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## **The ethnic group of Romanian Zipsers.**

### **Historical study of representation changes of the identity space in Vişeu de Sus, Maramureş**

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**Key words:** *ethnic group, colonization process, Carpathian space, Zipser, ethnic identity, Tipserai, Vaser Valley, Viseu-de Sus, ethnic elements, emigration, homeland.*

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## **Introduction**

This paper is a deep study on an ethnic group with German origins and so it joins other human geography papers. To underline the main features that highlight the existence and the development of the Zipsers in the Romania Carpathian space, different domains like history, linguistics, ethnology and sociology had to be used.

An ethnic group is bounded in the term ethnic thanks to the fact that this is " *part of a population that has its own culture*"<sup>1</sup>, but keeping in mind that from the ethnic there can appear an ethnic group right when unique elements make the difference between its members. The unifying element was very important in developing the cohesion of the group, in the past, but it is also the most vulnerable and it can become the reason for the separation from the ethnic group.

For this research, the geographical characteristics of space and the main occupations of the population have determined the development of an identity side the big German family from the East and South-East Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> (Erdeli, 1999, p. 148);

## **I. Object. Methods. Research retrospect**

The purpose of this research is to find geographical arguments for underlining the importance of space and its specificity in correlation with a small ethnic group. The human community is not just a bunch of people on a certain surface, but so much more. The human community is a genetic, cultural and linguistic kit. Going back into the past, the ethnic identity can be seen according to the space, with their mobility, but also can be seen according to the communication and the exchange of information inside the same region. Here it appears for the first time the complex of living one near each other, or living together, the complex of cultural transfer, of the ethnic and linguistic level, notions that will be further developed in the next pages.

Because there is the problem of using geographical, sociological and historical investigation elements, the results of the research will have as sub layer methods and techniques like the demanding of domains. The expected results are the ones that underline the mechanisms the ethnic group of the Zipsers has developed to handle the acculturation and assimilation processes that come from the autochthons both mental and spatial.

Also, the study wants to make radiography of the ethnic identity of the Zipsers and most of all of the role space had in building and preserving the ethnic identity. The space representations and the organization of all activities, influenced by its resources, have played an important role in allowing other ethnic groups or autochthons to accept the position of the Zipsers no matter where they have established new grounds.

The documents that stand at the base of this research are scientific papers published so far involving German ethnic groups, of Zipsers, but also archive documents, church books, personal collections and interviews. All these combined have helped the creation of different images and patterns on Zipsers.

## **II. The historical-geographical perspective on German colonization inside the Carpathian space**

The history of the Zipsers, or to be more precise, of Germans from Zips area, Slovakia, represents the starting point for this research. The Zips area was one of the most well treated are found under the Austrian and Hungarian domination. Germans have been colonized in the North of the Empire, currently belonging to Slovakia, in the past superior Hungary / Oberungarn, along a long period of time between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Century. The



most intense colonization processes took place after the Tartar invasion that took place in 1241, and happened at the margins of the entire Empire, not only in the north, but also in the East and North-East. The same thing happened to Transylvania and the origins of the colonists were the same both cases (siebenburger Sachsen / zipser Sachsen).

Zips region is found in the North-East of Slovakia. Its name goes back in history, as this is not currently an administrative region, its land belonging to the Szepes Committee from the Hungarian Kingdom (11<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Also, part of this territory is under Polish administration, or the Northern part, to be more precise, that goes by the name of *polsky Spis*.

Geographically this region can be found at the base of the Tatra Mare Mountains, in the North, where we can also find the Gerlachovka peak (2663 m) and Tatra Mica mountains at the South which reach heights of 2043 m tops, with the Dumbier, being more a basin. The rivers that cross the region are Poprad and Hornad. Their configuration is similar to the one Transylvania has, especially regarding relief, resources, history and the age of the German population, the main organization categories or the geographic space related to Zips as a mental space. This is a mountain area, with long or close villages situated along the access roads. The main occupations of the inhabitants were mining and working in the forest.

Now regions like Kosice and Preso are the administrative parts of Zips, with their cities like Poprad, Levoca, Spisska Nova Ves and the German cultural center Kezmarok.

