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## ARCHIVAL SCIENCE AND OUTREACH IN SMALLER POLISH COMMUNITIES OF THE BANAT REGION: EXPANDING ACCESS BEYOND DOCUMENTS

### Abstract

**Purpose:** *This article investigates the little-known history of the Polish Protestant community in Ostojićevo, a village in Northern Banat, Serbia. The study aims to uncover how this group, originating from Wisła in Cieszyn Silesia and migrating in the nineteenth century within the Habsburg monarchy, negotiated identity in a multiethnic environment where official records often misclassified them.*

**Methodology:** *Using a case study approach, the research draws on civil registers, church books, factory records, and oral testimonies. Special attention is given to the methodological challenges created by archival silences and the categorical practices that obscured the community's presence.*

**Results:** *The study reconstructs the history of this Polish Protestant group in Ostojićevo, showing how their experiences complicate established narratives of migration, assimilation, and ethnic classification in the Habsburg borderlands.*

**Conclusion:** *The case demonstrates the value of microhistorical research in illuminating broader processes of migration and identity formation. It further highlights the active role of archivists and historians in recovering marginalized histories shaped by the silences and biases of archival practices.*

**Keywords:** *Polish diaspora, archives, migration, identity, Ostojićevo, microhistory, Habsburg Empire*

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## SCIENZA ARCHIVISTICA E DIVULGAZIONE NELLE PICCOLE COMUNITÀ POLACCHE DELLA REGIONE DEL BANATO: AMPLIARE L'ACCESSO OLTRE I DOCUMENTI

### **Abstract**

**Scopo:** *questo articolo indaga la storia poco conosciuta della comunità protestante polacca di Ostojićevo, un villaggio nel Banato settentrionale, in Serbia. Lo studio mira a scoprire come questo gruppo, originario di Wisła nella Slesia di Cieszyn e migrato nel XIX secolo all'interno della monarchia asburgica, abbia negoziato la propria identità in un ambiente multietnico in cui i registri ufficiali spesso li classificavano in modo errato.*

**Metodologia:** *Utilizzando un approccio basato su casi di studio, la ricerca attinge a registri civili, libri ecclesiastici, registri di fabbrica e testimonianze orali. Particolare attenzione è riservata alle sfide metodologiche create dai silenzi archivistici e dalle pratiche categoriche che hanno oscurato la presenza della comunità.*

**Risultati:** *lo studio ricostruisce la storia di questo gruppo protestante polacco a Ostojićevo, mostrando come le loro esperienze complichino le narrazioni consolidate di migrazione, assimilazione e classificazione etnica nelle zone di confine asburgiche.*

**Conclusioni:** *Il caso dimostra il valore della ricerca microstorica nel mettere in luce processi più ampi di migrazione e formazione dell'identità. Inoltre, evidenzia il ruolo attivo degli archivisti e degli storici nel recuperare storie emarginate, plasmate dai silenzi e dai pregiudizi delle pratiche archivistiche.*

**Parole chiave:** *diaspora polacca, archivi, migrazione, identità, Ostojićevo, microstoria, Impero asburgico*

## ARHIVSKA VEDA IN DOSEG V MANJŠIH POLJSKIH SKUPNOSTIH V REGIJI BANAT: SIRJENJE DOSTOPA ONKRAJ DOKUMENTOV

### **Izvleček**

**Namen:** Članek raziskuje malo poznano zgodovino poljske protestantske skupnosti v Ostojićevu, vasi v severnem Banatu v Srbiji. Študija želi pokazati, kako je ta skupina, ki izvira iz Wisle (Tešinska Šlezija) in se je v 19. stoletju v okviru habsburške monarhije preselila v Banat, oblikovala svojo identiteto v večetničnem okolju, kjer so bili v uradnih zapisih pogosto napačno razvrščeni.

**Metodologija:** Z uporabo študije primera raziskava temelji na civilnih matičnih knjigah, cerkvenih knjigah, tovarniških evidencah in ustnih pričevanjih. Posebna pozornost je namenjena metodološkimi izzivom, ki jih ustvarjajo arhivska znanost in kategorizacijske prakse, ki so zakrivate prisotnost skupnosti.

