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**Centre and Periphery.  
An Oral History of the Roma Communities between Rural and  
Urban Areas in Post Second World War Transylvania**

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**Keywords:** Roma communities, communism, sedentarisation, Saxon houses, systematisation, mobility/ migration, centre and periphery

Post-Second World War years are characterised by many changes the nomadic, semi-nomadic and sedentary Roma communities have encountered regarding mobility, dwelling conditions and lifestyle. All these bring into question the post-war rural and urban areas, the centre and the periphery in terms of the rise and sometimes decline of Roma mobility, but also the manner in which it was regulated and distributed in different areas by the existing political, social and economic structures of power during the communist regime. A particular concept regarding the image of the Roma communities in Romania and particularly in Transylvania is that of marginality – small Roma communities settled nearby villages and towns are frequently perceived as a given or as an inheritance from the past. In this connection, the present research<sup>1</sup> “Centre and Periphery. An Oral History of the Roma Communities between Rural and Urban Areas in Post Second World War Transylvania”, aims at emphasizing the Roma communities’ everyday life during the communist regime in terms of the space/ place they inhabited, their mobilities and migration, their relationship with the local authorities/ the communist state, all of these placed in a centre-periphery binominal. In this approach, the chapters of the dissertation compose a picture of the Roma communities in Transylvania, where Roma are placed in a permanent relationship with the centre. The dissertation presents the centre-periphery binominal at several levels: the relationship between the communist state and the Roma population, respectively the relation between the institutions of the communist state (regarded as centre) and the Roma neighbourhoods (placed in a territorial periphery and also perceived as periphery); secondly, another level of analysis is that of the relationship between the major historical events of the twentieth century (understood as the centre) and the Roma population’s everyday goings-on (seen as periphery); finally, the thesis aims to present the centre-peripheral relation from a territorial point of view and to highlight the social implications of this centre-periphery binominal in Roma habitation, by approaching histories from periphery and histories about the periphery and the centre, as well as

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histories of discrimination, acculturation and integration. Considering that “the centre” and “the periphery” may indicate more than location (regions, cities), but also persons, institutions, nations or events, and taking the model of understanding from Immanuel Wallerstein’s theory in which the powerful and wealthy centres dominate and exploit the weak and poor peripheries, the research extrapolates and analyses the relationship between the periphery, understood as the Roma population, and the centre, perceived as the (communist) state and its institutions.

The present dissertation examines the changes Roma communities have encountered under the communist regime in Transylvania in terms of space and habitation as well as a variety of other factors which come along with these changes: dwelling conditions, relations inside the community (relations with the authorities, other ethnicities or Roma communities), economic dynamics, traditions and customs, occupations, lifestyle, mobility and migration etc. Regarding Roma habitation, the research takes into account *the place* inhabited by Roma communities (as a static location, analysed from a geographical point of view) as well as *the space* in which Roma live (as a dynamic socially constructed location). In this connection, there are multiple spaces: a Roma space (be it peripheral or central) which clashes with other existing nearby spaces, as far as social spaces interpenetrate one another and/ or superimpose themselves upon one another. This is in fact a natural way of exchanging knowledge, customs, language, values etc. – it could be seen as a mutual understanding on territoriality, an impersonal negotiated cohabitation of the living space of a larger territory such as a village or a city. Several examples could be given in regard to the territory of Transylvania where multiculturalism was and still is one of its defining attributes. Regarding the communist era, despite all efforts the communist leadership and the local communist authorities have made in order to homogenise the Romanian society, Roma communities managed to survive and sometimes to preserve their *spaces*. In this regard, phenomena of acculturation, integration and assimilation are considered to have been results of the multiple changes imposed to Roma communities by the communist regime. In the context of the sedentarisation of Roma in settlements, different cultural identities (encompassing values, social practices and traditions) met, clashed and influenced one another. It is interesting to observe this cultural and ethnic assimilation among the Roma communities living in Saxon, Hungarian or Romanian villages in Transylvania in the aftermath of the Second World War. In this regard, a salient issue the dissertation explores is the extent to which Roma resistance towards the assimilation/ integration programme launched by the communist state was registered.

