"Cathedral-Style" Churches

After the turn of the century, Ukrainian congregations often grew to a size where their small church buildings were impractical. The years from about 1920 to 1940 thus witnessed the construction of many large Ukrainian churches in Manitoba. These were no longer simple log or light wood frame structures like those built by the early settlers. The new churches were more elaborate structures, larger in scale and often more sophisticated in ornamentation; similar in conception to the large Ukrainian Baroque churches like the restored St. Sophia in Kiev, the Church of the Holy Trinity and the Chapel of the Three Saints. Although not technically cathedrals – which are the seats of bishops – these churches are so extraordinary, especially in a rural landscape, that they are frequently called "prairie cathedrals."

Considering the modest nature of the log or wood frame churches examined previously in this study, the large churches designed for Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox congregations in Manitoba during the 1920s, 30s, 40, and 50s are remarkable. Foremost among these are the Ukrainian Catholic churches designed by Father Philip Ruh. His designs for "cathedral-style" churches adorn the countryside outside Manitoba from Edmonton, Alberta to St. Catharine's, Ontario. Research to date attributes 33 structures to this amazing man. Ruh's influence also spread to other communities in less direct ways. He was often called upon by various congregations to discuss the designs for new churches and the two main contractors working for Ruh relied on his designs for the churches they built without his supervision. Ruh was prolific and his designs influential.

While there was not a prolific church designer like Father Ruh in the Ukrainian Orthodox community, there were several large Orthodox churches built after 1930 that can be considered "cathedrals." Two of these – St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Sandy Lake and Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Shortdale – are certainly of a size and nature that lifts them to "cathedral" status. These two buildings will be discussed after an analysis of Father Ruh and his designs for Ukrainian Catholic churches.

The Ruh Churches

Father Philip Ruh (Figure 44) was inspired by three strands of church architecture for his designs: European, Ukrainian and the vernacular. The architecture of Europe, especially the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals of France, Germany and the Low Counties of which he had first-hand knowledge, were of considerable influence upon his designs. Ukrainian church architecture, studies during his stay in Ukraine was also clearly of great importance to him. In L'vov, a provincial capital, he would have seen churches of the elaborate Ukrainian Baroque as well as those reflecting the Byzantine heritage of the Eastern church. And on his visits to the countryside he would have admired many examples of rural wooden Baroque churches. Finally, there were the early churches that had been built on the Canadian prairies when Ruh arrived in 1911. These small, unpretentious buildings eloquently expressed the humble nature of pioneer existence. Often under the same physical and economic constraints, Ruh relied on local experience and ingenuity for the construction of his churches.

Figure 44.

Father Philip Ruh at the construction site of the Cooks Creek Grotto in 1959 - he was working on the Grotto at Cook's Creek at the time of his death in 1962, at the age of 79.

Ruh thus combined a number of distinctive architectural elements, making them typical of his own style. While perhaps none were unique elements and, indeed, while many could be found in earlier Canadian Ukrainian churches, Ruh integrated them in a novel and distinctive manner. The first sense the observer gains upon scrutinizing one of Ruh's churches is of grandeur touched by flamboyancy. This impression is especially reinforced when a comparison is made with the ancestral log and modest wood frame churches. Ruh's churches are large and the dynamism of forms and colours allied them closely with Ukrainian Baroque churches. A discussion of Ruh's churches, with reference to five of his most significant designs will underline the significance of his work.

A cursory examination of St. Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church, Mountain Road (1924-25; destroyed by fire 1966), Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Portage la Prairie (1926-27; demolished 1983), Immaculate Conception Ukrainian Catholic Church, Cooks Creek (1930-38), Ukrainian Catholic Church of the Holy Ascension, Winnipegosis (1930) and Church of the Resurrection, Dauphin (1935) (Figures 45-49) reveals that Ruh combined precepts and elements from Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Ukrainian Baroque, and vernacular. Like the early Byzantine churches, Ruh's churches are in nearly every case cruciform in plan (Figure 50). The transepts, however, tend to vary in depth and outline. Some are short, like Cooks Creek or, as at Mountain Road, almost as long as the nave. The transepts can also be apsidal in form as with these two last examples, or rectangular, as with the transepts at Winnipegosis. There were other variations of plan that Ruh employed to distinguish each church. The Cooks Creek church, for example, has a nave that extends between two flanking towers. And with a hipped roof over the nave, the general impression is Romanesque.