**Rezultati:** Študija rekonstruira zgodovino poljske protestantske skupine v Ostojićevu in pokaže, kako njihova izkušnja zapleta uveljavljene pripovedi o migracijah, asimilaciji in etničnem razvrščanju v habsburških obmejnih območjih.

**Zaključki:** Primer dokazuje vrednost mikrozgodovinskih raziskav pri osvetljevanju širših procesov migracij in oblikovanja identitet. Poleg tega poudarja aktivno vlogo arhivistov in zgodovinarjev pri odkrivanju marginaliziranih zgodovin, ki so bile zamolčane in zavite v pristranskost arhivske prakse.

**Ključne besede:** poljska diaspora, arhivi, migracije, identiteta, Ostojićevo, mikrozgodovina, Habsburška monarhija

## INTRODUCTION

The image of the archivist is often shaped by stereotypes of quiet routine: cataloguing documents, answering requests, and preserving fragile records. Yet the archive is far from a neutral repository. It is a site of encounter, negotiation, and sometimes disruption. Moments arise when expected patterns of classification and retrieval are broken by questions that seem out of place, that do not correspond to any established catalogue entry. Such moments unsettle the assumed completeness of archival knowledge and force both archivist and historian to confront the limits of documentation. Archival theorists such as Jacques Derrida have drawn attention to the *violence of the archive*, the way institutions shape memory by preserving certain traces and excluding others (Derrida, 1996). On the other hand, Terry Cook (Cook, 2011) and Verne Harris (Harris, 2020) have emphasized the archivist's active role as mediator and interpreter of these traces. It is within this theoretical horizon that I situate my own encounter with the forgotten Polish Protestant community of northern Banat. On an early spring day in 2016, while working in a small local archive in Vojvodina, Serbia, my routine was interrupted by two visitors from Poland who requested documentation about their ancestors from the village Ostojićevo. At first, I doubted the accuracy of their claim. My knowledge of the ethnic mosaic of this region did not include any Polish settlements, let alone Protestant ones. Yet the duty of the archivist is to question doubt through evidence.

Several hours of research revealed that the names my visitors provided did indeed appear in local records, some even explicitly identified as Polish. What seemed at first to be mistaken inquiry turned into the beginning of a microhistorical investigation. How had Polish Protestants settled in northern Banat, far from their homeland? What traces of their existence remained in the archives, and what silences concealed them? And how could their history be reconstructed from fragmentary, scattered, or mislabeled sources?

This article seeks to answer these questions. I begin with a historical overview of the Banat region as a borderland of empires and ethnicities. I then turn to the specific migration of Polish Protestant from Wisła in Cieszyn Silesia, situating their arrival in the context of Habsburg labor and settlement policies. I then discuss the methodological challenges of tracing their history in the archives, focusing on issues of conflated identities, archival silences, and the role of oral testimony.

Finally, I reflect on the significance of this microhistory for understanding migration, identity, and archival practice in Central and Southeastern Europe.

## **NORTHERN BANAT AS A BORDERLAND**

The Banat region occupies a singular place in the historical geography of Central and Southeastern Europe. Situated at the confluence of major rivers, the Danube to the south, the Tisza to the west, and Mures to the north, it has long been a natural crossroads. For centuries, Banat was a frontier space between empires, armies, and religions, a fact that profoundly shaped its demographic and cultural profile.

Between 1552 and 1718, Banat formed part of the Ottoman Empire under Temesvar Eyalet (David, 1999). Ottoman rule left the region militarized and economically underdeveloped. Continuous warfare, plague outbreaks, and forced population movements reduced many settlements to “pustara,” empty plains dotted with shepherd encampments. When the Habsburgs seized the region after the Treaty of Passarowitz, they encountered what they considered an underpopulated and strategically vulnerable land (Ingrao and Pešalj, 2011). The imperial response was ambitious: Banat was recognized as the Banat of Temesvár, a crown land directly administrated from Vienna until 1778 (Petrovics, 2009).