Romanian master historical narrative makes few references to Roma population before 1989, most of them briefly referring to Roma once the historical discourse reached particular subjects such as: Gypsies as slaves in the Middle Ages, social and economic changes, demographic evolutions, the 1848 Revolution in the principalities, the abolition of slavery, the Second World War, the Holocaust, Antonescu's regime and the communist period. Later, post-communist years imply a *historiographical boom* concerning the Roma population living in Romania. The democratization allowed the minorities in Romania to express and organize themselves in terms of culture, education and politics. Regarding Roma history research in post-communism, there are multiple studies covering Roma's past from the first documented record of their presence on the Romanian territory, up close to today's facts. However, despite the fact that historians, anthropologists and sociologists published a large number of works about Roma communities in Romania, most such communities do not have a "history of their own", documented by themselves. Roma's history in Romania consists of a limited number of publications which tackle their history during the twentieth century – studies very often stop with the end of World War II, namely with the Roma deportation to Transnistria, and do not address (or poorly address) the history of the Roma mobility and everyday life during communism. This absence from the Romanian historical narrative could have been determined by the fact that Roma communities are characterised by an oral tradition, which did not generate written records about the past. Thus, in terms of historiography, there are few works written by Roma about the Roma, emphasizing the everyday life within Roma communities in Romania or specifically in Transylvania. Recently, Romanian historiography was enriched by a significant number of works addressing Roma communities and their history such as compendiums and articles questioning aspects of material, cultural and spiritual needs of these communities. While Romanian historical research encompasses several articles published on the topic of Roma in Romania, those referring to the living space, periphery-centre relations or forms of Roma habitation, (dis)placement in different spaces, are scarce. A common feature of these recent approaches is that the authors did not write about Roma traditions and everyday lives, but are oriented towards the analysis of the Roma - non-Roma relationship and the social and cultural dynamics generated by it. As a consequence, an approach on the space inhabited by the Roma communities is essential in order to get an overall picture of the history of Roma in post-war Romania and more specifically in the region of Transylvania.

In terms of methodology, the research attempts to employ two principles of the “immediate history” illustrated by Jean-François Soulet in his work “L’histoire immediate. Historiographie, sources et méthodes”. On the one hand, the present research pursues to approach facts on “a vertical scale”, respectively by reconstituting the context of the events recorded within the interviews, recording any continuity, rupture, change, or similarity to occur within the life stories recalled by the interviewees. In this respect, it is interesting to examine the pattern of remembrance interviewees who belong to different Roma communities in Romania reveal in terms of various instances such as: the Second World War and the deportation of Roma to Transnistria, the sedentarisation policy of the Roma communities during the communist period, the process of systematization of the territory during the communist era – all of these events represent in fact circumstances which correspond to everyday life stories of interviewees from different areas of the country. On the other hand, the second principle the thesis attempts to engage is pursuing facts/ events “on a horizontal scale” in view of a broader context: in this understanding, for example the sedentarisation of the nomadic Roma communities in Romania during the communist period is being analysed in the context of the nomadic groups within the Soviet bloc and the measures which targeted Roma communities in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

In order to anchor the present research in the realities of the communist past, in addition to analysing the master historical narrative on Roma in Romania, archival documents including the official censuses registered during the communist period in Romania and the “Official Bulletin” (of the Romanian People’s Republic and the Socialist Republic of Romania) are being investigated and linked to the oral testimonies recorded in different Roma communities across Romania and particularly in Transylvania. The official documents allow a better understanding on the political decisions targeting (in)directly Roma communities. In addition, for the purpose of understanding the sedentarisation of the nomadic Roma communities in Transylvania, the research made use of the Orthodox Parish Registers of Baptisms and Deaths in Sibiu County, where many of the former nomadic Cortorari communities nowadays live.

