1

"My Town—Miková, Czechoslovakia"

Throughout her life, Julia Warhola delighted in memories of her wedding: "Wedding was beautiful, beautiful. Three-day wedding."[1] A traditional Carpatho-Rusyn wedding was literally a three-day event. In time-honored fashion, the 1909 nuptials of Ulia Zavacka and Andrii Varchola were saturated with ritualism and magical significance. Combining song, dance, music, and the spoken word, the wedding celebration was a multifaceted piece of folk theater, performed expertly by unsophisticated, barely literate peasants. Everyday Rusyn life was steeped in tradition and ritual that harked back to ancient times, but no occasion was more infused with theatrical ritual and superstition than the wedding.[2]

For Carpatho-Rusyn peasants, marriage was primarily an economic transaction.[3] As described in numerous folk songs, young women feared being married off to an elderly man out of financial considerations. Ulia was spared this anxiety. The Zavacky family was from the middle class of Miková peasant society. Her maternal grandfather, a skilled tradesman from Poland, had built a water mill in Miková, which brought in extra income for the family. Ulia's parents could offer a respectable dowry and would have been on the lookout for a moral, stable, and industrious young man. While mothers played the major role in matchmaking, courting and betrothal were the initiative of the prospective groom. With a delegation of relatives

and friends, the young man went to the home of his chosen mate to present his proposal to her parents. To divert the attention of unclean spirits, his spokesman introduced the subject obliquely in formulaic speeches, with a metaphor that only a girl from an agricultural society might appreciate: "We hear that you have a young heifer to sell. We would like to buy it." When the parents and young people came to an agreement in these staged negotiations, bargaining over the bride's dowry ensued under the influence of homemade brandy.

For Ulia and Andrii, the formal matchmaking would have followed the same plot sequence, but it had a more unconventional prologue. As Julia Warhola later described it:

> My husband . . . come from my town—Miková, Czechoslovakia. I meet him when I'm seventeen, he's twenty. My husband, Andy, he go to America a year before and then come back to town.[4] He was good-looking. Blond. My husband had curly hair. Oh! He came back to village and every girl want him. Fathers would give him lots of money, lots of land to marry daughter. He no want. He want me. . . . So Andy comes into house. Oh so good-looking. I never forget. I come back from fields and I carried wheat. He sees me. "Who's this little girl?" he says. My Momma laughs. "She's gonna be your wife," she says. My mother, she jokes, for fun.

It was common for Rusyn men to emigrate to America to earn money, with the intention of returning to the homeland, buying land, and settling down. In Andrii Varchola, Ulia's mother recognized a good marriage prospect. In an unconstrained manner that would later also characterize Julia's maternal style, she set the process in motion. But while it may have been love at first sight for Andrii, Ulia was not convinced. For a Carpatho-Rusyn peasant girl, marriage meant moving in with her husband's family, where she might be looked upon as just an extra pair of hands. "I was seventeen, I know nothing. He wants me, but I no want him. I no think of no man. My mother and father say, 'Like him, like him.' I scared. My Daddy beat me, beat me to marry him. What do I know? The priest—oh, a nice priest—come. 'This Andy,' he says, 'a very nice boy. Marry him.' I cry. I no know. Andy visit again. He brings me candy. I no have candy. He brings me candy, wonderful candy. And for this candy, I marry him."[5]

The dowry was arranged, the parish priest blessed the betrothal and announced the banns, and a wedding date was set for a weekend in May, a month after the end of the Lenten season and the Easter holiday.[6] The night before the wedding, Ulia and her *druzhky* (bridesmaids) wove wreaths of periwinkle, a flowering evergreen plant that symbolized everlasting love. Andrii spent the night singing and dancing with

his groomsmen, while his female relatives, led by his godmother, the senior *svashka* (matron of honor), prepared the wedding flag—a branch of spruce decorated with colorful kerchiefs, ribbons, and streamers to represent the star of Bethlehem. The next morning, the groom's party was assembled at the Varchola home by the *starosta* (master of ceremonies), who, alongside the senior *svashka*, served as director and lead actor of the play. It was their duty to ensure that all tradition was carefully observed. After prayers, rhetorical speeches, and refreshments, not sparing strong drink, Andrii received his parents' blessing. In response to his mother's tears, he sang, "Oh mother, don't cry, but be glad, for your son will bring into your home a worker for you. And a dear helpmate for my heart." Fronted by the wedding flag, the groom's party proceeded to the bride's house with shouts, whistles, songs, and lively music.

