional interest, and in the past two years, the date of the pilgrimage has fallen on the weekend, enabling greater numbers of pilgrims to attend. In 1995, the 100th anniversary of Polish settlement in the province has been celebrated with a year of extensive festivities, culminating in the pilgrimage attended by Archbishop Szczepan Wesoly from Rome. The Archbishop is a delegate of the primate, Cardinal Glemp, and is appointed by the Vatican to look after the spiritual needs of Polish priests serving the diaspora Polish communities. There were over 4,000 pilgrims in 1995.

Pilgrims come by bus, car, or camper. The pilgrimage stretches over two days and families engage old friends, touch ancestral ties in the cemetery and in the telling and re-telling of local story, and, cultivate their faith through the various liturgies. The pilgrims' journey includes the gathering of the community, praying the rosary in Polish and English, a vesper service in Polish, confession, and then Divine Liturgy in the evening. A few hardy pilgrims park in the nearby town of Star and walk the last 10 km to the grotto. For those who come by bus, the opportunity to sing Marian hymns during the ride prepares them for the evening. Priests from the region hear numerous confessions at the *prie-dieus* which are discretely placed in the woods surrounding the site. The market atmosphere of pilgrimages has a modest expression at Skaro with a few stands where the faithful may purchase books, religious objects, candles, and food to augment their picnic baskets. The colour guard of the Knights of Columbus<sup>5</sup>, the procession, and the Liturgy — normally, celebrated by the Archbishop of Edmonton — builds up to the climax of the pil-

grimage. At dusk the pilgrims carry candles and form a procession along the main pathway of the grotto. The procession moves slowly as the faithful sing hymns to Our Lady. Many pilgrims stop along the pathway and pray at one of the statues. Some leave their candles at various places along the way, stuck on rocks and ledges all around the grotto. More candles are carried to the cemetery where soon the whole grave site is alight. This procession captures the heart of the Skaro pilgrimage. Its power lies in the people's ownership of the celebration.

The Marian aspect of many pilgrimages in Europe has been re-oriented at Skaro. The presence of the Archbishop for the Liturgy on the eve of the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary highlights a particular challenge Roman Catholicism faces in the Alberta context. The local diocese has a number of churches which retain their ethnic character, although it is clear from various Canadian Catholic documents that this is simply to accommodate the large immigrant populations until they acculturate to Canada.

Rome has long been uneasy with churches that are an intense part of the cultural and national life of a people, particularly where ethnic Catholics are in the minority. The Ultramontanist debates of past centuries remain in the background of the Skaro pilgrimage but it is noticeable in the theme the Archbishop commonly addresses in his homilies. Over a number of years the Archbishop has used this occasion to temper the faithful's devotion to the Virgin Mary, pointing out that, as much as she is to be loved, she is not the focus of the spiritual life of Roman Catholics. Rather, they must remain vigilant to ensure that the Holy Trinity is always the focus of their piety. They may appreciate the Virgin Mary but must never let her impede their focus on Christ and the Holy Trinity. What is worthy of note here is that, within the context of this feast dedicated to the Virgin, the Archbishop has moved from building his homily on her place in the spirituality of Poles, to orienting the spiritual focus away from this dimension of popular piety. In a diocese where a Polish church is something of an anomaly accommodated for historical reasons, the pilgrimage dedicated to Mary, at her pilgrimage



Fig. 2. The Skaro Grotto ready for the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady, August 14, 1995. Courtesy of the Provincial Museum of Alberta.

site, and with considerable cultural memory associated with such a focus, is treated with a touch of uneasiness by the Archbishop. In a Polish cultural context, it is difficult to imagine a priest or bishop not using the opportunity to emphasize that dimension of the spiritual life of which Mary is the symbol and focus.

