

**CRAFTING AS A LIFESTYLE.
ROMA COMMUNITIES' OCCUPATIONS DURING THE COMMUNIST
PERIOD IN TRANSYLVANIA***

Diana-Alexandra Nistor**

Abstract: *Everyday life of Roma communities in Transylvania during the communist period was mostly carried out around their crafts even though, according to the historiography, the communist regime systematically discouraged the practice of Roma traditional occupations in order to include Roma craftsmanship within the official economy. Thus, Roma craftsmen were forced to join agricultural cooperatives and obtain work permits from the local communist authorities. In this context, many Roma have tried to avoid or negotiate the legal provisions in order to practice their crafts and provide for their families. The article aims to highlight the manner in which Roma communities in Transylvania practiced their crafts or gave up to some of them under the austere communist legislation and the permanent surveillance done by the Miliția. Some of the research questions to which the presentation aims to provide answers are the following: What was the legislation imposed during the communist era on craftsmanship? How did Roma craftsmen carry out their activities? How and why did Roma communities quit the practice of certain crafts? The presentation is based on the available historiography on the subject, the archival documents and the oral history interviews recorded in different Roma communities in Transylvania, revealing several narratives regarding the Roma occupations which underwent adjustments or have disappeared during the communist regime.*

Keywords: oral history, Roma communities, craftsmanship, communist period, Transylvania.

Everyday life of the Roma communities in Transylvania during the communist period was mostly carried out around their crafts, as a legacy of their elder generation

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** Cercetător post-doctoral, Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai Cluj-Napoca; e-mail: sacarea.diana@gmail.com.

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during the interwar period. Regarding the years following the Second World War, historiography mentions that the communist regime systematically discouraged the practice of traditional crafts, therefore there were registered several “professional reconversions”: Roma started to practice new crafts, according to the new necessities or depending on the permissiveness granted by the communist law. Under the severe control imposed by the communist regime over the everyday life of all the citizens, regardless of ethnicity, apparently, at different times, the communist authorities dedicated special attention to the mobility of Roma communities. The present essay aims to highlight the manner in which Roma communities in Transylvania practiced their crafts or gave up to some of them under the austere communist legislation and the permanent surveillance done by the *Miliția*, answering to the following research questions: What was the legislation imposed during the communist era on craftsmanship? How did Roma craftsmen carry out their activities? How and why did Roma communities quit the practice of certain crafts? The research focuses on 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 in order to provide for their families. The interviewees whose story fragments are to be quoted in this article 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.

Since the interwar period, the Romanian authorities have tried to control the practice of different crafts by adopting the “Law on Professional Training and Practice of Trades” in April 30, 1936, according to which “crafts cards” (work licenses/ permits, Romanian: *carte de meșteșugar*) were offered to craftsmen who earned money by selling crafted goods. Earlier, the 1929 law required a written form of the apprenticeship contract if the craftsmen had apprentices, and the 1936 law maintained this provision along with the obligation to enrol that apprenticeship contract at the Labour Chamber in the circumscription where the craftsman lived. According to the oral history interviews recorded among different Roma communities, apparently most Roma did not apply and receive work licenses during the interwar period: the nomadic and/or sedentary Roma communities earned their living producing and repairing pots and other needful goods in the household, selling them without an authorisation. Moreover, most of the nomadic Roma communities were not registered during the censuses, therefore, they continued to practice their traditional crafts in Transylvania until they were forced/ convinced to settle as well as after their sedentarisation practicing a form of semi-nomadism.

“So, we were making boilers, men were making boilers and women, we were making *spoitoare* [brushes used to paint houses], this was a long time ago! [...] We were repairing pots if had holes, I know how to do it even today if needed! So, the Romanians came ... the Romanian women came and gave us a piece of pork fat, and instead we were repairing their pots! [...] We were glad when we received a piece of pork fat, a kilogram of flour! Our women were going in the villages, we were selling boilers or *spoitoare*, whatever men crafted, and we went from a village to the other one and sell them!”¹