At the Zavacky home, the groom's party found the doors locked. A ritual drama ensued, again using allegorical speech to deceive evil spirits.

> —*Slava Isusu Christu*! Glory to Jesus Christ! Christ is among us![7]
>
> —*Slava na viki!* Glory forever. He is and will be! . . . And what do you want?
>
> —We know that you have in your garden a beautiful rose, which we would like to transplant to our garden so it may bear fruit. We have a young lad who would like to care for that rose.

Playing out their scripted adversarial role, the bride's family demanded to know whether the bridegroom and his representatives were wise and God-fearing people. The *starosta* responded by reciting a prayer and solving a riddle to their satisfaction. When the groom's party at last gained entrance and asked for the bride, they were presented with an old woman, a Gypsy, or a boy dressed in women's clothing. Only on the third request was Ulia brought forward, to the musical refrain: "This is the right one / A great beauty. / This one is ours / Most beautiful of all." After the *starosta* made the sign of the cross and marked the door with his ax to prevent unclean spirits from joining them, the young couple left the house, carefully stepping out on the same foot so they might live together in harmony.

Although their wedding took place near the end of May, Ulia probably wore fur and Andrii, a long linen coat, to demonstrate affluence, and according to superstition, to ensure future prosperity. "I wear white," Ulia recalled in 1966. Her homespun linen dress was embroidered with white threads in patterns that originally had magical and protective significance. "I beautiful. My husband had big white coat. Funny, funny. He had hat with lots of ribbons. Three rows of ribbons." Ulia probably wore an open tiara-like wedding headdress decorated with

periwinkle and flowing with colorful beaded and embroidered streamers that fell below her knees. "I had hair like gold. Hair down shoulder, oh beautiful hair."[8] According to tradition, a maiden's headdress showed off her hair, which hung in a single braid. A married woman covered her hair with a cap or kerchief, reflecting ancient beliefs about the magic powers of women's hair. Only on her wedding day did a woman's hair flow freely in public. Ulia's joyful memory of her "hair like gold" is a poignant evocation of innocent youth.

Church bells rang as Ulia and Andrii stood before the door of Saint Michael the Archangel Greek Catholic Church, where they had both been baptized. Saint Michael's was a simple masonry building topped by a graceful baroque cupola and a three-barred cross. The nuptial ceremony of the Eastern Catholic rite of Byzantium, as developed among the East Slavs, was accompanied by a cappella congregational singing of the Carpatho-Rusyn *prostopenie*, or plainchant. Reverend Father Jan Turkiniak led Ulia and Andrii down the aisle, chanting litanies that asked God to bless them with a blameless marriage and the happiness of abundant fertility. Ulia promised to be subject in everything to her husband, and Andrii pledged to love his wife. The climax of the marriage ceremony was the "crowning" of the bride and groom. Father Turkiniak blessed the wedding wreaths prepared by the bridesmaids and placed them on the heads of Ulia and Andrii, praying, "Lord our God, crown them with glory and honor." After Ulia offered a special prayer before the icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the couple were showered with grain as they left the church for the bride's home.

Ulia remembered the wedding festivities: "A day and a half with my Momma. A day and a half with his Momma. Big beautiful celebration. Eating, drinking, barrels of whiskey. Wonderful food—eggs, rice with buttered sugar, chickens, noodles, prunes with sugar, bread, nice bread, cookies made at home. Beautiful. . . . And music, such music. Seven gypsies playing music." The food that Ulia tried to put into English for the interviewer was the traditional fare of Rusyn celebrations—*halushky* (dumplings or noodles sautéed with cabbage and bacon), *pirohy* (ravioli-like dumplings filled with potatoes or bryndza cheese), *holubky* (stuffed cabbage), and *kolachy* (rolled pastry filled with nuts, apricots, or poppy seed)—along with ham, sausage, and chicken. The couple ate from a common plate and drank from a single cup. They sang joyful wedding songs with the guests, and danced the polka, waltz, and czardas. The revelry continued until it was time for the saddest and most emotional ritual—the bride's farewell to her family. In a formal speech, the *starosta* thanked the bride's parents for bringing up their daughter righteously. Ulia bowed to her parents and asked forgiveness for her childhood transgressions, as her bridesmaids intoned

sorrowful songs of parting and the groomsmen shouldered her feather-down quilt and other household items for the move to her new home.

