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Peasant Life Histories as a Source of Data for the Study of Sociocultural Change

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In his introductory lectures on anthropology at Harvard during the 1950s, Clyde Kluckhohn used to observe—more seriously than in jest—that the principal difference between sociology and anthropology was that sociologists had no museums. If this indeed were the only distinction between the two disciplines, then cultural anthropologists and sociologists today would be engaged in closely similar work. To be sure, contemporary anthropologists have not ceased to be interested in modifications of subsistence patterns through changes in technology, but collecting specimens of material culture plays very little if any part in the course of their field research, with the exception, of course, of those who study so-called primitive or folk art.

Another characteristic frequently cited as setting apart the two disciplines—anthropology and sociology—is the emphasis in ethnographic fieldwork on participant observation. This research technique—extensively employed by Bronislaw Malinowski among the Trobriand Islanders as early as the World War I period— involves a conscious effort on the part of anthropologists to share, even if to a limited extent, in the lifeways of those whom they study. Now it is my impression that recently this distinguishing feature of cultural anthropological research has begun to abate. The trend no doubt has something to do with the changing foci of anthropological field research—peasant communities of Europe and urban sites in the United States rather than the "exotic" locales among the "primitive" peoples outside the mainstream of modern technological civilization. Today's anthropologist is just as likely to be found in the administrative offices of agricultural cooperatives, statistical bureaus, or regional archives combing through records of demographic or socioeconomic data as in the bush getting ready to accompany an informant on his or her daily rounds.

Let me note one other piece of evidence in support of the point I am trying to make. It has to do with the now celebrated argument concerning the epistemological distinction between emic and etic operational procedures in cultural analysis and explanation. In simple terms, the dilemma can be posed as follows: is the locus of anthropological knowledge to be sought exclusively in the domain of the cultural perceptions of the "natives" or, by contrast, in "scientific knowledge"—or, striking a compromise, in both jointly? Voices arguing an extreme position in favor of scientific knowledge have clearly been increasing in this country since World War II. One may demonstrate this trend by quoting from two of the most prominent representatives of cultural materialism, whose influence on
the younger generation of American anthropologists cannot be underestimated. Leslie White rhetorically asked, "Who is to judge in scientific matters, the scientist or the folk?" (1947:186) and answered himself two years later in his book The Science of Culture, arguing that "The concept of culture and an appreciation of its significance in the life of man lie beyond the ken of all but the most scientifically sophisticated" (1949:158). In his usual no-nonsense manner, Marvin Harris, in his recent book Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture, casts the same assertion in unambiguous terms: "We don't expect dreamers to explain their dreams; no more should we expect lifestyle participants to explain their lifestyles" (1974:6).

I do not propose to rake over the history and nature of the emic/etic distinction, discussions of which currently fill many pages of anthropological journals. The tendency that I have tried to illustrate here with only a few examples is clear. As a result of the many theoretical and methodological realignments in American cultural anthropology since World War II, quantitative or quantifiable data increasingly loom paramount; the normative rather than the idiosyncratic attributes of cultural phenomena are stressed; theoretical and pseudotheoretical models proliferate; questionnaires or interviews take the place of participant observation; some ethnographic accounts of village life read very much like papers or monographs emanating from students of rural sociology; and so on. In short, the special flavor of intimacy which for so long characterized anthropological writing is rapidly disappearing. We seem to have entered the "informant be damned" stage of cultural anthropology.

Before you begin dismissing these comments as the sentimental reminiscences of an aging laudator temporis acti, let me hasten to assure you that the last thing I want to suggest is to try to turn back the clock of anthropological research, analysis, and reporting. I, too, have inhaled my share of archival dust, administered unmercifully long questionnaires and subsequently pored over bulky computer printouts, searched through and quoted from statistical yearbooks, and quite recently even found myself wading through the turgid prose of all 118 paragraphed sections of the newest Czechoslovak law concerning agricultural cooperatives. Where I am likely to differ with some, however, is in my opinion that anthropology is not merely a scientific enterprise but a humanistic one as well, and that the best way to humanize our scholarly efforts and their products is to readmit into our written accounts, to the extent possible or advisable, those whom we study and from whom we learn—"to give voices to people who would otherwise not be heard," as Oscar Lewis (1954:viii) put it.