Europe has witnessed a significant increase in the popularity of pilgrimage during the past decades. Not only has the number of pilgrims climbed to new heights, but the age profile of participants has changed. The tourist industry has been quick to develop pilgrim tours, souvenirs, literature, and audio-video products. The “motivation clusters” driving the modern pilgrimage are complex and must be seen as a system of interacting forces, none of which is solely responsible, and all of which are affected by each other (Post: 1989). Renewed interest in participation parallels a growing interest in spectatorship. At the local level, in many cases, one can speak of the “staging” of a pilgrimage to

which both participants and spectators flock in droves, as they do to a variety of historic re-enactments (Post 1991). This is not to say that there is not also a certain renewal of religious piety at the same time, especially among young people. As one participant on the pilgrimage to Czestochowa observed: “Quand j’étais jeune prêtre, je me rappelle que les fidèles avaient peur de parler de Dieu. Ce n’est plus le cas aujourd’hui...” (Giovannoni, Mallein & Szot 1990: 51).

Media coverage plays a major role in developing people’s awareness of spectacular events. The media have long been reporting on the major pilgrimage sites in Europe, and have increasingly focused the public eye on the smaller local events by listing them in calendars of attractions, encouraging tourists to seek these events out as a destination for their outings. The tourist industry is both pro-active and reactive in this. It actively promotes its own interest and creates a market for itself, while

responding to perceived trends and developing interests.<sup>16</sup>

In Alberta there is no question of any tourist industry promoting pilgrimage, or of the accommodation of spectators. The Skaro setting is remote and rural, in an area where farms are five to ten km apart. The closest town of a few hundred inhabitants is Star, 10 km south and the closest point of recreational interest, Elk Island National park, is 20 km south. The pilgrimage to Skaro is known only among Poles and those who live in the immediate vicinity. "Sight-seeing" is not yet a motive for participation. Yet every year more people converge at this sacred site. The word is spreading among Roman Catholics of non-Polish origin and the number of Poles who attend is continuing to rise.

The increased popularity of pilgrimage in Europe has sparked a new, or renewed, interest in pilgrimage as a cultural and social phenomenon. In a clearly organised overview of themes and trends in pilgrimage research since 1986, Paul Post shows the impact of an increasingly interdisciplinary approach in developing a new understanding of pilgrimage in a varied contextual structure (Post 1994). The analysis of motives for some European pilgrimages is relevant to research on Canadian pilgrimage because it illuminates the complexity of the motivation clusters and the interaction of various social and religious factors. The immigrant history of Western Canada introduces a number of new factors to be explored in relation to pilgrimage.

Although the functions of pilgrimage are many, its process is characteristic and holds a degree of constancy through the ages. Victor and Edith Turner's division of the pilgrimage process into the three phases of detachment, liminality, and transformation, continues to be a valuable analytical theory. The Turners' model is based on van Gennep's analysis (Van Gennep 1908). According to van Gennep, rites of passage ritualise the experiences characteristic of the passage from one phase of life into the next and enable the community to participate in this otherwise private development. The process of passage resembles the process of immigration. The journey into the unknown is a recurring theme in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from the departure of Abraham and

Sarah from Ur to the journey of the Apostle Paul among the gentiles. This journey, undertaken to satisfy a need for a closer encounter with God, is a search for fulfilment.

The phases of pilgrimage as explained by the Turners – the death of the old which occurs when one embarks on a pilgrimage, the period of unstructured potential in which *communitas* occurs as a gift of grace, and the transformation marked by re-entry into a structured life at a new level – are likewise the key phases of immigration. For the immigrant, the irrevocable loss of homeland remains a haunting occurrence throughout life. Hence the prominent role of the pioneer cemetery, where not just the bodies of loved ones are buried, but where a reminder of the lost past with which one continues to feel close ties remains.

The phase of liminality, or unstructured openness to possibilities, is particularly significant in immigration. Virtually no situation the new immigrant faces has routine answers and solutions. The future unfolds at the margin of the past which has been left behind, without the interference or guidance of an established pattern. At this threshold, unburdened by the expectations of convention, the immigrant has little choice but to interact fully with the opportunities offered by the future. Because this unstructured state (at least at the level of self-understanding) is by nature unstable, few people remain comfortable there for very long. Yet in this phase human potential for creativity is often realised and the personal accounts of the early pioneers reflect this. Matejko has recorded many examples of the resourcefulness and creativity displayed by new immigrants (Matejko: 1979). In this phase, also, both isolation and *communitas* are most strongly experienced.