In a theatrical change of scene, the wedding drama moved to the Varchola house for the second act. Andrii's mother greeted her new daughter-in-law with the ceremonial welcome of bread and salt. "What have you brought with you, daughter-in-law?" Presenting her gifts of bread and money to the women of the groom's family, Ulia said, "I bring the word of God, God's gifts, and God's blessings." Andrii's mother daubed the faces of bride and groom with honey for a sweet life together and slipped an egg down the front of Ulia's bodice, a superstition to ensure easy childbearing. Relatives and friends—the Chomas, Kacsurs, Hladoniks, Janocskos, Kalinyaks, and other villagers—gathered for more singing, dancing, feasting, and merrymaking, until it was time for another central event of the wedding, the "capping" ritual (*chepchovanie*). The *starosta* ordered that the bride's headdress be removed, asking rhetorically, "Am I to cut off your head, or just take off your wreath?" The bride twice answered, "Cut off my head!" before she finally agreed to give up her maiden's tiara. The married women from the groom's family then plaited the bride's loose hair, wrapped it in a bun, and covered it with a cap suitable for a married woman. From now on, Ulia's outward appearance told the world that she was no longer a maiden, but a wife.

The male guests lined up for the *riadovyi tanets* (dance in a row) to dance a few minutes with the bride, paying for the privilege with a monetary contribution to the couple's new life and receiving in return a shot of whiskey. All the while, like a Greek chorus, the *svashki* (matrons) sang age-old rhyming verses that narrated and commented on the action:

> Glory to Jesus Christ, / We have a beautiful bride // Our bride is like a pine tree / Where did such a girl grow? // Our girl has been capped / She is now a *baba* // Our girl has married / Leaving her friends behind // She's still ours, not yet yours / give some money and you will have her // Whoever gives for the cap / Can dance with the bride // God the Lord rejoices / The bride is dancing with her papa // May the good Lord rejoice / The bride is dancing with the groom // This lovely bride / Has grown up for you // Take her with you / And love her till death.[9]

Finally, with music and practical jokes, the young couple was led off to the bed prepared for them in the loft, while the merrymakers continued the festivities, improvising erotic jokes and bawdy songs. Many years later in Pittsburgh, Julia playfully told her granddaughter how, as a result of the revelry, Andrii clumsily navigated the ladder to their nuptial bed.[10]

Mythmakers

The Carpatho-Rusyn wedding ritual was a theatrical transformation of everyday life. Thanks to Julia Warhola's 1966 interview in *Esquire*, her wedding has become the single fixed point for the narrative of her early life. And yet, it cannot be taken as historical fact. Julia's brother Stephen was a witness to the marriage. His daughter Nora recalled her father's reaction to Julia's story, chuckling at the memory. "When she's talking about her wedding, he started to laugh . . . she said they had seven gypsies playing. He was laughing, he said that's not true."[11] Stephen's refutation was surely overstated, given the known facts from official records and the persistence of custom. But according to her niece, Julia was "a talker," who told exaggerated stories for the amusement of her audience.[12] Her story and her public image were passed down to subsequent audiences of scholars, biographers, and fans, who came to know Julia through the *Esquire* interview. In fact, the self-image she projected in her wedding narrative was not entirely natural, but rather a construction of personal identity in the context of Carpatho-Rusyn culture.