The preamble of the communist law on crafts practiced by craftsmen in their own workshops, namely the Law no. 13/ May 15, 1968, stated that the craft sector (mostly in rural areas) of the socialist state of Romania, was to be developed by regulating some legal provisions under which the craftsmen were allowed to work. In this sense, craft authorisations were to be given to persons who had “the necessary professional training, with a certain experience in the field of each craft and passed an examination before the committees established for this purpose by the territorial bodies of the Ministry of Labour”². According to the preamble of the law, the practice of crafts in workshops owned by craftsmen or at the client’s domicile was to be based only on the authorizations issued by the executive boards of the Popular Councils of the municipalities, towns or the villages in which the craftsmen set up their workshops. The authorizations were to be issued “to other categories of persons for the purpose of exercising their trades” without the need of participating at the professional knowledge examination in case they practiced some of the indicated occupations (which were, apparently, exercised predominantly by the Roma communities). A larger list of these occupations was listed within the Annex 6 of the “Instruction no. 50078/1969 regarding the exercise of crafts by craftsmen in their own workshops under the conditions of the Law no. 13/1968” and contained the following occupations: blacksmithing; making and selling combs, bricks, spoons, brooms, baskets, pots, boilers; repairing pots; cutting wood; washing laundry; trading horses, polishing shoes etc. with the mention that, as far as necessary, the list could have been supplemented with other trades or activities by the Ministry of Labour together with the Committee on Local Administration Issues. The instructions provided that in the case of craftsmen who made ceramic or wooden handicrafts, as well as the residents of mountain villages producing household products such as farm tools, brooms, baskets and others, the issuance of authorizations was to be given by the Executive Board of the Popular Council of each county in which the applicant was domiciled. The same instructions

¹ C. A. (Anonymous), interview by the author, audio file, no. 1106, Oral History Institute Archives, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, (OHIA), Ighi“u Vechi, Sibiu County, June 6, 2015.

² ”Official Bulletin of the Socialist Republic of Romania”, No. 64, May 15, 1968.

stipulated that crafts were to be exercised only at the location indicated in the authorisation, in the case of stable activities, or on the territory of the county where the issuing authority was located, in the case of the itinerant activities. If people wanted to work in other counties, they were supposed to obtain a prior approval of the executive board of the People's Council within the county where they required to carry out the activity, and they were to receive a "working visa". The authorisations emitted by the communist authorities implied, according to Article no. 8 of the above-mentioned law, a social insurance, for which purpose the craftsmen were to pay a share to the insurance funds, calculated on the taxable professional income. The amount of the social security contributions to be paid by craftsmen to themselves and the apprentices or the persons who worked³ in their workshops, was to be determined by the Central Union of Craft Cooperatives, with the approval of the Ministry of Labour. Withal, the authorisations were to provide or not the right of the craftsmen to sell the goods produced in the workshop.

In order to be able to practice their trades, since the first half of the 1970s, several Roma families, part of the so-called traditional communities of Gabori and Căldărari, applied and received the first craft authorizations. Interviewees Barcsa Anton and Frigor Rudi recalled the manner in which their parents and grandparents used to live during the interwar period as well as a couple of years after the end of World War II, moving from village to village by carts. There, men went at trade fairs while women went house-to-house to sell goods: pots, clothes and cotton. Later, the Gabori in Mureș county began to make drains. The adaptation to the new social realities is one of the main qualities this community showed over the 20th century: at the beginning of the century they were producing household pots, and then, instinctively, due to the pressure caused by the competition of the specialized units in the production of agricultural tools and household iron, they began in the 1960s-1970s to produce drains⁴.

"Tinsmithing was a great job! A great one, but now... it doesn't bring that much money. Some Romanians still practice it. They [the Gabori men] were all authorized by the People's Council. They [the authorities] gave them the authorizations, but we had to pay regularly. Well, people from the People's Council were forced to give them the authorisations. After all, they won upon our work! They received a part of our income... because everybody paid a part of their income. So, they authorized our men.

³ According to Article 25 of the "Instruction no. 50078/1969 regarding the exercise of crafts by craftsmen in their own workshops under the conditions of the Law no. 13/1968", the authorization was to show the number of apprentices, the employees and the names of the family members who helped in the workshop. By family members was understood: husband, wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters.

⁴ Gabriel Sala, *Neamul țiganilor gabori. Istorie, mentalități, tradiții*, Cluj-Napoca, Edit. Dacia, 2007, p. 107-109.

If you didn't have the authorisation, Miliția would fine you. Our men have been authorized"⁵.