The Habsburg state used Banat as a laboratory of colonization and modernization. Large-scale migration campaigns brought settlers from across the monarchy and beyond: Germans from Swabia, Serbs and Romanians, Hungarians, Slovaks, Ruthenians, Jews and many other smaller groups (Rupčić, 2017). Officials sought not only to repopulate the land but also to stabilize it by diversifying its ethnic composition and securing loyalty through land grants and privileges. At the same time, infrastructural projects such as the Bega Canal, road reconstruction, and swamp drainage transformed Banat into one of the empire’s most intensively managed frontier regions (Halbac-Cotoara-Zamfir, 2015).

After 1778, Banat was reincorporated into the Hungarian counties Torontal, Temes, and Krassó-Szörény, and autonomous Privileged District of Velika Kikinda, but its frontier character remained (Rupčić, 2017). The coexistence of multiple languages, confessions, and traditions fostered a distinctive regional identity was flexible and situational: religion might bind them to one community, language to another, and imperial administration to yet another.

Ostojićevo, known historically as Tizsaszentmiklós, exemplifies these dynamics. Archeological remains such as kurgan mounds and Iron Age settlements testify to its long-standing role as a meeting point of cultures. Medieval documents mention it as Rasán-Szent-Miklós, a settlement under Hungarian rule (Tibor, 2014). Ottoman conquest in the sixteenth century left it depopulated, recorded as abandoned pastureland. Its revival came only under the Habsburgs in the eighteenth century, when it was resettled as part of the broader reorganization of Torontal County (Gratien, 2022). By the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ostojićevo resembled many Banat villages: predominantly agricultural, with Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, and Slovaks living side by side. Yet censuses and parish registers reveal the presence of additional, smaller groups, among them a handful of Polish families of Protestant confession. In absolute terms, their number was modest, but their very presence illustrates Banat's openness to unlikely migrations. For the Habsburg monarchy, Ostojićevo and similar villages functioned as receptacles of diversity, small nodes in a wider imperial strategy of population management.

The twentieth century brought further upheavals. After First World War, Banat was partitioned between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Kingdom of Yugoslavia), Romania, and Hungary (Batt, 2002). Ostojićevo fell within Yugoslavia, though cross-border contact remained common. Second World War and its aftermath reshaped the ethnic map again: many Germans were expelled from Yugoslavia, Hungarians faced suspicion, and new socialist policies encouraged collectivization and industrialization. Yet even though these transformations, Banat retained its reputation as a "microcosm of Central Europe," where different ethnic groups coexisted, sometimes uneasily, but often in ways that created hybrid cultural forms.

To understand the Polish Protestants of Ostojićevo, therefore, one must first appreciate Banat itself as a borderland shaped by migration, imperial design, and shifting sovereignties. Their arrival was not an anomaly but a part of broader pattern of resettlement that made Banat what it is: a landscape layered histories, where small communities could take root in unexpected places and leave traces that survive only in fragments of memory and archive.

## THE MIGRATION OF POLISH PROTESTANTS

The arrival of Polish Protestants in Ostojićevo must be situated within the broader patterns of population mobility across the Habsburg monarchy in the nineteenth century. The community traces its roots to the town of Wisła in Cieszyn Silesia, a region whose history itself reflects the entanglements of empire, confession, and language. Cieszyn Silesia was a borderland in its own right, divided between Austrian and Prussian sovereignties after the eighteenth century. It was an area where Poles, Czechs, and Germans coexisted, and where the Reformation had taken deep root. By the nineteenth century, Wisła had become a center of Polish Lutheranism, a rare phenomenon in a monarchy dominated by Catholicism (Marcol, 2017).

