

56. Szypenitz

Saint Mary Ukrainian Orthodox Church

The Szypenitz Ukrainian Orthodox Church of St. Mary derives its name from the village of Shypyntsi, located in Kitsman Raion, Chernivtsi Oblast, Western Ukraine. This settlement, situated along a tributary of the Prut River, was home to many Bukovynian settlers who emigrated to Canada in the early 20th century, forming the Szypenitz School District in 1906 and the nearby Shepenge Post Office in 1911.

Early Establishment and First Church (1907-1910)

In 1907, Orthodox settlers in Szypenitz purchased 45 acres of land for a cemetery at NW 22-55-13 W4. That same year, they erected a modest log church with a simple gable roof and no dome, finishing the interior with wide boards purchased in Vegreville. Initially, priests from the Russian Orthodox Mission based in Shandro and Boian ministered to the congregation. However, their church mysteriously burned down in 1909-1910.

Second Church (1913-1916)

Undeterred, the congregation constructed a larger church in 1913 under the supervision of Harry Osiecki (Hryhorii Osietski). Each member contributed \$5 toward lumber from Vegreville, providing labor voluntarily. The churchyard became a focal point for community gatherings, including a Russophile assembly on November 21, 1914, featuring MLA Andrew Shandro and Russian nationalist leaders. This period marked increasing tensions between Russophiles and nationally conscious Bukovynians.

On June 14, 1916, just three days after Pentecost, a second fire destroyed St. Mary's Church under suspicious circumstances. Community lore attributes the arson to inter-denominational tensions, allegedly sparked by a



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marriage between an Orthodox woman and the son of a Protestant-backed Independent Church supporter. No evidence confirmed the allegations, but religious tensions escalated in the district.

Denominational Split and Third Church (1917-1919)

Following the fire, Szypenitz parishioners split into two factions. Pro-Ukrainian members broke away to establish Saints Peter and Paul Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Kaleland (5.3 km southwest), while those loyal to the Russian Orthodox Church remained. Determined to prevent another fire, the Kaleland group built their sanctuary from local fieldstone, while Szypenitz members opted for brick.

In 1917, Szypenitz parishioners purchased 40 acres from Petro Eliuk for \$80, choosing a new location across the road from the cemetery at SW 27-55-13 to house their third church. Once again, Harry Osiecki led the construction, using volunteer labor and materials from Gordon's Hardware Store in Vegreville. The new structure, completed in 1919, featured:

- A large central dome,
- A small dome over the narthex,
- An entrance on the southwest side.

A wooden bell tower was later erected in the southeast corner of the churchyard, its three bronze bells historically used to signal emergencies like fires but now reserved for religious observances.

Tragedy and Conflict

Mysterious Death of Rev. Yosyf Yaroshuk (1920)

On October 15, 1920, Szypenitz's resident priest, Rev. Yosyf Yaroshuk, was killed in a hunting accident, possibly after dropping his rifle. His body was discovered near a lake

by Illia Kiriak, a teacher who later became a well-known author (*Syny Zemli*).

Rev. Yaroshuk, a Russophile from Kyiv, had previously served at St. Nicholas Russo-Orthodox Church in Wahstao. Allegedly, he had once considered leaving the priesthood but was inspired to remain after claiming to have seen a vision of Christ entering his home and walking toward the church.

Some sources, such as Rev. Panteleimon Bozyk's *Tserkov Ukraintsiv Kanady* (pp. 203-204), suggest Yaroshuk may have been murdered amid the escalating rivalry between the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church of Canada (UGOCC) and Russian Orthodox Mission. His death was rumored to be linked to his staunch opposition to the UGOC, but no evidence supported a murder investigation. He was buried in the Shypyntsi cemetery, laid out facing the congregation in accordance with Orthodox clerical burial customs.

Conflict with the Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church

Tensions between Russophiles and Ukrainophiles escalated further under Rev. Petro Dovheiko, Yaroshuk's successor. A former detective in Kyiv, Dovheiko was infamous for his involvement in the 1911 arrest of Dmitri Bogrov, the assassin of Russian Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. In Canada, he reportedly physically expelled dissident UGOC supporters from St. Demetrius Church in Soda Lake and returned from Easter services in 1921 to find his manse at Szypenitz vandalized, likely by pro-Ukrainian activists.

By 1925, however, the Szypenitz congregation increasingly favored the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This shift became official on September 6, 1941, when church members, under Rev. Ambrose Chrystawka,

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voted to join the UGOCC, marking an end to decades of division.

Church Beautification and Historic Recognition

Interior Decoration (1929)

In 1929, the congregation commissioned Peter Lipinski (1888-1975), a Catholic Ukrainian patriot, to paint the church interior—a bold move given the previous Russophile affiliations. Lipinski adorned the church with:

- A decorative border,
- Angels inside the dome,
- Walls painted to resemble cut stone,
- A two-tiered iconostasis, considered one of his masterpieces.

Donations from members, including a chandelier from Kiriak Eliuk, further enhanced the church's beauty.

Designation as a Historic Site (1987)

In 1987, the Government of Alberta designated St. Mary's Church as a historic site. This recognition spurred restoration efforts, including:

- Trust Fund for Cemetery Perpetual Care (1986), established by John Taschuk,
- Installation of two wrought-iron gates, donated by Dan Lutzak and Frank Lakusta.

Priests

A. Pohrebniak (ROC, 1916)
G. Soroka (ROC, 1918-1921)
Y. Yaroshuk (ROC, 1920)
P. Dovheiko (ROC, 1920-1921)
A. Chrustawka (1926-1948)
P. Zubritsky (1965-1986)
M. Sawchenko (1986-1994)
W. Sapeha (1994-present)

Location and Feast Day

Northwest of Two Hills, on the north side of Secondary Highway 637, half a mile east of Secondary Road 860, at SE 27-55-13 W4. *GPS Coordinates:* 53.773487, -111.849963 | Their *Feast Day* celebrated on September 21, the second feast of the Virgin Mother of God.

Founding Members

P. Mandryk	K. Eliuk
M. Rusnak	I. Towpich
P. Kereliuk	(Tovpach)
P. Eliuk	H. Verenka
M. Ursuliak	O. Ruptash
V. Ursuliak	D. Ruptash
S. Grekul	Iu. Lutsak

Cemetery

Located opposite the church, at NW 22-55-13 W4. *GPS coordinates:* 53.773487, -111.849963



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