Emigration is a journey toward a new life in a new land. The realization of this goal is marked by the appropriation of new ground as "one's own". Emigration is also a journey toward the re-creation of a structured life. Structure emerges through the integration of the new physical surroundings with a continuing cultural memory. This takes time as the emerging pattern needs to be both functional and comfortable, providing cultural identity as well as room to be alive in a new world.

Apart from the experiences of individual immigrants, the immigrant community as a whole can be seen as having moved through the rites of passage process. When considering the history of pilgrimage in Poland and the settlement history of the Polish immigrants sketched here, it is clear how the two processes resonate when superimposed on each other. Initially there was no Polish community in Alberta, merely clusters of individual immigrants in a new land. Eventually local communities were forged, finding their identity in a common heritage and shared experience. In order for pilgrimage to serve the same function for immigrants in Canada as it does for people in Poland — integrating the rhythm of worship with the rhythm of life — it is necessary for the immigrants to have reached a stage of stability. Thus the people need to have discovered a new rhythm in their lives which includes moments for acknowledging gifts, for grieving losses, and for experiencing a closeness to the new land. By 1918, the Polish community had come to such a stable stage in its life. They had a new homeland and a new community. The newcomers had established themselves on land they could call their own and together they had encountered many crises. To give expression to feelings of grief as well as thanksgiving, the community needed to add a new dimension to its worship.

Father Sylla sensed the longing and the readiness of the community to establish a pilgrimage through which the people could express all the grief and joy of their new life in a new land. The building of the shrine at Skaro has its roots in the Polish folk tradition, according to which pilgrimage is part of the rhythm of life. At the end of the pilgrim's journey the celebration of the Mass completes the re-entry into the structured world. For the Polish settlers, the first pilgrimage to Skaro completed a journey and acknowledged re-entry into a world which they now knew was their own. This process of revalorization is an annual experience at the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin. For the immigrant pilgrim, the encounter with the familiar symbolism of the Roman Liturgy becomes a moment of being part of the new world and of the kingdom of heaven, of coming home and of facing the world anew.

The pilgrimage to Skaro, since it is barely seventy-five years old, has a particular place among pilgrimages. Few communities today combine such a short history with such an old heritage. The short history makes the observation of its development unusually accessible, while its old heritage anchors the pilgrimage firmly in the European tradition. Against the backdrop of a complex system of influences, the pilgrimage to Skaro emerges as a dynamic event which continues to develop. During the 1980s, when Polish immigration to Alberta reached new heights, so did the pilgrimage to Skaro. This increase in enthusiasm still continues. Since the lifting of martial law in Poland, Polish immigrants often travel to Europe to participate in pilgrimages in their home country and other places. These travellers return with renewed zeal and bring back some of the European revival ethos. However, while the pilgrimage to Skaro may reflect some of the renewed popularity of European pilgrimages, it remains closely linked to the immigrant history of the pilgrims, thus adding a dimension to its function which is uniquely Canadian.

## Notes

1. Father Albert Lacombe (1827–1916), an Oblate priest, is one of Western Canada's most famous missionaries. He devoted most of his life to work with the Cree and Blackfoot peoples and on occasion served Polish and other settlement communities.
2. Turner & Turner point out that "Whereas medieval Marian pilgrimages are seldom known to have begun as the immediate consequence of a vision, the post industrial pilgrimages clearly owe their origin to particular visionary or apparition experiences." The origin of the medieval pilgrimages is seldom identifiable, their "foundation narratives have a mythical quality and seem to have arisen long after the pilgrimages were operant" (Turner & Turner 1978: 209).
3. Interview with a pilgrim from the Edmonton Polish community.
4. Taped interview. Provincial Museum of Alberta, Folklife Collection. tape # AU95.9
5. The Knights of Columbus, a fraternal and beneficial society of Catholic men, was founded in New Haven, Connecticut in 1882. It is a popular society in Canada and is devoted to Catholic education



- and charity. They characteristically provide a uniformed honour guard at the Skaro pilgrimage.
6. Similar developments have been noted in Japan, where a renewed interest in pilgrimage has been accompanied with materialistically oriented marketing techniques, advertising, air-conditioned busses, and luxury hotels for pilgrims (Reader 1987).

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