The socio-economic conditions of Cieszyn Silesia in the nineteenth century provided both push and pull factors for migration. Land scarcity and economic pressure weighed heavily on smallholders. For Protestant families, additional motives included the search for spaces where their confessional identity would be tolerated or even welcomed. The Habsburg monarchy, despite its Catholic predominance, had by the late eighteenth century established a regime of relative toleration for Lutherans and Calvinists under the Patent of Toleration (1781) (O'Brien, 1969). In Banat, where officials sought industrious settlers to cultivate land and work in newly established industries, Protestants were seen as reliable and disciplined. Migration from Wisła to Banat was not a mass movement but rather a chain migration: a few families departed first, and others followed through kinship and village ties (Marcol, 2017). By mid-nineteenth century, records indicate the presence of Polish-speaking Protestants in Ostojićevo, often described in documents as "Polish Evangelicals." Their numbers never exceeded a few dozen families, yet they formed a distinct node in the wider mosaic of Banat migration. They found employment in agriculture and, later, in industrial enterprises such as the saltpeter industry.

For the Polish migrants themselves, resettlement meant negotiating a complex set of identities. In Ostojićevo, they lived alongside Slovaks who were also Lutherans, Hungarians who were predominantly Calvinists or Catholics, and Serbs who were Orthodox. Linguistic proximity to Slovak facilitated communication, and in many official documents Polish families were recorded simply as Slovak, reflecting both administrative convenience and a broader fluidity of ethnic catego-

rization in the monarchy. Yet the presence of Polish surnames, oral traditions, and occasional references to “Polish” nationality in censuses indicate that a sense of distinctiveness remained. For Vienna and Budapest, the classification of subjects was less about ethnographic precision than about manageability. Categories such as “Slovak” or “other” absorbed minorities like the Poles in Ostojićevo, erasing them from the statistical record even as they lived their daily lives with awareness of a different heritage.

The migration of Polish Protestants to Banat thus exemplifies how the Habsburg Empire functioned as a space of both opportunity and effacement. The monarchy’s demographic engineering created openings for communities such as the Wisła Protestants, who found work and land in distant Ostojićevo. At the same time, the very bureaucratic logic that facilitated their resettlement also rendered them invisible, classifying them into broader categories that obscured their distinct origins. The result was a paradox: a community that existed, thrived, and contributed to local society, yet one that official histories almost entirely forgot.

## **ARCHIVAL CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES**

The rediscovery of the Polish Protestant community in Ostojićevo began not with a well-defined research project but with disruption. When the Polish visitors entered the archive in Kikinda, their request did not match any of the categories by which the holdings were organized. There was no entry for “Poles in Banat” in the finding aids, no folder of correspondence, no collection of church records neatly labeled as Polish. What they asked for did not exist, at least not in the official archival sense. Yet this absence was precisely the clue that something had been forgotten.

Archival research in Banat is an exercise in patience and improvisation. Many of the surviving records are fragmented: brittle civil registers with fading ink, baptismal books that are water-stained, or payroll lists written in cursive or gothic letters. Each search involves long hours in dimly lit reading rooms, inhaling the smell of dust, tracing surnames through pages that often conceal as much as they reveal. To locate traces of Poles, I began scanning for distinctive endings: *-ski*, *-czyk*, *sz*. The work resembled detective labor, piecing together fragments into tentative narratives.

But archival discovery is rarely straightforward. The same surname might appear once as “Polish,” another time as “Slovak,” and still another without any ethnic designation. In one baptismal record, a family was entered as “evangelikus tót” (Slovak Evangelical), through oral testimony later confirmed that they were remembered locally as “Poljaci.” At times, the classification seemed arbitrary, dependent on the scribe’s assumptions of the bureaucratic categories available in a given year. Such inconsistencies illustrate what scholars of archives describe as “archival silences”: the gaps, distortions, and misclassifications that shape the historical record. The case of Ostojićevo highlights how archives are not neutral containers of the past but active producers of historical meaning. Categories of nationality and confession were themselves political constructs, reflecting the needs of imperial census-takers or local administrators rather than the lived realities of borderland communities. In Trouillot’s terms, silences enter the record at multiple moments: when events are created, when they are documented, and when they are archived (Trouillot, 2015). The Poles of Ostojićevo were silenced not through deliberate erasure but through the more banal mechanism of bureaucratic simplification. Derrida’s insight that archive is a site of power is palpable in this context. What could be named and classified became visible to history; what fell outside those categories risked being forgotten. The designation “Slovak” swallowed up Poles because it was administratively convenient, reinforcing a particular map of ethnic diversity that excluded communities too small or ambiguous to matter. For historians, this means that the archive must be read not only for what it contains but also for what it refuses to contain.