The toponim *Zips* (*ge.*), *Szepes* (*magh.*), *Spis* (*slovk.*), *Spiz* (*pol.*), *Scepusium* (*lat.*) is reminded since the 1198<sup>2</sup>. The German literature uses the term Zips / zipser, zipserisch, Zipserreihe, Zipservolk<sup>3</sup> which means an ethnic group that has its origins in Zips (Slovakia), and that can be found in Viseu de Sus at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Unfortunately, Romanian dictionaries do not contain translated versions of the German word, despite the fact that this ethnic group can be found on the Romanian territory for a few centuries now. The ethnics introduce themselves as *tipteri*, *tiptari*, and these words are also used in different Romanian texts. This variant can be considered, but it cannot be an

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<sup>2</sup> (Krones, 1878), Szipsis, in terra Scypiens, with the pronunciation Bispisch; in 1254, Szipiüs with the pronunciation Bispüsich; in 1255, Szipes, with the pronunciation Bipesch; in 1271 and 1299 as Szips, pronounced Bipsch; in 1309, Szepis, Bipsch, but also later in 1330, it appears Szepes pronounced Bipsch; from the etymologic point of view which has latin roots, *sepes* which means fence, closing (*ge.* Der Zaun), the same author referring to the Carpathian mountain chain from Zips. Also it can be considered the Hungarian saying *Oh, be szépes!* Which means (Oh, how beautiful!);

<sup>3</sup> (Gehl, 2005, p. 182);

official one. The renaming process of this ethnic group starts from etymologic indicators and the way words have evolved. So, the term tipser has its origins in the Latin *terra Scypiensi*, in Slovakian culture Spis, but also in the Hungarian *Szepes* or the German *Zips*. The common element of these terms is tips (in Romanian pronunciation), which is very close with the Germans pronounce it, *zipser*. The S is very useful, because it can be found in all languages that use this word. So, in conclusion, the final form of the word is *tipser*.

The few centuries the Germans spent in Zips have brought modifications regarding the identity of this group<sup>4</sup>. The new identities that have been formed forced by the new life conditions or by the interaction with other populations, have imposed other modifications and not just the ones referring to the architecture of the houses, the traditional cloths, but mostly, the changes refer to the way of understanding the social problems.

Some of the identity elements have been the dialect that has suffered different influences and modifications. The German dialect from Slovakia is considered by the majority of the citizens to be a German island in a Slavic<sup>5</sup> space. These communities of German people have lived separately from the Slavic ones, but the work environment was one in which acculturation processes were active. The assimilation process cannot be confirmed in the true way of the word because these colonists have not been marginalized or harmed thanks to their management structure. Even so, starting 1412 until 1770, part of the Zips region, while Sigismund was in charge, Poland has been offered, and to be more precise, we are talking about 13 cities. During these 3 centuries, the sharing of the historic regions, has determined the form of a dialect and culture, found in the dialect differences and only of the Zipsers colonized in the East part of the Carpathians, after 1770, when the Hungarians return<sup>6</sup>.

The Zips region is one of the most concentrated historical regions of the populations colonized by the Germans it is a construct of an evolution and mix of dialects and cultures. Today, Zips represents not just a geographic space, but more than that, a county, a life, an experience. Even if Zipsers generation were not born in Zips, in their identity can be seen elements that belong to this mental space.

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<sup>4</sup> (Wiesinger, 2007, p. 40 ); Sprachinsel (ge.): „relativ kleine Sprach- oder Siedlungsgemeinschaft in einem anderssprachigern, relativ groesseren Gebiet”;

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<sup>6</sup> (Ilk, 2011, p. 64);

### **III. The ethnic group of the Zipsers from the Romanian Carpathian space. Banat, Bucovina, Maramures.**

The Zipsers found in the East part of the empire are not by surprise, especially because relationships with Transylvania were already tight, through work, people of culture and science. The main reason for the colonization of the Zipsers was the care the Austrian empire had to the margins (safety of the borders), the important salt mines (Maramures), mining (Banat and Bucovina) and wood. Other arguments refer to the social part and the roots of the German element for an easier control.