There is of course nothing novel about the use of life histories, or autobiographies, in anthropology. Their place in ethnography was recognized by A.L. Kroeber as early as 1908, when he supplemented his account of Gros Ventre culture with some twenty-five pages of narratives concerning the war experiences of Gros Ventre men (1908:196-221). During the years prior to World War II, the primary purpose in eliciting life histories was to enhance the cultural portrayal of the human condition.
With the onset of the war, the newly felt need to obtain authentic documentation for culture-and-personality studies resulted in a continuing interest in collecting personal life histories. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, autobiographically based studies culminated in the several well-known books by Oscar Lewis, especially *The Children of Sánchez* (1961) and *Pedro Martínez* (1964). Since then, biographical accounts as told by the representatives of those whom anthropologists study seem to have lost favor, to have gone out of style. It is a trend to be regretted.

Let me turn now to the main portion of my paper which at this point is no more than a sketchy report on work in progress. It concerns six Czech-speaking villages in the southeastern Romanian Banat.

The available sources differ somewhat concerning the circumstances under which these settlements were established. According to archival documents of the old imperial war ministry in Vienna, the first villages came into existence early in the nineteenth century in response to the request of one Georg Magyarly to be allowed to bring in laborers from Bohemia for his extensive lumbering enterprise. Apparently Magyarly had been given the lease to enormous tracts of virgin forests north of the Danube at a very low rental, and was to arrange to have the timber cut and sold, keeping the profits and turning over the cleared land to the military administration. After receiving permission to establish two communities, he sent agents to various districts in Bohemia to recruit men who would be willing to move with their families to the highlands of the southern Banat in order to provide the needed labor force. Landless laborers, journeymen, and farming cottagers found the terms attractive enough: steady work for decent pay, free lumber for the construction of their houses, temporary exemption from paying taxes, and—above all—private plots of land on which to grow crops.

The sources are in general agreement that the first migrants, proceeding as a group, set out for the southern Banat in the early 1820s, traveling via České Budějovice and Vienna and then across the treeless Hungarian plain. They were followed by two other groups in subsequent years. Each family loaded a large wagon with tools and household belongings, hitched their oxen to it, and then spent some two months en route to their new home.

The first two groups, which consisted of about fifty families, mostly Catholic, were settled west of the present Moldova Nouă in the hills known as Poiana Alibegului, at well over a thousand feet above sea level. The settlement, named Elisabeth(a)feld in honor of one of Magyarly's two daughters, was located in a valley along a creek. The third group, of about thirty Protestant families, was assigned to land about a mile east of Elisabethfeld. This settlement, presently Sf. Elena, was named for Magyarly's second daughter.

Instead of the 500 to 600 families originally sought, over 1,500 petitioned to resettle. The number of Bohemian families eager to move
reached such proportions by the middle of May 1828 that regional authorities were advised by Vienna to issue immigration permits only to those who had already received their acceptance papers, sold all of their belongings, and been released from their local obligations.

This second wave of migration, which lasted until 1830, proceeded from Vienna, where the migrants assembled to be received, processed, and then taken by ferry to near either the present Baziag or Moldova Veche, both on the Danube. Individual groups, consisting of 26 to 80 families, brought wagons, household equipment and tools, food, livestock, and even straw and fodder. Upon reaching their destination, the migrants went by wagon to the locations assigned to them. Some were settled in the hills about 15 miles northeast of Moldova in Weitzenried (later to be known as Girnic). Others were taken along the Nera River through the present Bozovici toward Lupusnicel, near which they settled the village of Sumita. Still others were directed east along the Danube through the present Berzasca and beyond it toward Orsova. This stream accounted for the villages of Ravensca, Schnellersruhe (later to be known as Bigar), Ebenthal, and others. Once again, Czech-speaking settlements were established high in the hills, while the fertile valleys situated at lower altitudes were given to the more demanding settlers from the German-speaking parts of Bohemia.

