

**WEAVING AND UNRAVELING THE FACTORY TOWN: SOCIAL  
ALTERATIONS AND EUROPEAN BELONGING IN THE AFTERMATH OF  
ROMANIAN INDUSTRIAL COLLAPSE**

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my daughter, Aida

and in the memory of my grandparents whose lives inspired me to seek and share the complexities of contemporary Romanian reality

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## INTRODUCTION: Social Stakes of Spatial Change

*In a grubby, wood-paneled room on the ground floor of city hall, the mayor of Piatra-Neamț, a stocky pitbull of a man named Ion Rotaru is proudly showing off his latest and most ambitious municipal projects. The wall behind him shows a crude map of the town of Piatra-Neamț itself, an unlovely cluster of tower blocks housing 126,000 people, tucked in between the mountain ranges of north-east Romania. On the long conference table before him is a detailed plan of a mammoth sports complex to be built on the outskirts and a model of a luxury block of flats currently under construction. However, it is the centrepiece of the display, a cardboard model of what the mayor rather euphemistically calls "Speranța", or the "District of Hope", that has outraged human rights organisations and led Roma activists to proclaim that "Hitler's ghost is still walking around the city hall of Piatra-Neamț".*  
(O'Mahony 2001)

In 2001, 12 years after the overthrow of the Communist Party, Romania exhibited one of its first attempts to institutionalize racism. The mayor of Piatra-Neamț, a city in north-east Romania, the seat of Neamț county, proposed to remodel the communist chicken farms located six kilometers away from the city into subsidized housing for the Roma minority, the majority of them living at the time in Piatra-Neamț residential neighborhoods. Upon completion of the project, all the Roma living in the neighborhoods were to be relocated to the new "District of Hope" (*Speranța*). The project, partially financed by funds preparing Romania for European Union accession, was described as a measure for improving the social conditions of the Roma minority. However, as mayor Rotaru stated in an interview, the relocation of the Roma aimed "to extract this 'black

plague' from the residential districts in town. The place will be surrounded with barbed wire and watched by guardians, and both local Roma community and street children will be moved there" (O'Mahony 2001).

There were similar relocation projects targeting Roma communities around Romania and Eastern Europe more generally, but *Speranța* was unique in the kinds and degrees of national and international outrage it generated (Gergely and Morteau 2001). In fact, its coverage in the media as a "political project" called the attention of human rights activists, journalists and scholars working on other similar projects in Romania that had managed to emerge unnoticed into the public sphere (Rughiniș 2015). National and international organizations condemned the project as an extremely chauvinist attempt to segregate the ethnically Roma minority from the mainstream Romanian population. Following the extensive media attention and the numerous reports filed by human rights non-governmental agencies, the project was significantly altered: the barbed wire fence was never finished (although a fence still stands separating the new and old buildings), a school and church were built, and public transportation, although limited, became available. The residents were not given any kinds of special identification cards and no guard was hired to monitor the families living there, as previously intended.

When I arrived in Piatra-Neamț for my preliminary research in the summer of 2008, I was interested in the local Roma and non-Roma responses to Rotaru's project. Regional governments in Romania conceptualized relocation projects as solutions addressing dilapidated housing. As O'Mahony's description of Rotaru's office also suggests, the Roma relocation project was part of a larger urban development plan; one that, as this dissertation shows, was entangled in strategies for local economic

transformation from factory town to tourist attraction. It is as part of this transformation that Rotaru presented the Roma, along with homeless children, as undesirables whom he sought to remove from the heart of the city. Thus, in my field explorations I wanted to understand how people grasped the expected and accidental transformations happening to and around them, as well as the processes through which the forced relocation of a minority group could be upheld, both discursively and financially, as social progress and a step towards European accession.

In my archival investigations, it became clear that my inquiries about *Speranța* were unsettling for those I encountered. After my first month requesting and analyzing materials at one local archive, the archivist told me they “did not hold materials on this topic” and asked me to leave. Finding any kind of primary sources about the event proved to be quite a challenge. In my conversations with members of various non-governmental and administrative institutions, the *Speranța* project never came up naturally. When I asked them to tell me about the project, they shifted from informal language about their life in the city to what seemed like a rehearsed speech showcasing media coverage of *Speranța* as misrepresentations and misunderstandings. Moreover, even the district’s Roma residents did not seem keen to talk about their move to *Speranța* in terms of a forced relocation that targeted them based on ethnicity.