The interviewer, Bernard Weinraub, reports that he did not prompt Mrs. Warhola to talk about her wedding. Rather, Julia, who was "sort of in charge of the interview," launched into her personal narrative performance.[13] Scholars of narrative explain, "In the form a particular narrator gives to a history, we read the more or less abiding concerns and constraints of the individual and his or her community."[14] Accordingly, in Julia's narrative, we see the forces and features of her culture. Although her first reaction to Andrii was that he was "oh, so good-looking," Mrs. Warhola highlights, and probably exaggerates, her innocence, an obligatory element of Carpatho-Rusyn peasant culture. Pointing up the peasant woman's lack of agency in marital matters, she is persuaded to accept Andrii's proposal by a priest, albeit "a nice priest," and her father, who "beats" her, although this harsh phrasing may arise from Julia's limited English. In the end, it is Andrii's gift of "wonderful candy," probably a taste of America, that induces Ulia to accept him. These wistful plot features give way to the joyful narrative of the wedding, as the elderly Julia Warhola indulges in happy memories. The "barrels of whiskey," "wonderful food," the groom's ribboned hat, and the "seven gypsies playing music" are glowing details of traditional culture that brighten the gloom of her later life. The repeated exclamation "Oh!" highlights the expressive character of her performance, and the evaluative comment, "I beautiful," exposes its function. Telling the tale at almost seventy-five years of age, Julia asserts a romantic vision of her worth and vitality as a beautiful young bride in Miková.

Julia's story of her wedding was a performance in the sense that the term is used in performance studies: "a certain type of particularly involved and dramatized oral narrative," a purposeful presentation of the self.[15] From Julia's earliest performances in Miková to the stories she told her children and recorded on tape, to her relationships with her son's New York friends and her appearances in his film and video, performativity was basic to her personality and her communicative style. She passed on her proclivity for performance to her son Andy, who later made films in which self-dramatizing personalities projected a unique presence or identity in staged events and improvisations.[16] According to Weinraub, his interview with Mrs. Warhola took place in her apartment on the lower level of her son's house, where "all these weird people were wandering around. And there was this very old lady in black sitting there. She was a total fish out of water."[17] In a transformative performance for the interviewer, the "old lady in black" held on to the reality of the past, reveling in the identity she enjoyed as the innocent peasant girl with golden hair at the center of the wedding story.

The entire Carpatho-Rusyn wedding was, in fact, not real life, but ritual, "where theater and anthropology overlap."[18] In his study of Carpatho-Rusyn drama, the Russian scholar Evgenii Nedziel'skii pointed out that viewers of the wedding ritual expected not realistic role-playing on the part of the participants, but a theatrical transformation that would produce a kind of catharsis in viewers.[19] Conventional gestures, formalized expressions, and self-dramatizations were expected. One can imagine that Ulia excelled as a histrionic actress-bride. As time passed, and as she told and retold the narrative of her wedding, she reconstructed and embellished it.

Perhaps self-mythologizing on Julia's part should not surprise us. Julia's son, Andy Warhol, was known as a consummate mythmaker. He crafted his own public persona out of artistic invention (self-portraits that conceal more than they reveal), psychological defenses (his monosyllabic public nonstatements), fabrication (literary self-representations that were in fact produced by associates), appropriation (unauthorized use of photographs), and outright deception (dispatching an impersonator to substitute for him at college lectures).[20] Biographers have conceded defeat in their attempts to define his character and biography in explicit terms, resorting instead to hollow statements of ambiguity—he was "the tycoon of passivity," or "a trickster, artfully evading our attempts to pin him down," "a character without a past, who conjured himself out of his own head."[21] In the most recent biography, the art historian Blake Gopnik notes, "There had always been something theatrical about the way [Warhol] refused to be tied down to the simple facts of his own existence—about the way he'd always shaped his myth and persona to suit himself and please others."[22]

Warhol's persona was built on performance, on the presumed irrelevance of reality. He reportedly said, "Who wants the truth? That's what show business is for—to prove that it's not what you are that counts, it's what they think you are."[23]