Despite some cases of real hardship, the settling of this second wave of Bohemian colonists apparently went well. According to a report in the Vienna archives, there were 1,036 Bohemian families in the southeastern Banat as of March 1828, and 3,424 settlers by 1830. Leaving aside several largely German-speaking Bohemian communities, the population numbers cited amounted to 469 for Weitzenried (Girnic), 356 for Ebenthal, 281 for Schonthal, 266 for Schnellersruhe (Bigar), 237 for Ravensca, 186 for Frauenwiese(n), and 123 for Sumita.

In the course of the next several decades the inhabitants of Schonthal moved to some of the other Czech villages and to eastern Vojvodina, and Schonthal eventually ceased to exist. The Czechs of Frauenwiese relocated nearby in a new community, Ogradena Noua. And by 1847, all those living in Elisabethfeld had left--most of them settling in nearby Helena--as the creek which supplied them with water had become unreliable during the summers.

There are two major reasons for the ethnic persistence of six Czech-speaking villages in the southeastern Romanian Banat. One is their isolation from the other villages and towns of the region. This isolation, the result of the rugged, hilly terrain, must have been nearly complete for a major part of the last century. Even today, none of the communities can be reached by any form of public transportation, and villagers and visitors alike must depend on the irregular connections provided by heavy state-owned trucks or tractors or the occasional run of a vehicle with four-wheel drive. Only those men of Sf. Elena, Girnic, Ravensca, and Bigar who are employed in the state mining enterprises of the area are provided with
scheduled transportation to their jobs, which are a good hour's ride away. Passenger vehicles are able to negotiate the poorly tended roads, with their foot-deep mud in rainy weather, only under the most favorable conditions, and even then at some risk to the vehicles. The villagers therefore continue to depend on horse-drawn wagons, and often make the trip to a neighboring community on foot.

The situation is particularly precarious in the winter when several feet of snow are likely to be on the ground for two or three months at a time. Ravensca, which has the worst access road and the highest elevation of the Czech-speaking villages (about 2500 feet above sea level), was completely cut off during January and February of 1976—not an unusual situation by any means. In such circumstances its 250-odd inhabitants, without a telephone or power line to the outside world, live under conditions not unlike those found in some of the more remote areas of Bohemia at the turn of the century. Among the six villages, only the largest, Čírník, has its own village government (consiliul popular). The others are administratively subordinated to neighboring communities: Ravensca to Șopotu Nou, about six miles north-northwest; Bigăr to Berzasca, about 14 miles by road to the west; Sf. Elena to Pescari, about three miles to the west; Șumița to Șapușnicel, about five miles to the northeast; and Eibenthal to Dubova, about ten miles to the northeast. The exceedingly heavy workload during the growing season and harsh weather conditions during the winter allow the villagers to visit from one village to another only on such special occasions as weddings or funerals of close relatives. Few, even among the oldest, have been to all five of the other Czech communities. The practical world of many of these people has its periphery only two or three hours' walking distance from the village—perhaps fifteen miles.

The second major reason for the ethnic persistence of the Czech settlers is their strong tendency toward village endogamy. Parents expect their children to marry within the community, or at least to select their spouses from among the other ethnic Czechs of the area. For example, prior to World War I, Ravensca is said to have supplied Șumița with some forty wives. If a young person does marry a member of another ethnic group, it is not at all unusual for the parents to express their disapproval by refusing to attend the wedding ceremony, although within a few years the ties between parents and the young couple are generally reestablished. While marriages between first cousins occur rarely, second cousins marry quite frequently. Bigăr, with some 350 inhabitants, has only two dozen different family names, some of which recur many times: Mleziva, for example, is the family name in 18 of the 114 inhabited houses. To take a random case, one middle-aged couple in Bigăr was found to be related, by either blood or marriage, to at least nine of the twenty-four family name groups in the village (over 37 percent).