However, there were brief instances when the *District of Hope* entered local discourse regardless of whom I talked to and where. This happened in and around conversations about the economic transformation of Piatra-Neamț from factory town to tourist attraction. In these stories of transformations, *Speranța* gained symbolic value, triggered memories, and set up fluid temporal, spatial, economic, and ethnic borders. By

shifting the discussion from the relocation of some residents to the transformation of everyone's city, stories of and from *Speranța* emerged as people talked about their social relations: who they knew and how, where they lived and moved, and how personal networks they understood as more or less stable shifted and altered their reality. Hence, stories about *Speranța* surfaced in new and unique ways along other local material alterations that disrupted Piatra-Neamț experience, particularly in relation to the loss of the local textile factory and European Union accession. As I inquired about the factory, neighborhoods, apartments, buses, documents, and museum artifacts, people talked about other people and how that particular "thing" fostered, maintained, activated, or inhibited a certain social bond. When I asked about relatives, friends, colleagues, clients and acquaintances, my interviewees grounded each person in a place by drawing maps or fixed them with an object that signaled their bond: a wedding chart, a flower pot, a petition, etc. Talking about space meant talking about local sociality and vice-versa; hence understanding ideological transformation required an inquiry into the spatial shifts and the ruptures they created in local sociality.

Consequently, this dissertation explores contemporary social, historical, and ideological transformations by focusing on the material realities of the socialist-planned industrial city. I navigate, through instances of material change, the lives and histories of the poorest of Piatra-Neamț residents (mostly Roma), self-identified members of the middle and upper classes, and various activists, bureaucrats, and scholars who negotiate, on a daily basis, their local realities with European Union expectations. I argue that, for the people of this former factory town, urban and industrial space is tied to a particular form of sociality, ideas about selves and others, one's ability to move, to climb, to work,

and to measure time. By looking at socialist built places as frameworks for conceptualizing personhood, social change can be understood in a new light as “making space” for, or “fitting in” a new reality.

Therefore, people’s understandings of post-socialist ideological transformation are also directly linked to attempted alterations of the surrounding socialist built spaces, their material characteristics, and the contradictions arising from their attempted recalibrations. As the Roma minority is removed from town, the introduction of sidewalk ramps is meant to signal the inclusionary climate in the newly redefined European city. Making socialist spaces into new sites of memory or acquiring a novel European functionality and aesthetic has elicited local responses that challenge the extent to which Piatra-Neamț society can, indeed, “transform.” While local residents do not oppose change, it has been regarded as if mistranslated from a different context. Thus, bright terracotta colors lose their Mediterranean aesthetic when covering massive socialist blocks of concrete amidst the Carpathians. Inspired by recent developments in Eastern European historiography, I argue that in Piatra-Neamț, change does not pivot around the 1989 revolution; rather, it is rationalized through the local industrial collapse in the late ‘90s, various milestones in transforming the city into a tourist attraction, and most importantly, Romania’s accession to the EU in 2007. By looking at spatial transformations, and, most often, their failures to function as expected, not only are new temporalities carved out of history, but also new persons, at times accidentally, emerge out of the malfunctions of change.

Unlike many studies about the Roma, I present the minority in context, explaining how spatial recalibrations (re)create various others while also destabilizing seemingly



continuous images of the Roma. Lastly, while the study joins the developing body of literature on the former Eastern Bloc, it seeks to open possibilities for engaging factory sociality and industrial collapse across political and economic regimes as well as time periods. I suggest that while socialist and capitalist experiences might have created particular and different kinds of state subjects, there is something to be gained from comparing factory life experience across political regime and geographical boundaries.

This dissertation addresses change as (attempted) process of repurposing the material dimensions of socialist life. It is an inquiry into the decaying lives of once able-bodied factory workers, the socialist city they built and the challenges faced by a new generation. Ultimately, it is an ethnographic exploration into the existence of (never fully) transformed things into (barely) functional objects.