According to several interviews with Gabori women, they had a very important role in earning a living for their families during the communist period. Besides their domestic activities, they were as well involved in the commerce activities. Apparently, in most cases their husbands received an authorization to practice tinsmithing, being most of the time involved in those activities, while women practiced street commerce without any kind of authorization. Interviewee Cătălina Gabor remembered she and other Gabori women had no authorisation to sell the dishes, the pots or other goods they sold at the time, and she was quite surprised when asked whether they had such authorisations. She stated that Militia ignored them as long as they were not doing anything wrong: „We bought new things from stores and went to sell them. [...] And that's how we've been working for the Saxons. We weren't authorized. We had nothing, nothing, nothing. Because we did nothing wrong! I wasn't selling big things. I was going to my ladies [Saxon women], only to acquaintances"⁶. These activities continued to be practiced after the fall of the communist regime in Transylvania.

According to Roma interviewees' testimonies regarding their everyday lives and the manner in which they managed to earn their livings, most of the times they succeeded in avoiding imprisonment due to their abilities to negotiate with the communist authorities in spite of the arbitrary behaviour of the latter⁷. There was a regulation that had a massive impact on the everyday lives of Roma, namely the Decree no. 153/ March 24, 1970 on the establishment of contraventions on the rules of social co-habitation, public order and tranquillity. Apparently, obtaining an authorisation was the key to success both in avoiding prison and ensuring the economic survival of their families. According to Article 1.d from the above-mentioned law, groups of people who “by their behaviour expressed a parasitic or anarchic life conception, contrary to the principles of socialist coexistence”⁸ were to be fined according to the law in force. Several Gabori interviewees recalled the provisions of the law. For instance, B. T. from Crăciunești remembered the year 1975 when he was arrested and condemned with no investigation for 90 days in Codlea, Brașov

⁵ Tereza Gabor, interview by the author, audio file, no. 1148, OHIA, Târgu Mureș, Mureș County, July 7, 2015.

⁶ Cătălina Gabor, interview by the author, audio file, no. 1150, OHIA, Târgu Mureș, Mureș County, July 7, 2015.

⁷ See also: Lavinia S. Stan, *Sharing a broken umbrella. Roma life-stories in communist Romania*, “Annual of Oral History, No. XVI - The Roma in Romania: Sharing a Traumatic past- Living in a problematic present”, 2015, Cluj-Napoca, p. 30-54.

⁸ Article 1.d in Decree No. 153/ March 24, 1970, in “Official Bulletin of the Socialist Republic of Romania”, No. 33, April 13, 1970.

county, for practicing a parasitic lifestyle. He remembered his father had an authorisation, and that he was, as many other Gabori young men, practicing commerce activities. The same interviewee recalled Miliția ignored and destroyed authorisations Gabori men had, arresting them either way:

“In 1980, I was with my brother in Bucharest and we got arrested. They gave us 18 days in prison, they took our authorization, they did not take us to the court... and my father took a copy of the authorisation from Crăciunești and brought it to Bucharest... and after 21 days, we were free to go. And the military prosecutors told my father: ‘Sir, you have the right to sue the miliția men. The boys were authorized and the Miliția was not allowed to detain them for more than 24 hours.’ [...] When he brought the papers to the military prosecutor’s office, he brought the authorisation, came with a lawyer, and they let us leave. Our father knew we had rights, we had the authorization”⁹.

Other Gabori and Cortorari interviewees, especially the craftsmen, recalled that they worked with authorizations as employees of the Collective Farms (further: C. A. P.) in the villages they lived in – this is how they managed to continue to practice their professions and earn decent incomes for their families. Some of them worked on their own as well, but those who were C. A. P. employees said they had enough work to do and did not have any spare time: “There was the Collective Farm and you could have applied to work there. You were the boss... you were authorized, and you could work. You were entitled to employees. That’s how I worked until 1989. I received my authorization at the age of 18”¹⁰.