Despite the determination on the part of the villagers to maintain ethnic homogeneity, recent trends do not bode well for the future of the Czech communities. Their small, widely scattered fields and meadows are
located on such hilly ground that cultivating them requires the continued use of draft animals. Moreover, chemical fertilizers are completely out of the villagers' reach. With the numbers of those committed to farming and tending livestock steadily dwindling, it is no wonder that the yields are poor and that most of the villages are no longer even self-sufficient. In recent years, except when crops were particularly good, additional wheat flour for human consumption and maize for livestock have had to be purchased from the outside. The only surplus crop is potatoes, which are sold in the nearby towns. Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that there has been no outside pressure on the villagers to collectivize. And since the state takes little, if any, active interest in the farming economies of these remote communities, efforts to raise their productivity have been minimal.

There are a number of reasons why these poor but at one time self-sustaining farming villages have been losing their economic viability. The earliest cause was population pressure, which reached its peak during the interwar period. For several generations some of this pressure was relieved by the availability of employment in the mines (especially in the case of Bigăr and Eibenthal) and in lumbering (Gîrnic, Sf. Elena, and Ravensca). Then, too, there has been a steady if modest trickle of those choosing to out-migrate to the more prosperous villages or towns of the region or, in some cases, even to emigrate as far away as South America. A substantial loss of population occurred between 1947 and 1949 when, under an agreement concluded between Czechoslovakia and Romania, as many as one-third of the village families returned to the country of their ancestors, where they were given jobs, housing, and land which had belonged to the expelled Sudeten Germans.

Among the ecological factors accounting for the shrinkage of the area which the remaining peasants cultivate has been the rapidly increasing population of wild boars in recent years. Protected by the state, these animals are causing serious damage to crops on the periphery of the village lands.

Most decisive, however, is the growing availability of jobs in the state sector—especially in the recently opened mines near Moldova Nouă and in the logging enterprise—with their cash earnings and the prospects of pensions and other social and economic advantages. Agricultural labor is more and more left to the women and older men, with the result that the average age of those engaged in farming is rapidly rising.

The most extreme case may well be Bigăr, whose men have been deriving fair incomes from mining for many decades. By 1976, among some 350 inhabitants, no less than 72 males and 28 females were receiving some sort of pension, disability payment, or social assistance, and over 40 men were employed in various mining operations in the general area. Current mineral explorations in the hills surrounding the village have helped to allay the fear that with the agricultural base steadily diminishing, the villages might eventually face resettlement in Berzasca on the Danube below.
Nearby Ravensca, which, unlike the worker-peasant Bičič, is still primarily a farming community, could probably improve its economic lot by raising cattle for meat on a village-cooperative basis. However, the tradition of private holdings and of eking out existence from the miserly land in the manner of their forefathers weighs heavily against any change in life-style.

There is little doubt that the six villages of the southeastern Romanian Banat have reached a crucial period in their history as the southernmost outposts of Czech language and custom. This is why their present situation and future prospects are of particular interest, and why they deserve serious continuing study.

As I was recently rereading transcriptions and relistening to untranscribed tapes of some of the life histories which I collected in the six Czech-speaking villages of the southern Romanian Banat, I could not help thinking how rich they were in information which would otherwise have remained unelicited. These autobiographies certainly are not intended to take the place of formal studies of communities, institutions, or social and economic processes, but they complement them vividly and usefully by adding a significant dimension which no array of numerical data or the abstruse prose of social scientists can hope to provide.