To counter these silences, I turned to sources beyond the traditional archive. Oral testimonies proved indispensable. Elderly villagers recalled stories of “Poljaci” who attended the Lutheran church, sang hymns in a slightly different accent, and occasionally corresponded with relatives in Poland (Marcol, 2020). These memories were fragmentary and often tinged with nostalgia, but they filled the gaps left by censuses and registers. One interviewee vividly recalled how, during the socialist era, the Polish embassy would send representatives to visit Ostojićevo, an event that reinforced for the community that their identity had not been entirely forgotten. Industrial archives also offered unexpected insights. The records of various factories in Ostojićevo and nearby Novi Kneževac listed employees by name,

occupation, and sometimes place of origin. Among these dusty ledgers, Polish surnames appeared, anchoring the migrants not only in the rural economy but also in the industrial transformation of Banat. These sources suggested that the Poles were not marginal figures but active participants in the region's economic life.

The process of piecing together these fragments resembled the construction of a mosaic. Each shard, whether a baptismal entry, a census line, a half-remembered anecdote, was insufficient on its own. Yet together, they revealed a pattern: a small, resilient community negotiating its place in a shifting borderland. The narrative that emerged was less about grand historical events than about the persistence of traces and the effort required to make them visible again. Methodologically, this experience underscores the need for a flexible, multi-source approach when studying small diasporic groups. Paper archives, oral memory, and material remnants must be read in dialogue, each compensating for the silences of the other. It also reminds us that the historian's own positionality matters: it was only because of the visitors' question that I began to search in directions I would otherwise not have considered. Their disruption of archival routine became the catalyst for a history that might otherwise have remained untold.

## **IDENTITY, ASSIMILATION, AND PERSISTENCE**

The Polish Protestant community of Ostojićevo offers a compelling case study of how identity is negotiated in multiethnic borderlands. Unlike larger groups such as Serbs, Hungarians, or Romanians, who could draw upon established institutions, schools, and cultural associations, the Poles never possessed the demographic weight to secure autonomous structures. Their survival depended on delicate balancing: blending into surrounding communities while maintaining subtle markers of distinctiveness. Official census records provide the most systematic, if problematic, lens through which to observe this balancing act. In the Austro-Hungarian censuses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationality was usually defined by "language of everyday use" (Scheer, 2018). This method disadvantaged small minorities, especially when their dialects overlapped with larger groups. For the Poles of Ostojićevo, whose speech shared affinities with Slovak, the category "Slovak" often absorbed them. In 1910, the last imperial census, they appear only indirectly, hidden in the residual "other" category or recorded as Slovaks.

After the First World War, when Banat was divided between Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary, census categories shifted again. The interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia sought to integrate its minorities into the umbrella category of “Yugoslavs,” encouraging declarations that blurred ethnic distinctions. Oral testimony indicates that some Polish families complied, while others chose “Slovak” or “Serb” depending on context. The result was a pattern of fluid self-identification: a community that adapted its public face to political regimes while preserving private forms of difference. This fluidity should not be interpreted as simple assimilation or loss. Rather, it reflects what Rogers Brubaker calls “identification without identity,” a process in which individuals strategically adjust their categories without necessarily abandoning their sense of heritage. In Ostojićevo, surnames, family traditions, and confessional affiliation anchored Polishness even as official statistics obscured it (Marcol, 2020).