Given the fact that all documents related to Roma are about Roma people but never written by the Roma, this research is based on the oral history methodology, namely on the oral history interviews conducted between 2014-2017 in many different Roma communities in Romania. Basically, one of the purposes of the present research was to collect, preserve and then interpret a collection of everyday life stories of Roma placed in a context of change (in terms of time, space/ habitation, socio-cultural background) and

cross-cultural strategies of identity engaging a process of acculturation. In this understanding, the thesis tackles the Roma space/ housing issue from a historical perspective using the oral history methodology, rather than a geographical or a sociological one, focussing on the social and cultural contexts, living space and the Roma movements across Transylvania during the communist years, sometimes encompassing memories of the interwar period or even older. The oral history approach brings up some interesting accounts of Roma living conditions in Transylvania in *longue durée*: throughout the interwar period, the years of World War Two, the communist decades and the post-1989 years. Ordinary life stories enrich the history of periphery-centre-periphery movements of Roma in terms of geographical approach, as much as in terms of cultural and intercultural approaches. Throughout the research, I have recorded a total number of 145 interviews (86 in the region of Transylvania) of which 66 were male and 79 female but this research makes use of some of the 623 interviews recorded during the “Untold Story. An Oral History of the Roma people in Romania” project (conducted at the Oral History Institute in Cluj-Napoca) as well. Undoubtedly, a wealth of data was amassed through my fieldwork and the oral history interviews quoted within the chapters of this research portray individual biographies, family histories, and histories of various Roma communities revealing the manner in which they used to live during the communist era in Transylvania. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and fragments were translated into English in order to be used within the body of the following chapters.

At the heart of this research are four distinct research questions, focusing upon the following topics: the forced sedentarisation of the Roma nomadic families during the communist regime in Romania, the Roma families living in the centre of former Saxon villages and towns during the same period of time, the systematisation policy affecting the Roma, and the Roma craftsmen communities who managed to move around the country under the strict control managed by the communist authorities in terms of mobility.

The first chapter, entitled “Sedentarisation historical narrative. Forced residency of nomadic Roma communities in communist Transylvania,” record life stories of Cortorari Roma communities (tent dwellers) who remembered the forced sedentarisation of their nomadic families beginning with the 1950s. This chapter seeks to emphasize the centre, understood as the State i.e. the communist authorities, which, by implementing the forced sedentarisation of the nomadic Roma communities (groups placed outside the periphery), sought to bring the Roma towards the periphery. Following the track of the archives, historiography and collected life stories some of the research questions to be answered in



the chapter are the following: What was the state policy regarding the nomadic communities in the early years of communism? How did Cortorari live as nomadic communities? Where did they usually camp? How do they remember the communist years? When do they recall and how did they perceive the sedentarisation policy? Chapter 1 seeks to describe the Roma dwelling conditions after embracing the change: the way they managed to maintain a household, to go to work and send their children to school, give up traditional occupation and habits or find ways of keeping alive some of their trades and customs. Finally, it investigates how young generations of Cortorari relate to the past, holding the story of their nomad parents and grandparents.

Chapter 2, “Back and forth – change of address, change of lives. Roma in Saxon houses: state policy or opportunity?”, focuses on Roma who moved in the centre of some former Saxon cities and villages in Transylvania such as Reghin, Sighișoara, Brădeni, Uila or Bradu, emphasizing the manner in which Roma families got to live in Saxon houses under the communist regime, trying to understand whether it was a state policy or an opportunity. It also analyses the way Roma sedentary or former nomadic communities perceived the migration towards the former Saxon centre and the changes they have encountered in terms of lifestyle, occupations, traditions, religion or language. Thus, Roma in the periphery reached the centre and lived there for a period of time, through a coordinated action either from the centre (the communist authorities) or through an uncontrolled action in which the periphery entered the centre as a result of the outcomes of the end of the Second World War. The research took as a starting point the Archives and the post 1989 historiography. After that, an oral history approach was used to collect and recover life stories of Roma from Transylvania in the communist period with the intend to complete the Romanian historical narrative.