Figure 45.
St. Mary's Ukrainian Catholic Church, Mountain Road (1924-25; burned 1966). (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

Figure 46.
Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Portage la Prairie (1926-27) as it looked in 1948. The church was demolished in 1983.
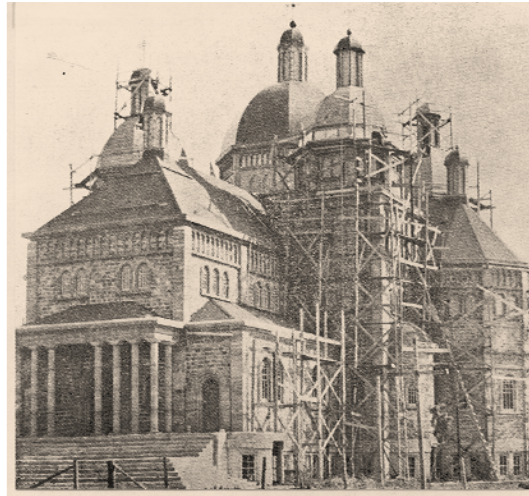
Figure 47.
Church of the Immaculate Conception, Cook's Creek, ca. 1937. (Jubilee Book of the Settlement of Ukrainians in Canada, p. 137)

Figure 48.
Ukrainian Catholic church of the Holy Ascension, Winnipegosis, shortly after its completion in 1930. (Mary Kohut)

Figure 49.
Church of the Resurrection, Dauphin, ca. 1935.
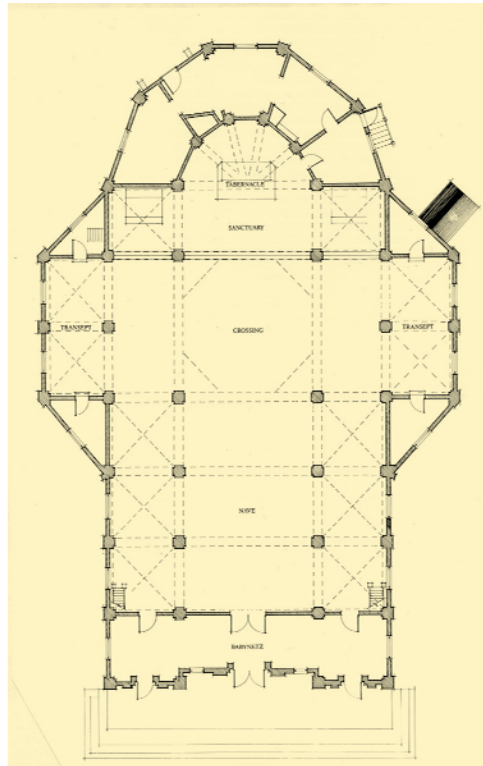(Mary Kohut)

Figure 50.
Floor plan. Church of the Assumption, Portage la Prairie.