Religion provided the most stable axis of continuity. The Evangelical Church, shared with Slovaks, offered institutional belonging even if it did not formally recognize a separate Polish community. Services were conducted in Slovak, but families often prayed or sang hymns at home in their Wisła dialect. Oral testimonies recall mothers and grandmothers teaching children “Polish prayers,” passing on fragments of a linguistic and spiritual heritage that the church itself could not preserve (Marcol, 2020). The Protestant ethos of sobriety, discipline, and literacy also helped the community maintain cohesion. Evangelical parishes emphasized education, and although formal schooling was usually in Hungarian or later Serbian, literacy in multiple languages enabled Polish families to correspond with relatives in Poland or to read religious tracts sent by Protestant organizations abroad (Marcol, 2020). Religion, therefore, was not only a spiritual anchor but also a cultural bridge linking the community to transnational networks.

Beyond the church, cultural expression became another means of persistence. Archival traces and oral memories point to occasional folk ensembles, which performed dances and songs in Polish costume during village festivals. These events, though sporadic, symbolized the community’s claim to a distinct heritage (Marcol, 2023).

The socialist period brought new opportunities. Factories in Yugoslavia functioned not only as sites of production but also as centers of cultural life (Marcol, 2023). Workers’ councils organized holiday events, sports clubs, and cultural

evenings. In Ostojićevo and nearby towns, Polish workers participated actively in these initiatives. Oral recollections mention “Polish Days,” where workers prepared traditional dishes, displayed embroidered costumes, and performed folk dances for colleagues. These events, while encouraged by the state’s policy of “brotherhood and unity,” also provided a rare space for Poles to assert visibility in a society where census categories still rendered them marginal. This intertwining of cultural persistence with socialist structures underscores the adaptability of the community. They did not resist assimilation outright but selectively embraced frameworks, whether religious institutions or factory cultural programs, that allowed them to preserve fragments of their identity.

By the late twentieth century, demographic decline had reduced the community to a fraction of its former size. Emigration to Poland, intermarriage, and the general outflow of rural youth to urban centers thinned their ranks. Census data from 2002 counted around 300 people of Polish origin in Ostojićevo, while embassy estimates later halved that figure (Popis stanovništva, 2002). Yet even in decline, the persistence of memory remains striking. Families continue to emphasize their Polish roots when recounting genealogies, and community associations, however small, still organize cultural events (Marcol, 2023).

In this sense, persistence does not mean the survival of a fixed identity but the continual renegotiation of belonging. The Poles of Ostojićevo never formed a homogeneous or bounded group; their identity has always been relational, shaped by interactions with Serbs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and the shifting regimes of empire, monarchy, socialism, and post-socialism. Their story illustrates how small diasporic communities endure not by isolating themselves but by weaving their heritage into the fabric of local society, leaving subtle yet enduring imprints.

## **MICROHISTORY AND THE VALUE OF SMALL COMMUNITIES**

The history of the Polish Protestant community in Ostojićevo is, by any statistical measure, a marginal story. Their numbers never rivaled those of the larger ethnic groups in Banat; they left no monumental architecture, no newspapers, and only a thin archival footprint. Yet it is precisely in these small, fragile traces that the significance of microhistorical inquiry becomes evident. Microhistory, as developed

by Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, and other historians since the 1970s, is concerned with the “exceptional normal”: the small-scale event, community, or individual whose story illuminates larger structures of power and culture. The classic example of Menocchio, the sixteenth-century miller at the center of Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, demonstrated how even one person’s testimony could shed light on the diffusion of ideas, the policing of orthodoxy, and the intellectual world of early modern peasants (Ginzburg, 2013). In a similar way, the Poles of Ostojićevo function as a microhistorical lens into the workings of empire, nationalism, and identity in Central Europe’s borderlands. Through their story, we see how imperial bureaucracies categorized populations, how census officials simplified complex identities, and how local communities navigated between multiple linguistic and confessional worlds. The fact that the Poles are barely visible in official records is not a limitation but a revelation: it shows us the mechanisms by which states rendered certain groups legible while consigning others to invisibility. To reconstruct their history is to reverse-engineer these processes of silencing. Studying a small diaspora such as the Ostojićevo Poles also challenges conventional hierarchies of historical importance. National historiographies often privilege the majority, the politically dominant, or the militarily decisive. By contrast, minorities without a state, a press, or an army are easily ignored. Yet such groups reveal dynamics that majorities take for granted. The Poles demonstrate how identity was not fixed but negotiable, how individuals could be “Slovak” in church records, “Yugoslav” in a census, and “Polish” at home. These practices destabilize nationalist narratives that assume clear and immutable categories. Furthermore, the Poles’ story highlights the role of memory and everyday life in preserving heritage. While national institutions in Warsaw or Belgrade may never have paid them much attention, the villagers of Ostojićevo carried on traditions of language, song, and prayer that quietly defied statistical erasure. The persistence of these practices reveals how cultural survival is often less about political recognition than about intimate family and community rituals.