“Living a parasitic lifestyle. Roma population and the policy of systematisation” deals with the centre, i.e. the communist state, who blamed the parasitic lifestyle within the periphery and aimed to change and control it by applying the systematisation policy meant to eradicate existing disparities between the centre and the periphery, and finally leading to the wished-for socialist city. In Romania, the “re-organization of settlements and territory” affected millions of people in urban and rural areas, including Roma marginal communities who were at some point explicitly targeted because of their peripheral social behaviour and their parasitic lifestyle, considered harmful to the socialist society in the making. Some of the research questions to which the third chapter aims to provide answers to, are the following: Which were the peripheral dwelling conditions in the rural and urban areas in

post-war Romania? When and how did the communist authorities decide to destroy peripheral Roma settlements? How do Roma remember forced displacement during the communist years?

The last chapter, entitled “Mobilities and migration as way of living. Roma communities in Transylvania during the communist regime”, aims to highlight the manner in which Roma communities in Transylvania managed to practice their crafts and trades and to move across the country, under the austere communist legislation and their permanent surveillance done by the Militia in each county. It emphasizes the periphery’s negotiations with the centre in terms of mobility as long as, by means of its occupations, the periphery reached the centre and provided it with goods of immediate need. In this regard, oral history interviews very often demonstrated the inability of the communist regime in regulating the manner in which Roma families gained their existence practicing different crafts and/ or the street commerce. Therefore, this chapter focuses on the life stories of various Roma craftsmen communities who continued to produce goods and sell them during the communist regime and who moved (most of the times temporary, but also permanently) in different areas in Transylvania, managing to negotiate with the system to provide for their families. The interviewees whose story fragments are to be quoted in this chapter, belong to the traditional communities of Gabori or Căldărari, as well as to former communities of brick makers, comb makers, spoon makers, musicians, brooms and baskets craftsmen and street merchants.

The Epilogue of the dissertation, “A story of a century. War, peace and the everyday life of a Roma war veteran in Transylvania”, emphasizes the relationship between the periphery and the centre by bringing into question a “lived history” of a Roma interviewee in Transylvania. Histories recalled within this interview are stories from the periphery, histories of discrimination and marginalization and, at the same time, histories of integration and acculturation. In this sense, the Epilogue addresses the relation between Roma communities (acknowledged as periphery) and the major historical events of the 20th century (understood as centre). The life story discussed within its paragraphs is that of a 93 years old Roma war veteran, who recalled a period of one and a half century in a village in Mureş county, encompassing the experiences his family and the Roma community underwent during the second part of the nineteenth century, the post-World War I land reform, the most common occupations the Roma had in the village at the beginning of the 20th century, the languages spoken by the Roma community, the relationships with the Saxon population during the interwar period, the Jewish community

in the village and the atrocities they have encountered during the Second World War, the communist period and the post 1989 years.

Finally, the conclusion draws each of the chapters together, highlighting the importance of this research within the history of the Roma population in Romania during the twentieth century. Regarding the appendices of the present research, the first three, namely Appendix A, B and C, are documents drafted by the communist authorities (the Sibiu County Inspectorate of Securitate and the Militia of Cluj County) regarding the situation of the Roma in their area of competence. These refer to the total number of Roma people, the number of Roma people enrolled in work, those who did not have a job and received social support, their situation in terms of sedentarisation as well as in terms of their criminal status and religious options. The documents present actions taken by the above-mentioned institutions regarding the “integration of the Roma population,” the reduction of their antisocial behaviour, the sedentarisation of the nomadic groups, the fight against social parasitism and the control over their illegal migration from one county to another one. Appendices D and E contain the consent forms and the interview guide used during the fieldwork campaigns, while the last two Appendices, F and G, present two oral history interviews recorded during the fieldwork campaigns in Transylvania, which are representative for the topic of the present thesis. In order to preserve their authenticity, they are attached in the original Romanian language version with English abstracts.

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