Did Warhol learn to deflect, obfuscate, and embellish at his mother's knee? Of the numerous commentators who have mentioned Julia's tendency to embroider reality and create stories, Joseph Giordano was most explicit. An advertising art director who worked with Warhol in the late 1950s, Giordano claims that he "almost lived [with Andy and his mother] for five or six years." Archival information attests to a close relationship between Giordano and Julia, whom he called "Missy." Some of his memories strain credulity, but he admits that in Julia's stories, he could not distinguish myth from reality. "She was exactly like Andy—she was a myth-maker. . . . And I think this was the basis of [Warhol's] whole character. . . . He knows how to perpetuate the myth. . . . That is exactly what Missy was. He had the most wonderful teacher in the world."[24]

Indeed, Julia Warhola had her own flare for "show-business." Gifted with a theatrical personality, she developed her natural talent for performance and her penchant for self-mythologizing as she practiced the folkways of her native culture. Throughout her life, she created an artistic world of imagination to supplement and enhance her dull reality. The traditional culture of Carpathian-Rus′, communicated across generations, encompassing attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors, was a psychological and social construct that defined Julia Warhola's world. Her artist-son internalized his mother's creative interaction with the world, turning the focus of his own creative energy to American life and fashioning artistic images from commonplace items. Like participants in the Rusyn wedding drama, he played with different versions of reality in improvisational films, where actors role-played themselves in routine activities drawn out to marathon length. Warhol's camp artistic taste "[moved] insistently towards performance, towards the theatricalisation of everyday life."[25] Ethnographers used the same formulation to describe Carpatho-Rusyn folkways. Evgenii Nedziel′skii compared the peasants' theatricalization of everyday life to the elaborate court ceremony of English royalty: "The theatrical ceremony of the royal court pales by comparison to the traditional, ritualistic, and superstitious aspect of everyday Carpatho-Rusyn peasant life."[26] Warhol transferred his mother's old-world creative instinct to contemporary American life, employing an aesthetic that derived from a wealth of folk tradition rooted in Ulia Zavacka's lived experience—Carpatho-Rusyn life and culture in the village of Miková.

The People from Nowhere

Carpatho-Rusyns, also known as Rusyns, Rusnaks, Carpatho-Russians, Lemkos, and Ruthenians, are a stateless people whose homeland is located on the northern and southern slopes of the Carpathian Mountains in central Europe.[27] Ulia Zavacka, who would become Andy Warhol's mother, was born in 1891 in the village of Miková, in what was then the Kingdom of Hungary, a largely autonomous component of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. Miková was located near the border with Austrian Galicia in Zemplyn (Hung. Zemplén) County, and today it is in the Prešov Region of northeastern Slovakia.

Magyars were a numerical minority in the multiethnic state they ruled, and to counteract the demographic trend, the Hungarian government carried on a rigorous campaign to assimilate national minorities. But the Carpatho-Rusyn peasants living in the villages of the kingdom were largely untouched by national movements or governmental compulsion. They went on speaking their own East Slavic dialects, practicing their Eastern Catholic religion, and performing the time-honored customs and traditions that predated states and monarchs. They viewed the nobility and government officials with suspicion and distrust, and it was typical of Rusyns to deride the gentry as lazy and pompous. "He dresses like a *pan*" (gentleman) is an insult directed at a pretentious peasant. "She thinks she's a *pani*" (lady) is a slur aimed at a woman who avoids work and puts herself above others of her own class. This way of thinking, hardwired in simple Rusyns, was unconsciously absorbed by their American children. Andy Warhol's secretary wrote, "The worst thing that Andy could think to say about someone was that he was 'the kind of person who thinks he's better than you,'" and according to his colleague from the 1970s, Bob Colacello, "his usual response to a star he had met was not 'Gee' and 'Wow' and 'Great'—it was 'Who does she think she is?'"[28]

The Hungarian government's policy of national assimilation had an impact on Rusyn peasants through the educational system. Formal education was considered a pursuit of the nobility and was little valued in Rusyn villages. As they later indicated to US census officials, none of the Zavacky or Warhola immigrants had more than a few years of elementary education.[29] By the time Ulia and Andrii began attending school in Miková, students were required to demonstrate proficiency in Hungarian, and only religion was taught in Rusyn. However, peasants never gained a real mastery of Hungarian, which was largely useless in practice, and most remained semiliterate in their own language. The Hungarian Ministry of Education replaced Cyrillic, the natural alphabet of the Rusyn language, with the Latin alphabet in a complicated