The use of the twin flanking towers, capped with banyas was one of Ruh's most popular motifs, used on nearly all of his churches built after 1930. The two small banyas in conjunction with a large central dome represent the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. There was always a provision in the plan for the construction of a large dome at the central crossing; although often this ambitious feature failed to materialize. The alternating shingle pattern, originally evident for example on the Winnipegosis church, gave a polychromatic effect to many of his domed churches. Inside the church the transition from the square crossing to the octagonal drum of the dome was achieved by squinches (Figure 51). At the far end of the church, at the top of the cross plan, was the sanctuary, always apsidal in form and surmounted by a half dome (Figure 52).
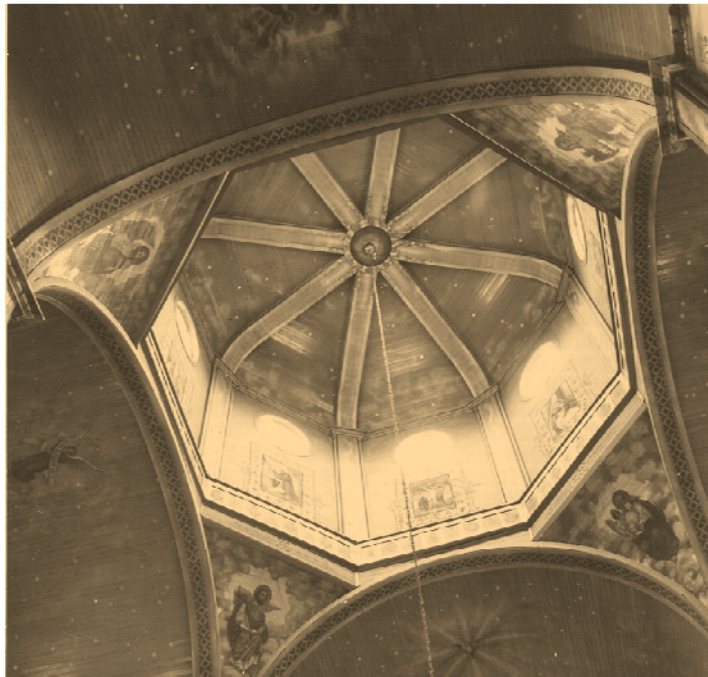
Below left: Figure 51.
St. Mary's Church, Mountain Road. Each of the pendentives beneath the dome had a figure painted on it. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

Below: Figure 52.
St. Mary's Church, Mountain Road. View towards the altar. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

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The decorative elements that Ruh used to define and animate the exterior of these churches were also variations on a theme. Romanesque and Neo-classical details were juxtaposed with and applied to Ukrainian banyas and domes. Round-arched windows and arcades are the most obvious of the Romanesque-inspired elements. Twinned arched windows were a favourite with Ruh and can be seen on nearly all his churches. Door openings were also round-arched, and often fitted with fan light transoms. Ruh frequently used a blind arcade as a decorative element in the twined facade towers, around the dome drum and below the main dome. Variations on the blind arcade motif were also used in a variety of other situations, particularly in the panels of the drum and inside the church, where it would reappear as a decorative frieze or a column pattern on the balustrade and railings (Figure 53).

The interiors of Ruh's churches form a system of impressive vaults culminating in a domed crossing. Both the nave and transept ceilings were constructed as barrel vaults (Figure 54); the ceilings of the aisles were joined; the round arches were continued in smaller areas. In his larger churches – as at Mountain Road, Portage la Prairie and Cooks Creek – arcaded side aisles were augmented by semi-circular arches with square columns (Figure 55). The curves of these arches were often enhanced with exaggerated ribbing (Figure 56).
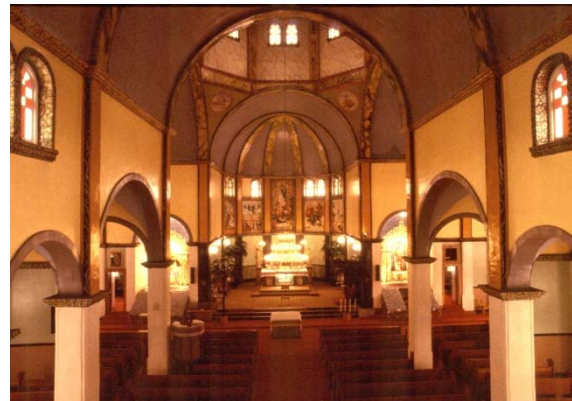

Figure 53.
Church of the Assumption, Portage la Prairie. The balustrade of the cantor's loft, with its miniature columns and arches reflects the blind arcade motif which Ruh made use of on the exterior.

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Top left: Figure 54.
Church of the Assumption, Portage la Prairie. View of the central crossing. Also visible is the apsidal form of the chancel with its half dome and the barrel vaulting of the nave and transepts.

Left: Figure 55.
Church of the Immaculate Conception, Cook's Creek. View down the main aisle toward the chancel and altar.