Among the following lines, some excerpts of the testimonies recorded with Roma in Transylvania show a large extent of mobility people in rural areas underwent during the communist regime in order to provide food and other goods for their families. These testimonies show the extent to which the communist system failed in terms of regulating the craftsmen activities: almost all Roma communities living in rural areas managed to sell their crafted goods without any form of legal authorisation, and, besides this, without being controlled by the local authorities. In this regard, some interviewees mentioned the negotiations Roma did with the local authorities in order to let them practice their activities. Bella Horko recalled that his family used to make bricks out of mud without any authorisation, but, as his father was a musician, he negotiated the production of bricks on singing at the bar in the village: “Our parents

⁹ B. T. (Anonymous), interview by the author, Ionela Bogdan and Lavinia Costea, audio file, no. 1143, OHIA, Crăciunești, Mureș County, July 4, 2015.

¹⁰ Rupi Gabor, interview by Ionela Bogdan and Călin Olariu, audio and video file, no. 1149, OHIA, Târgu Mureș, Mureș County, July 7, 2015.

went and sang in the bar. They sang in the bar and they [the authorities] let them make bricks”¹¹.

Within the Transylvanian mountain villages, where Collective Farms were not established, the Roma gained their living by manufacturing various objects of need in households at the time, items such as: brooms, baskets, spoons, wooden trough etc. They were also picking up mushrooms and blueberries or other berries which were later sold to people in the nearby villages or in markets. Interviewee Valeria Ursu from Loman, Alba County, recalled the occupations of the Roma community in the village during the communist regime. She stated that immediately after the end of the World War II, her father used to make wood charcoal, carry it in large bags and sell it all over the nearby villages. In return, her father usually received food: flour, corn flour, eggs, milk etc. Later, their main way to support their families has become the manufacture of brooms and baskets. She stated that they did not apply for authorisations as long as the local authorities allowed them to practice their craft and sell the goods to people in the villages – she added, the goods were of immediate need in households, therefore even people working at the village halls bought them.

“Men brought us the raw material. And we, the women, we were working day and night. In the middle of the night we woke up and worked until mornings... Oh, for days on the same seat, working! We made 20-30 baskets per month. After we finished them, we took them and went on foot to Daia [25 kilometres from Loman] ... ‘Good people, come and buy baskets!’ ‘Sir, come and buy baskets!’ They came out on the streets and gave us a bag with potatoes, a kilo of flour, a kilo of cucumbers... We brought them to our children at home, the children were waiting for us, as people wait for Easter! We had nothing at home!”¹²

Interviewee Elisabeta Crescu remembered her family used to make combs and sell them in order to provide for the children: “My parents made combs and sold them in villages. They were not travelling by cars, no! By train! And they slept in railway stations, they slept where they could in order to bring the necessary things”¹³. Interviewee Ileana Crăiescu’s husband was employed at the Republica Factory in Reghin, while she practiced commerce: she went to Bucharest to buy the goods which she then sold on trains or at monasteries on Christian holidays. During her train travels she was not asked to have an authorisation, and when she assembled her stall, she

¹¹ Bella Horko, interview by the author and Ionela Bogdan, audio file no. 1141, OHIA, Satu Nou, Mureş County, July 3, 2015.

¹² Valeria Ursu, interview by the author, audio file no. 1232, OHIA, Loman, Alba County, July 31, 2015.

¹³ Elisabeta Crescu, interview by Ionela Bogdan, audio file no. 1446, OHIA, Reghin, Mureş County, September 7, 2015.

usually put it next to a Romanian with an authorisation who, in case of Militia's controls, would have said that the articles are his/ hers.

To conclude, the communist regime has legislated the production and sale of the goods resulting from the practice of Roma sedentary and nomadic/ semi-nomadic communities' traditional crafts. As for the sanctions for Roma practicing these trades without authorizations, the interviews show different situations: traditional Roma communities (Gabori or Căldărari) have encountered multiple Militia controls with regard to their authorisations, while interviewees from communities that traditionally earned their living by producing goods such as brooms, baskets, spoons, combs etc., did not face the need to apply for authorizations. A possible explanation would be that, beyond the immediate need of those items mostly in the rural areas in Transylvania, most of these people were enrolled in the local Collective Farms as well, and their additional earning was overlooked at the local level. Moreover, most activities exercised by Roma during the communist era involved a high level of mobility, and sometimes their temporary or permanent migration in the Transylvanian areas. In these circumstances, Roma who received authorisations allowing them to practice their trades under the conditions imposed by the Law no. 13/ May 15, 1968, and Roma who practiced commercial activities with no such authorisations, were travelling around the country in order to provide for their families. Finally, 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 street commerce.