Microhistory also raises ethical questions about how historians deal with absence. To reconstruct the lives of a small community demands reading against the grain of sources, searching not only in obvious collections but in margins, footnotes, and registers where a stray surname might appear. It also requires humility: ac-

knowledging that what survives is partial, fragmented, and shaped by power. Yet in making sense of such fragments, we restore agency to communities that official narratives have ignored. In this sense, the Ostojićevo Poles remind us that historical significance is not proportional to population size. Their very marginality forces us to confront the selectivity of archives, the instability of categories, and the resilience of cultural memory. To study them is to accept the challenge of giving voice to the nearly forgotten, and to recognize that the borderlands of Central Europe were never only the stage of great powers but also the home of small, tenacious communities whose legacies endure in quiet ways.

## CONCLUSION

The history of the Polish Protestants of Ostojićevo might, at first glance, appear to be little more than a footnote in the vast chronicles of Banat. Their numbers were small, their institutions fragile, and their archival visibility faint. Yet when examined closely, their story brings into focus the wider dynamics of empire, migration, and identity that shaped Central and Southeastern Europe over the last two centuries. This article has demonstrated how the community emerged from mid-nineteenth century migration chains linking Cieszyn Silesia to the plains of Banat. Drawn by economic opportunity and facilitated by the Habsburg Empire's internal labor mobility, these families carried with them not only their skills but also their Protestant faith, which remained a vital anchor in their new home. Once settled, they navigated the region's multiethnic environment by blending into surrounding Slovak Evangelical structures, while preserving a distinctive sense of Polishness through language, family memory, and cultural practices.

The archival record reveals the precariousness of such a position. Census categories, designed for administrative efficiency rather than ethnographic precision, routinely erased the Poles into larger groups. Church records, written in Slovak, reflected shared confessional life but obscured ethnic distinctiveness. It was only through the triangulation of sources, civil registers, industrial archives, oral testimonies, and the occasional intervention of Polish institutions, that fragments of their history could be pieced together. This research underscored the active role of archives in producing historical silences, and the necessity for historians to read absence as carefully as presence.

The community's trajectory also illuminates the paradoxes of assimilation and persistence. While many individuals outwardly adopted the categories of Slovak, Serb, or Yugoslav, they continued to affirm Polish heritage in private and communal spaces. Religious services, factory cultural programs, and local festivals provided opportunities to express identity in ways that were compatible with shifting political contexts. This adaptive strategy ensured survival, even as demographic decline and emigration reduced their numbers in the late twentieth century. Placed within a microhistorical framework, the story of Ostojićevo's Poles acquires broader significance. Microhistory teaches us that the lives of small communities can reveal the operations of large structures: how empires managed diversity, how nation-states classified populations, and how individuals negotiated belonging. Far from marginal, the Poles' experience highlights the instability of ethnic categories and the resilience of cultural practices in contexts where official recognition was minimal or absent. Their history complicates nationalist narratives by showing that identity in the Banat borderlands was never singular but always relational, fluid, and situational.

Finally, this case points toward a broader ethical imperative for historians and archivists. To recover the traces of forgotten groups is not merely an antiquarian exercise but a contribution to a more inclusive historical record. In giving voice to communities like the Polish Protestants of Ostojićevo, we acknowledge the pluralism that has long characterized the Banat and challenge the simplifying logics of state and empire that sought to reduce such complexity. The task of the historian, then, is not only to recount what the archive readily offers but also to listen for what it silences, to reconstruct what has been neglected, and to recognize significance in the small and the fragile.