**The field site: “Industrial town with no industry, tourist town with no tourists”**

Before the 1950s, Piatra-Neamț was a relatively small merchant and lumber town that struggled to recover from the great losses of WWII. Located in Northeast Romania, at the intersection of central commercial routes, the “timber town” was directly impacted by the Russian Red Army invasion (see Figure 1). In 1948 Piatra-Neamț hosted a population of only 26,303 but in the next four decades, as a consequence of its rapid socialist industrialization, the town’s population increased dramatically, reaching over 120,000 residents by 1992 (Institutul National de Statistica 2011). A recent historical ethnography of Piatra-Neamț during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has uncovered hundreds of documents attesting to the diversity of local culture but also what Moscalu (2009) calls, the “presence of a soul” that allowed Piatra-Neamț to distinguish itself from

its surrounding rural areas. At the time, Piatra-Neamț was a highly diverse community of Romanian, Jewish, Hungarian, and Roma merchants, craftsmen, clergy, timber workers, and log drivers.



Figure 1 – Map of Romania

Contemporary Piatra-Neamț is unique for several reasons: it carries with its socialist aesthetics the history of the socialist industrial project and the story of the distinctively diverse collective it attracted; it is surrounded by mountains and heritage sites central to Romanian historiography; and it is one of the most depopulated cities in Romania due to recent labor migration to Western Europe. Piatra-Neamț also shares striking similarities with post-socialist spaces, post-industrial urban centers and with cities transforming towards a global tourist economy around the world. The unique intersection of historical and environmental circumstances is what local actors call on to

justify the turn to a tourist economy, while it also provides the grounds for comparative social inquiry across geopolitical and temporal boundaries. In other words, by focusing at times on the infrastructural transformation and its exclusionary consequences, or the possibilities offered by the presence and international recognition of heritage sites, we can draw parallels between seemingly contrasting social experiences.

Piatra-Neamț was conceptualized as an industrial city in the 1950s to be mainly sustained economically by the Săvinești Industrial Complex (SIC), which grouped together a series of chemical plants focused on the research and production of synthetic thread, cellulose, and textiles. This consolidation and expansion of local industries into the SIC was part of a larger economic plan for the development of the Moldova region, particularly the Bistrița river valley (Meeus 2013). Piatra-Neamț's scenic location amidst the Carpathian Mountains and its proximity to a multitude of monasteries and ancient ruins, was regarded as both environmentally and culturally beneficial by migrant factory workers. The region had been home to a large Jewish population<sup>1</sup> (Julean 2015; Moscalu 2009) while the Roma minority was concentrated in villages around the local monasteries that once enslaved them (Achim 1998; Pons and Ciubuc 1999; Hancock 1987). Many were deported or fled during WWII while some Jewish residents migrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Piatra-Neamț's proximity to the Harghita County, an ethnic-Hungarian majority region, explains the presence of a noteworthy Hungarian speaking community in town.

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<sup>1</sup> Piatra-Neamț is home to the oldest surviving wooden synagogue in South-Eastern Europe (figure 2). *Baal Shem Tov* or the Cathedral Synagogue was built in 1766 (Julean 2015, 283). Archival materials also suggest that Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hassidism, lived and prayed in Piatra-Neamț.

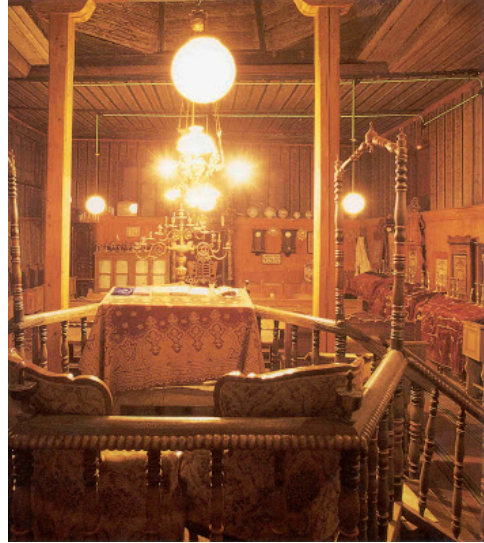


Figure 2 – Baal Shem Tov or the Cathedral Synagogue in Piatra Neamt: (left) Photo by author, (right) Photo (before the restoration) by Janos Kalmar (Gruber 1999)