As it can be seen, Zipsers belong to the mountain space, through their origin being colonized in the mountain region of the Tatra Mountains to the Carpathians, as through the specific of their work, mining and forest exploitation. The benefits received after the transfer towards other regions (not paying taxes, land, materials for houses), but also the restrictive factors from Zips (religious issues, no working places, the poor population) were some of the most powerful reasons for leaving Zips. One of the older colonization with Zipsers was the ones found in mountain part of Banat until Resita, Anina, Oravita, Orsova, Mountain Bocsă, Valiug, where the first Zipsers were trained to work in mines, at schools from Salzkammergut (Austria) or Zips. These were followed by other waves as well which led to the over population of cities, the development of other places, the development of mining, but also the development of different StEG factories in Resita. Zipsers from Mountain Banat have lived together with Austrian population (Salzkammergut), Italians, Slovaks, Polish, etc. the acculturation process has developed fast, as it was about the Roman-Catholic church as a common point of the ethnic groups, then the German language, giving up the dialects in favor of the literal German language and last, but not last the basics of work, mountain space and mining, these being the main pillars for the cultural and linguistic development.

As for Bucovina, this is a privileged place part of the Austrian monarchy. The Zipsers can be found in the mountain Bucovina area, but also in the upper part of the Bistrita River. The cameral responsible with the colonization of the Zipsers was von Manz, the one that starts the exploitation of mines and forest in Bucovina. So, the highest number of Zipsers colonized was in Iacobeni, Carlibaba, Pojorata, Prisaca Dornei, Vama.

Just like the Zipsers from Banat, living together with Austrians, inside the Roman-Catholic church, sharing the same German culture, space has a very important role in the acculturation process followed by the assimilation one. Also we could see the presence

and the influence of the imperial house by trying to build *homo bucovinensis*<sup>7</sup>, a strong German identity, conversation in German, even though this was not the native language of all inhabitants, the cultural tolerance, devotement for the management. This construct depends on the space and it lasted until nowadays, even between the German Tipsers from Bucovina, by using this space. This indicates the strong impact this current had until the period between the world wars, in the acculturation process of the Zipsers. Moving after the German army retracted from the second world war then the deportation in the U.R.S.S. because of the damage caused by the war which had to be paid by Germany, the West exude after 1970, were the phenomenon with the highest impact in the destruction of the ethnic group of the Zipsers from Bucovina.

Maramures represents a special case of the colonization of the Zipsers, as they are included in the last parts of these processes. Their presence is possible thanks to Rudnyanski, Maramures administrator, which brings Zipsers from the North and South part of Zips (former Polish province) that has the Tisa River at the North at Rahau, Frasin, Bohdan and Viseu de Sus at the South. The typology of space is the same one, the mountain region with valuable salt and forest resources. These were colonized together with the Austrians, where living a parallel life and then a joined life, has brought important modifications along the years in terms of ethnic and cultural identity. In the historic Maramures, the change of the political situation was more intense than in other historic lands, moving from one regime to another, has had a major influence on the ways the ethnic identity used to manifest. Between three of the most important historic Carpathian regions, in Maramures, the Hungarian and Slaving processes were the most intense.

Now, only in Viseu de Sus we can find an ethnic group that has zipser origins. The marks left behind is highlighted by the Zipserai neighborhood from Rahau, but which now was left with only the name. Here live only three people who speak German, who know their Zipsers origins, but who think of themselves as being Hungarians.

#### **IV. The colonization process of the Germans from Viseu de Sus**

The Vaserului Valley and Viseu de Sus had represented a specific starting point for the colonization process that begun with the initiative of Maria Theresia and Joseph the 2<sup>nd</sup>, the resources that could have been exploited also had an important word in this.

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<sup>7</sup> (Ilk, 2011, p. 64);

The German colonization from Viseu de Sus started in 1775 as a lot of Austrian colonists were brought here from Bad Ischl, Salzkammergut, Ebensee (Austria), to exploit forest resources needed to transport salt from Ocna Sugatag, on the Tisa River until the Danube<sup>8</sup>. Because of the high demand of wood for rafts and the lack of implication in these works of the Romanians, the Austrians were brought from the regions mentioned above.

Zipsers were also brought from the Zips region, from high Hungary that is currently Slovakia. The workers were specialized in the forest domain. Their origins were Hobgarten, Schmollnitz, Pudlein etc. but some workers were even brought from the North parts of Zips, which for more than four centuries were found under Polish command. As proof, there are a lot of surnames finished in *-sky*, *-ski*<sup>9</sup>. This colonization started in 1792 and continued until 1832.