The Poles of Ostojićevo may have been numerically modest, but their history endures as a testament to endurance, adaptation, and the quiet persistence of identity on the margins of empire. Their story reminds us that the past of the Banat, and indeed of Europe as a whole, is not only the history of nations and empires but also of those small, resilient communities whose presence continues to shape cultural memory in subtle yet lasting ways.

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## Summary

*This paper examines the forgotten history of the Polish Protestant community in Ostojićevo, a village in northern Banat, Serbia, and situates their story within broader discussions of archives, migration, and identity in Central and South-eastern Europe. It begins by challenging conventional views of archives as neutral repositories, instead highlighting them as contested spaces where silences, misclassifications, and disruptions shape historical knowledge. Encounters with unexpected questions, such as the 2016 inquiry from Polish visitors seeking ancestors in Ostojićevo, reveal the limits of archival completeness and open pathways for microhistorical inquiry.*

*The first part contextualizes Banat as a historical borderland shaped by empires, migrations, and infrastructural modernization. Once under Ottoman rule, it was reorganized by the Habsburgs in the eighteenth century as a laboratory of colonization, drawing settlers from across Europe. This imperial strategy created a multiethnic mosaic where Serbs, Hungarians, Germans, Slovaks, and others coexisted. Ostojićevo itself followed this trajectory: depopulated under the Otto-*

*mans, resettled under Habsburg administration, and integrated into broader networks of agricultural and industrial development. Within this diverse landscape, small groups like the Polish Protestants were absorbed into wider demographic strategies, yet their presence illustrates the permeability and openness of Banat as a frontier.*

*The second section traces the migration of Polish Protestants from Wisła in Cieszyn Silesia to Banat in the nineteenth century. Motivated by economic hardship and the search for confessional tolerance, these families took advantage of Habsburg labor policies and resettlement incentives. Migration proceeded through kinship networks, producing a small but distinct community in Ostojicevo. While they integrated into local Lutheran structures, Polish surnames and oral traditions signaled a separate heritage. However, official classifications often absorbed them into larger groups, especially as “Slovaks,” reflecting the bureaucratic simplifications of imperial and later national census systems. Thus, the very mechanisms that facilitated their settlement simultaneously obscured their distinct identity.*

*The third part highlights methodological challenges in reconstructing this history. Archival silences and inconsistencies, such as shifting ethnic labels in parish registers, illustrate how archives actively produce erasure. The historian’s task, then, is to read not only presence but also absence. Oral testimonies, industrial records, and family memory were crucial in filling gaps left by the archival record. Elderly villagers recalled Polish prayers, folk traditions, and occasional contact with Poland, underscoring the persistence of identity despite bureaucratic invisibility. This interdisciplinary, multi-source approach reflects the mosaic-like nature of reconstructing small diasporic histories.*

*Attention then turns to identity, assimilation, and persistence. While the community adapted publicly, registering as Slovaks, Serbs, or Yugoslavs, they preserved Polishness in private through religion, language, and cultural practices. The Evangelical Church provided continuity, while socialist-era factories became spaces for cultural performance and visibility. Even as demographic decline reduced their numbers in the late twentieth century, memory and tradition maintained their presence. Their case exemplifies identity as situational, relational, and fluid rather than fixed.*

*Finally, the paper argues for the value of microhistory. Like Carlo Ginzburg's classic studies, the story of the Ostojićevo Poles demonstrates how small communities illuminate broader structures of power, classification, and belonging. Their marginality reveals how states managed diversity and how individuals negotiated multiple identities across shifting political regimes. The study also raises ethical questions about archival practice: recovering forgotten groups is a way to counteract silences and acknowledge the pluralism erased by imperial and national narratives. In conclusion, the Polish Protestants of Ostojićevo, though small in number, embody themes of migration, adaptation, and cultural persistence. Their story enriches our understanding of Banat as a borderland and highlights the historian's responsibility to recover and amplify fragile, nearly forgotten voices.*

***Typology: 1.01. Original scientific research***