During my research in Piatra-Neamț in 2011, former factory workers talked about their city as a crossroads location (*e la răscruce*), explaining why it continued to attract an ethnically diverse factory collective during and after the 1950s. Workers often invoked the support of socialist policies that did not allow differentiating individuals of the proletariat by race, gender, economic status, and contended that they all worked and lived side by side for five decades. Similar to discourses in former Yugoslavia (see Botev 1994), people in Piatra-Neamt often talked about intermarriage as evidence for a successful integrated local society. Women and ethnic minorities talked about being empowered by the opportunities to grow professionally in the factories, even if differences continued to be maintained to various degrees (see Gal and Kligman 2000). In the case of the Roma, socialist policies adopted a language of distinction similar to that in the West, rendering the Roma as a “problem,” although efforts were made to regard them as a social problem rather than an ethnic one (Stewart 2001). As it will become apparent in chapter one, relocation of the Roma as part of an urban transformative process also

occurred during the socialist industrialization of the city. However, the 2011 population census contrasts with this history of diversity and presents Piatra-Neamț as a remarkably homogenous Romanian community<sup>2</sup>, which raises questions about the demographic of the labor migration to Western Europe in the past two decades.

Contemporary testimonies about Piatra-Neamț invoke several themes around which people make sense of their past and present experience: the appearance of the city, its location, outsiders' perceptions of the city and its residents, and most often, people's social networks or webs of acquaintances. Many times, my interlocutors insisted on defending the city because of its socialist aesthetics or its location in the Moldova region, which is often described in media and popular discourse as poor and backward compared to the rest of Romania. Socialist architecture and aesthetics were met with wide criticism, even though there had been an initial excitement and appreciation for new socialist construction, especially on the part of migrant workers from rural areas (see also Fehérváry 2013). As people migrated in the 1950s to work at Săvinești, they often sent post-cards of the factory to their families, talking about the size and importance of the industrial complex<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> 98.08% Romanians, 1.3% Roma, 0.16% Lipovans, 0.14% Hungarians, 0.32% Other

<sup>3</sup> Figure 3 text translation: *Dear Petrica, From the Săvinești region I am sending you this post card where you can see a part of the grand factory of synthetic fibers and threads. Petrica, lots of health, success, and happiness. With much longing and love.* [Signature]

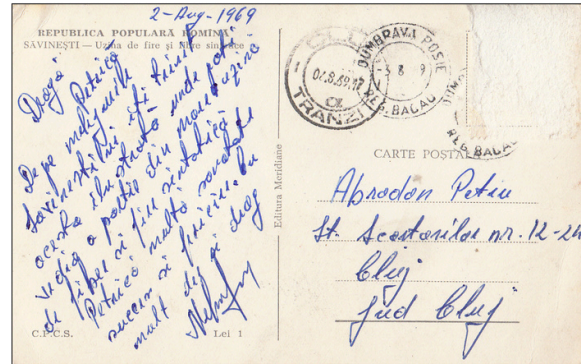


Figure 3 – Postcard sent by factory worker

In 1993, the Săvinești textile complex began to shut down its factories<sup>4</sup>. Many warehouses were auctioned away, thousands of people were laid off, thousands more were forced to retire and life for Piatra Neamț residents was completely transformed as a result. Following the industrial collapse was an immediate impulse to transform the city economically into a tourist attraction (similar to Valea Jiului where tourism was meant to replace the mining economy), capitalizing on its favorable location and surrounding historical attractions. These plans did not result in immediate employment opportunities. Nor did they ferment the sort of solidarity that workers once cherished Săvinești for. On the contrary, women and minorities were seen as the key beneficiaries of socialist

<sup>4</sup> This was mainly caused by a rapid privatization process and the subsequent dismantling of the Săvinești enterprises due to managers' lack of experience in the global market, aging technology, and lack of demand for products. Foreign former partners were allowed to come in as investors and downsized the factories. Some former workers also claimed that foreign competition saw the Săvinești factory as a threat because it produced high quality products at low prices. High inflation rates also made it impossible for factories to pay workers enough for a decent life (Cojocar 2012; Jbanca 2014).

policies (Tismaneanu 2009; Brearley 2001) and had the hardest time finding employment after the industrial collapse. More and more migrated to Western Europe to find temporary work and many of them ended up homeless and begging on the streets of large metropolises. The Roma, and especially the communities that held on to a more “traditional” way of life and comportment, became the unwilling markers of Romania’s alleged backwardness. Their darker skin and brightly colored attire were, and to a great extent still are, interpreted by domestic and international actors as signs of the country’s failure “to return Europe”. In this process, the Roma became undesirables “at home,” their physical removal being justified as an economic measure as they no longer fit in the landscape of the aspiring tourist city.