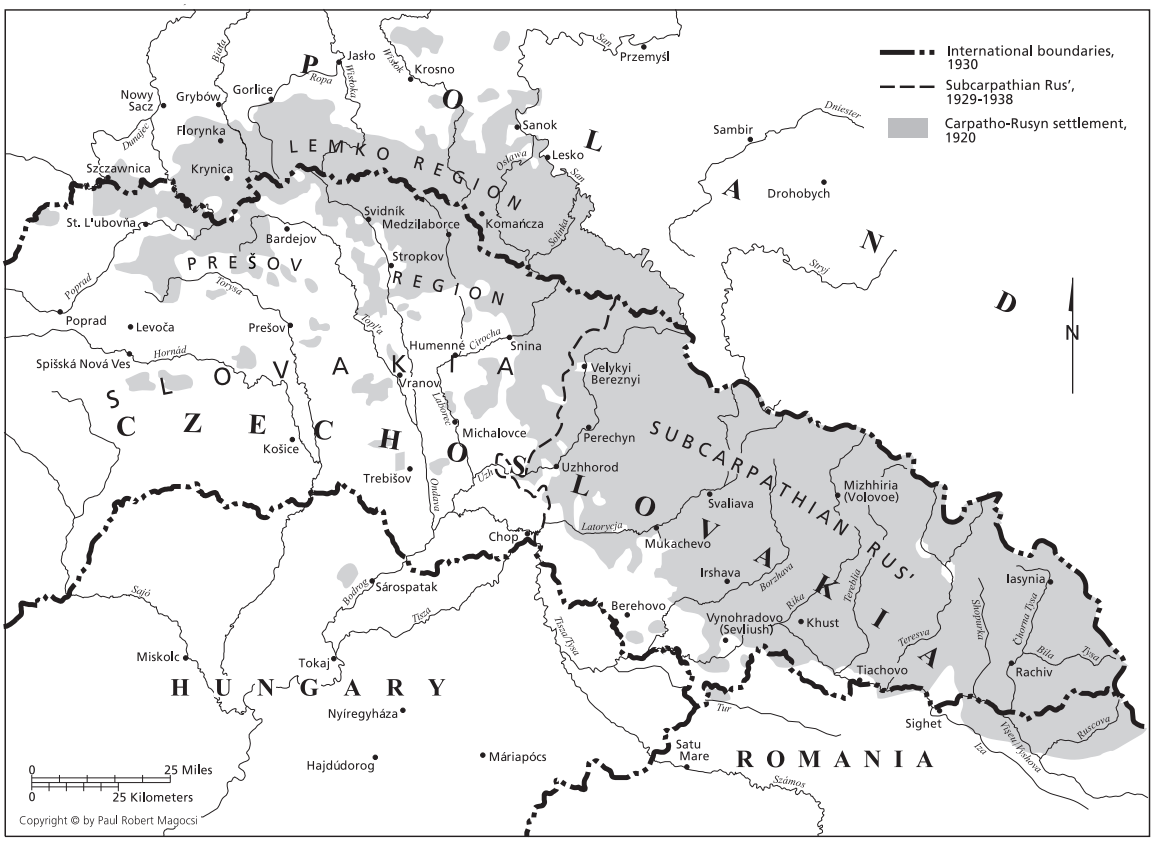

Figure 1.2. Carpathian Rus', 1919–1938. Miková is located four miles northwest of Medzilaborce.

Hungarian transcription. Throughout their adult lives, Julia and her relatives used this script, later mixed with elements of Slovak and the random misspelled English word or phrase, in a basic phonetic spelling, making their notes and letters a challenge for researchers.

Another imposition of the Hungarian government on peasant life was military conscription.[30] Every male citizen between the ages of twenty and thirty-six was subject to compulsory military service. In the infantry, recruits served one to three years, followed by nine or ten years in the active reserves, during which time they were required to participate in annual training. Even after their obligation was completed, conscripts could be called up in time of war. This was a burden for peasants, who made their living through time-intensive agricultural labor. Andrii Varchola emigrated to America first in 1905 at the age of nineteen or twenty, perhaps with