The strong waves of colonization in Viseu de Sus of the Zipsers have determined the development of a neighborhood for these ethnics, separately from the Austrian ones, called Tipserai. These have lived apart for almost two centuries, but after more than 170 years took place the first marriage between a Zipser woman and an Austrian man. The tensions between the two groups were determined by the age of the Austrian population, their superior qualification, and the colonization environment, the social and economic status, but also competition in the activity domain.

The main jobs were forest responsible, financial responsible, material administrator, forest supervisors, hurdler, apprentices and workers. The organization of the forest domain is not really a specific activity of the Zipsers, but the exploitation methods and the common language can be found among Zipsers. Some of them are: chalet / *Kulibn*, rack (transversal constructions built on the course of a river to stop big wood materials), rafts and cribbing, dams, conveying trough (adduction canal for wood from the mountain), dams, small waterfalls, lumber factories, water mills etc.

## V. Viseu de Sus, the layout of a multicultural space

Nowadays, Viseu de Sus represents a good example of living together and communication between the 8 ethnic groups that ever existed in this small town in Maramures. The cultural interferences can be felt even now by referring to the *other one*, but

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<sup>8</sup> These colonists have been transferred from Deutsch-Mokra and Konigsfeld, today in Ukrain; 8 Jachmovski, Zawatski etc);

<sup>9</sup> Jachomovski, Zawatski etc.;

also referring to the ethnic tolerance. Jewish, Austrian, Zipsers, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Polish, Slovakian ethnic groups in comparison with the Romanian ones have had different ratios between the majority and the minority. The most delicate ration was between Romanian and Jewish people (after religion), Romanian and Germans (after the ethnic group), especially before 1910.

From the geographical point of view, Viseu de Sus is found in the East part of Maramures, South-East part of waivode Maramures, the North of Romania, in the high basin of Viseu River; its most important feeder is Vaserului Valley, an important pillar of the economy of Viseu de Sus, but also of the wood exploitation.

The main attraction is the well-known wood exploitation that started in 1775, but continued under the command of the State and then becoming private.

## **V. The space-ethnographical identity of Zipsers from Vişeu de Sus**

The relationship between identity, space and ethnography is necessary in studying an ethnic group. The interferences of these three derivatives have determined different manifestation ways of the ethnic identity especially in a multi-cultural space like Viseu de Sus and Vaserului Valley. So, a study made in this direction indicates an interdependence between space, as a geographical and identity delimitation and evolution, and the cultural patrimony, though specific traditional occupations.

The traditional structures are represented through a space for living and household. These are characters of a colonial locality, through place, architecture, organization of annexes or of the land for agriculture. The material chosen for the construction of the houses was initially wood. The strict organization of the households has determined the individualization of this space, called after the name of its ethnics, Zipserei.

This neighborhood was first seen as a freestanding location. Thanks to different facilities the Zipsers were dependent on (church, administration, school) the Zipserei has become part of Viseu de Sus. For the German ethnics, this is not longer a physical space, but a mental one. The connection with the center neighborhood of the Zipsers is made through reminding the past and through a loss current situation. Even though the ethnic identity and the space one are built on idealism, this mechanism still works and it is being updated by the young generations.

The Vaserului Valley represents a space with a strong identity and not only for the Zipsers, but also for all locals from Viseu de Sus. If each of the delimitations of Viseu de Sus had a strong ethnic feeling, the Vaserului Valley managed to gather together all ethnic groups and to give birth to a cultural mix. So, the Vaserului basin is seen as being a place of interferences and communication between different cultures.

Communication started with working together on the Vaser and it was eased in by the church or schools. Despite all these have been organized separately, Romanians and Germans, Jewish etc, starting the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the development of education; these ethnic barriers have been over passed. It is then when started the modifications inside the ethnic group thanks to the intense communication, the partnerships between different ethnic groups for easing living together.

## **VII. Cultural identity elements**

The cultural identity manifested by the Zipsers from Viseu de Sus was very obvious, especially thanks to the customs and religious traditions with the cloths, and not the original Zipser one, but through a new one with German influences, through the initial Zipser dialect and then through the specific German idiom from Viseu de Sus. These elements were influenced by the social, economic and politic factors. Most severe transformations took place under the Hungarian domination and in the communist period.