### **Geographical and theoretical contributions**

With each of my research trips to Romania, every passport control officer asked me what I could possibly have to do in “that town.” They insisted I should explore other interesting and “picturesque” places in Romania: “Why would you go to Moldova?” Particularly because Romanian Moldova region has historically been considered the poorer, less developed Romanian region, it comes as a surprise to Romanians elsewhere that Piatra-Neamț could be considered a tourist attraction. When tourists pass through Piatra-Neamț, it is usually as part of a wider historical tour, a circuit to the surrounding Moldova monasteries, or to attend a particular event. In the past decade, Piatra-Neamț tourist planners have taken advantage of the natural landscape to attract off-road cycling events, hunting expeditions, ski and snowboarding competitions, etc.

Scholars of Eastern Europe have focused on political ideology shifts, regaining property rights, adopting new financial models, racial and religious conflicts across Eastern Europe. Although their contributions are valuable in understanding post-socialist transformation, I believe looking at industrial centers<sup>5</sup> offers new opportunities for social scientific inquiry into the entanglements of sociality, space, and history. As Krisztina Fehervary has argued, “the planned city was an ideal site in which to investigate how the socialist state had forged new relationships among the state, material goods, and people and how these were being transformed in a post-socialist environment” (2013, 2).

My own explorations in Piatra-Neamț sought to uncover the ways in which residents of this planned city forged relationships with one another, how they anchored these relations in individuals’ lives, and to what practical ends they employed them. Furthermore, this research asks what it meant for dwellers of Piatra-Neamț to undergo the transformations prompted by the postsocialist uprooting of labor and state welfare. Some scholars have equated Romania’s “return to Europe” with the country’s “return to history,” arguing that heritage and geography had become the foundations of this transformation (Minkenberg 2009). While this lens may, to a certain degree, elucidate the emergence and popularity of right-wing politics in contemporary Romania (see Tismaneanu 2007), my own explorations in Piatra-Neamț enable us to understand how history is understood and practiced in everyday life. Forging, maintaining, and activating social networks in a particular landscape cannot be done in the absence of history, and in the case of Piatra-Neamț especially, without acknowledging and engaging a socialist past. In this sense, this research problematizes the rupture between political and everyday life

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<sup>5</sup> See also Burawoy (1985), Dunn (2004), Kotkin (1995), Collier (2011)



in Romania and uncovers the complexities of ideology production in a particular (post)industrial setting.

### **Research methodology**

This dissertation is based on twentythree months of methodologically multifaceted research conducted between 2008 and 2012, combining archival exploration in Piatra-Neamț and Bucharest with ethnographic fieldwork in Piatra-Neamț.

To understand the way in which individuals navigate and differentiate between the various roles they embody in interactions with each other and the relations they draw between specific events and their daily life, I conducted extensive archival research at the Kirileanu County Library Archive (documents and articles on Piatra-Neamț local history), the mayor's office archives (records on policy design, urban planning, and implementation techniques), and the private archives of the Agency for Regional Development in North East Romania (ADRNE) (records on acquiring European Union funding and meeting minutes that explain the local distribution of such funds), the History and Archaeology Museum of Piatra-Neamț (local, national, and international history records and documentation of history exhibits and events), and the Agency against Corruption and for Human Rights (court cases about corruption and human rights violations).

I juxtaposed the information gathered from this body of archives with the oral histories (K. Anderson and Jack 1991; Thompson 2000) I collected among three distinct groups in Piatra-Neamț: previous workers at the Săvinești Industrial Complex, members of various organizations and institutions (NGOs, ADRNE, mayor's office, schools,

history museums, etc.), and the members of the Roma minority who were relocated to the “District of Hope.” In doing so, I paid particular attention to the way in which individuals navigated various social networks, both as community members and as representatives of specific institutions and the national and international networks they understood to be a part of (NGO networks, museum and heritage committees, education foundations, etc). Motivating my research as a scholar whose work integrates anthropology and history was my longstanding interest in the role of memory in culture making and evidence for the past or history. Memory has also been regarded as evidence in attaching authenticity to particular objects or experiences and in situating a people in time and space (Gable and Handler 2011, 34). From its inception, anthropology has been concerned with recording “daily lives and customs anticipating their extinction in the face of modernity,” as well as with preserving “people’s own memories of the past” (Williamson Huber 2011, 5). In my own research, the concern was recording and preserving the life stories and experiences of an increasingly aging population whose members lived through both the city’s industrialization in the 1950s, as well as the subsequent post-socialist transformations.