Above: Figure 56.
Church of the Assumption, Portage la Prairie. The accentuated ribbing of the dome and half dome is a particular design element which Ruh made use of repeatedly.

Although the interiors of all of Ruh's churches have been rendered exciting decoratively, through the years, several are spectacular. The resplendent interior of the church of the Resurrection in Dauphin, decorated during 1957 by Theodore Baran of Saskatoon – the foremost and most prolific of recent Ukrainian church artists – is wondrous (Figure 57). The beautiful icons, chandelier, vaulting, paneling, altar and decorative painting, create a drama to rival the rich and voluminous space of its Byzantine ancestors.

It should be noted that while Father Ruh likely intended the interiors of his church buildings to be colourful and vibrant, in most cases he did not actually supervise the interior decoration. Indeed in his own parish church at Cooks Creek, and in numerous others, most of the decorative additions and the internal colour scheme was accomplished by the parish itself, over many years, and continued during the decade following Ruh's death. Nevertheless, the final product complements Ruh's own design sense and it is likely that he would have approved.

Another interesting aspect of Ruh's churches, usually completed without Ruh's direct supervision, was the building material. The smooth marble surfaces of the interior, the tall marble columns and pilasters, the intricate stone arcades, the large cut stones on the exterior are, in fact, faux marble. These visual deceptions reflect not only Ruh's, and the parish's, heroic attempts to emulate the richness of European churches, but also underline an ingenious response to the restrictive economic conditions of the 1930s. Ruh, in partnership with numerous Ukrainian Catholic parishes, undaunted by economic and physical obstacles, undertook massive projects that today inspire respect.

Figure 57.

Church of the Resurrection, Dauphin. Interior view towards the main altar showing the highly decorated auditorium.

Ukrainian Orthodox "Cathedral-Style" Churches

The designs for the sixteen Ukrainian Orthodox churches identified in this study that can be considered "cathedral-style" appear to be stem from the same basic design sense as Father Ruh's. Because many of Father Ruh's designs preceded most Orthodox "cathedrals", it is tempting to attribute his influence. Alternatively, the designers of these churches may have relied upon the same Ukrainian precedents that Ruh recalled: the Baroque splendour of seventeenth and eighteenth century Ukrainian churches. This character is evident in two of the most fetching of Ukrainian Orthodox "cathedral-style" churches – St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox, Sandy lake and Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox. Shortdale.

St. Michael's Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Sandy Lake (1944-48) is a striking building which bears some general similarities to Father Ruh's "cathedrals", but springs from a slightly different sensibility (Figure 58). As in Ruh's designs the straightforward progression of spaces – vestibule, nave, short transepts and apse – are clearly expressed at Sandy Lake. In contrast to Father Ruh's predilection for a triangular pediment, a curved pediment with hounds-tooth edging graces the Sandy Lake Church. The semi-circular motif is pursued throughout the building, especially at window and door openings. The structure is dominated by a towering dome. On the entrance facade two large banyas flank a smaller central banya, all of which are crowned with filigreed Orthodox Crosses. While the church exterior is not as flamboyantly decorated as many of Father Ruh's churches, the clean crisp design is nevertheless an elegant one.

Holy Trinity Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Shortdale is a compact, tall, building whose isolation on a slightly rolling landscape makes it a special local landmark (Figure 59). The traditional progression of internal spaces is expressed in this design, which is, nevertheless, a unique response to that tradition. The large dome is truncated at the front facade, creating a heavy central form, akin to the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. A smaller dome pierces this expansive shell to light the interior. Four corner towers enclose the largest dome and their capping banyas provide a forceful vertical expression. The banya atop the central dome creates a deft punctuation to the whole structure.

The entrance facade reiterates the curved pediment motif at Sandy Lake. This motif appears to be a more common one in Orthodox churches – appearing in almost half of the Orthodox "cathedral-style" churches – than in Ukrainian Catholic "cathedrals". At Shortdale, the broad curve is expressed twice, with a decorative moulding stretching below the actual pediment.

Figure 58.
St. Michael's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church,
Sandy Lake (1944-48).

Figure 59.
Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, Shortdale.