The main material cultural identity elements are the Tipserai neighborhood and the Vaserului Valley. The spiritual ones are laic holidays of Farsangului, the statute labor or cultural manifestations that go back to old Zipser labors like Droben im Wassertal or Heimattreffen. From the religious ones, the most spectacular is the one with the Viflain, which has a variant brought from Zips and which can be found in Viseu de Sus even today.

The Zipser dialect represents an important element for the identity of the group. Nowadays, the Zipsers only by the name, from Viseu de Sus talk a different German dialect, different from the one the first colonists used, different from the Austrian one and much more different from the literal German language. So, after the modifications of the dialect, it can be confirmed the fact that there are modifications in the ethnic structure in comparison with ethnics from Zips or the identity of the Zipsers that live in Viseu de Sus.

By giving up the traditional cloths of the Zipsers was actually a necessity, thanks to the fact that the Zipsers were not wealthy colonists and the work they had to do asked for certain cloths. So the Zipsers have borrowed a classic German port.

Space had modified its footprint on ethnics, ethnic identity and especially on transformations and modifications on their content. The shape has remained unchanged, the Germans from Viseu de Sus are Tipsers, but the internal structures or perception modifications have been changed. The processes that have determined these changes were acculturation, assimilation and the cultural transfer. These were sustained by an offensive political situation through Hungarian and Romanian colonization and after through the opening of the ethnic group allowing cultural-mix marriages.

### **VIII. German Vișeu de Sus Tipsers**

The Zipsers have gone West thanks to the German commerce. This actually represented a big step backwards, in terms of natural balance of the Zipser population from Viseu de Sus. Even so, they were directly involved in the retreat of the German troops after the Second World War and the deportation to U.R.S.S. For war damages Germany had to pay to Russia, freeing exits between the borders of a German communist state was seen more as a challenge and less as a necessity. The transfer of the population lasted until after the 1989 revolution.

In Germany, the Zipsers were seen as Romanians, even though they were speaking German, have lived in the German culture and more than this, have manifested their interest in the German space. From the selection camp to their personal houses, the space identity built in Viseu de Sus was kept intact. This is how, helping methods like the statute labor from Viseu de Sus helped them to stay together.

Zipsers from Germany are represented inside lands with Bayer and Baden W. by Swabian people from Satu Mare, interacting with them since Romania. Starting 2004, the tensions and their options have determined the separation of the Zipsers from Viseu de Sus and this is how a new forum was born, of the ones that believed that self-representation is much more important than walking aside of the Swabians from Satu Mare. The only thing is that this separation involves a resizing of the relationships with the ones from Viseu de Sus and Hobgarten (Slovakia), which who they share contacts, friends and experience exchanges.

Also it is easy to see that distances are not problems with communication neither are borders and this is why socializing and sending information through web sites are very important. There are also flyers, banners that appear regularly, especially for maintaining this group, independent from space.



## Results of the research

The initial purpose of this research involving Zipsers from Romania was reached thanks to different methods used, documentation sources that stood at the base of the research, but also thanks to the help received from different specialists in geography and other related fields.

Tipser from Romani represent a German ethnic group, with a weak representation from a numerical point of view, but with a *mobile* past, that continues to live on. The evolution of identity shapes in time was influenced by different political organization ways, but also by the geographic status in the past.

Space is the essential notion in determining the ethnic identity of the Zipsers. These connect to the space, and not its physical part, but mostly to its mental one. No matter if they do not live in the country or the place they grew in, the Zipsers are connected to Viseu de Sus and its surroundings. This means a transfer of the symbolic representation of space, from the Slovakian-Zipser to the Viseu de Sus-Tipser. This link was born through collective unity, but also through adaptability and living in harmony with other ethnics.

So, the motivations that led to changes in representing the ethnic identity space in Viseu de Sus had as base history, political regimes, especially the communist one, religion, with long period of time with priests sent in the locality which did not speak German, economical through professional changes, social ones, but mostly the high age of the ethnic group and the reborn of new Zipser and Viseu de Sus generations.

The reproduction ways of the ethnic identity are influenced by the regional multiculturalism. Beside these there are also the church, schools, local admin, the media and the social environment.

The ethnicity has become a construct, an instrument to link the present to the past. The 400 German ethnics, Zipsers, from Viseu de Sus, represent the last breath of a voice that made its way for centuries in the economical, religious and cultural life in Viseu de Sus. In 20 years, the Zipsers will be history, a history that will close a 2 century cycle of existence on the Romanian territory.

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