During my field research experience in the Banat villages I was struck by the readiness and even eagerness with which older males (not women, in part no doubt because I was a male) complied with my casual request to relate their life stories into my cassette recorder. Quite frequently I had to ask them to repeat a part of their narration because at my first suggestion they immediately began talking, even before I could properly set up the recording machine. This particular behavior seems in direct contrast to the visible embarrassment or polite reluctance exhibited by most members of complex societies when faced with a similar request. There appears to be a deep-seated need and propensity for epic self-expression among the older men in these southernmost Czech-speaking communities—a phenomenon I would be tempted to see as the diffusion of a Balkan trait among these people were it not for the fact that I have met with similar instances in Czechoslovakia. As is also true of older villagers elsewhere, their memory is prodigious and their sense of detail astonishing. It struck me that in addition to the more routine methods of data gathering—village census taking, examination of agricultural rolls, key-informant interviewing, genealogical surveys, and the like—here was a source of information that literally cried out to be tapped—and taped. The result has been some thirty hours of recordings of autobiographical narratives which, conservatively estimated, will produce several hundred typewritten, double-spaced pages, not counting annotations.

Aside from their ethnohistorical and socioeconomic interest, these narratives also represent texts of considerable sociolinguistic value. The fact that these villagers have retained their original Czech despite their ancestors having settled in a linguistically foreign environment early in
the past century attests to the relative social isolation of their communities in the new homeland. One would expect their speech to have retained a number of original and by now conservative traits, as happens to be the case in Bigár, for example, where the villagers still speak a dialect closely related to the dialect of Czech spoken in the southwestern Bohemian region of Chodsko. German, Magyar, and Romanian loanwords reflect influences characteristic of different periods and cultural concerns.

Although my informants were encouraged to tell their life stories in their own way, I felt free to break into their narratives at convenient points to probe further any references or passages which were either too elliptical or which did not sufficiently develop a topic of potential interest or importance. In addition, again at appropriate stopping places, I tried to elicit commentaries on a number of standard topics having to do with the changes to which the informants and their fellow villagers had been subject during their lifetimes. Among the topics I have obtained on tape are the following: the provenience of those who were not native to the village; the current residence and occupation of those relatives who have resettled elsewhere; the nature and extent of the informants' formal education; the nature of their military service during the two world wars and the ways of avoiding war service; the incidence and attitude toward excessive drinking; the extent of intermarriage with members of the other Czech-speaking villages of the area; the changing attitudes toward intermarriage with non-Czech-speaking individuals; the intergovernmental project to repatriate the Romanian Czechs to Czechoslovakia during the late 1940s and its effects on the village populations; the extent of current contact with repatriated Czechs; the varying sources of cash income supplemental to their subsistence economy over the past half century; the nature of work in the various mining enterprises of the area in which many male villagers have participated; attitudes toward the changing size of families during the past half century; attitudes toward cooperative agricultural enterprises in the non-Czech-speaking valley villages of the area; the reasons for the failure of cooperativization of their own villages; the mechanisms of property inheritance; the treatment of disease; the differential perception of recent socioeconomic changes according to age and sex; socioeconomic expectations under socialism; the development of sociopolitical consciousness among the mining villagers; the contemporary role of women in the farming enterprise; the experience of a village kulak gained during his enforced stay in Bărăgan; the lot of superannuated or sick members of households; the effect of increasing opportunities for extravillage employment on the farming economy; and others.

Using for this project multiple male informants (and a few women) in varying age brackets from each of the six villages should reduce the subjectivity inherent in the selection of a single autobiographer per community. Moreover, since all six villages are fairly homogeneous culturally, the presentation of a fair selection of about a score of narrators should produce a "Rashomon" effect in providing a variety of perceptions of the events and the process of change which the villagers have witnessed over the past three generations.
There is no question that a systematic study of the Czech-speaking villages of the Romanian Banat must be based on all of the available sources and draw on the customary techniques of cultural anthropological research. But to the extent that the villagers have been given the opportunity to add their voices to that of the anthropologist, the final account should prove to be at once more complete and more human—in the best tradition of anthropological reporting.

Notes

1. I am indebted to the International Research and Exchanges Board for sponsoring my Romanian research during 1975, 1976, and 1977, and to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the American Council of Learned Societies for their financial assistance in 1976 and 1977, respectively.

2. For a bibliography of sources concerning the Czechs and Slovaks settled in Romania, see Salzmann, 1983.

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