In addition to collecting oral narratives, I attended and observed formal and informal “scenes of encounter” (Keane 1997): strategizing meetings at NGOs and local government institutions, meetings where EU funding distribution was decided at ADRNE, personal encounters in the *Speranța* neighborhood, and I also followed the way activating a network moves actors across the boundaries of these confined spaces. I attended numerous meetings organized with the objective of bringing various NGOs together in an effort to become more aware of each other’s role in Piatra-Neamț and to collectively decide how they could help one another be more efficient in achieving their

goals. Numerous pre-existing networks were activated for the formation of this group of NGOs and the dynamic interactions (Riles 2001) during the meetings clearly illustrated that individuals recognized their value. This particular kind of participant observation illuminated the characteristics of these interactions that might be understood as natural by the actor and would not necessarily emerge on their own in the individual interviews. I established a strong relationship with ADRNE, one of the independent institutions responsible for distributing E.U. financial resources to local businesses and NGOs according to the guidelines set by the E.U. Conversations with one of the directors of ADRNE have suggested the various ways in which networks are valuable in applying for specific funding opportunities. Finally, through my Museum Studies certificate internship, I became directly involved with the History and Archaeology Museum in Piatra-Neamț, where I observed the way in which networks function to re-create local history in the context of the new Romanian and European meaningful past.

In addition to archival materials and newspaper clippings, I collected maps my interviewees drew for me while talking about the city or the people they knew. These maps helped me to better understand the way individuals visualized networks and situated them in space. The maps emerged out of specific contexts invoked by each individual: as I asked them to clarify a particular point they were making, many of my interviewees called upon a paper and a pencil. Maps of network structure illuminated the types of actors identified in a network (individual, organizations, etc.), how some actors were prioritized visually (is the network drawn around a specific person? What was the order in which key actors emerged when drawing maps?), and representation forms interviewees adopted (lineal, circular, following genealogical models, etc). Maps of

network spatial configurations explained how interviewees understood the scale of networks, their distribution in space, and identified specific nodes of networks (places of socialization, spatial origins, etc.)

The turn to a tourist economy in Piatra-Neamț is linked to the recognition of the numerous monasteries surrounding the town as UNESCO heritage sites, further legitimizing Romania's place in the E.U. by imagining a Christian community with a shared history. Thus, it should not be surprising that one of the most prominent figures in Piatra-Neamț history is the priest and researcher Constantin Matasa, also the founder of the Piatra-Neamț History and Archaeology Museum. During my preliminary research, I familiarized myself with the various texts published by Matasa (1929; 1935; 1946) on archaeological discoveries of Cucuteni-Trypillian culture artifacts, as well as the variety of flora and fauna unique to the Neamț environment. His texts have become historical evidence for the tourist economic turn of the area, while some passages have been translated to become key testimonies in international tourist guides.

The conclusions drawn here are based on one hundred and twenty six recorded oral histories and hundreds of archival materials that include newspaper articles, maps, reports, memoirs etc. Since my work is, in many ways, about the spatial configurations of sociality in a particular urban space, I also incorporate experience from participant observation (walking the city, seeing, working with and against the spaces) documented in extensive field notes and a variety of vernacular maps (city and social network maps, wedding and baptism seating charts, etc.).

***Speranța as event: memory, history, and distinction making***

The Roma relocation to the District of Hope was an event. One that allows us, social scientists and historians, to enter the history of Piatra-Neamț in unique ways. It was an event that altered Roma reality and sociality, an event that was forgotten or changed in the memories of local political actors to escape accusations of discrimination, and an event that enabled non-Roma to think of their own struggles in transitioning to Europe. In making sense of this event, Piatra-Neamț residents talked about their own struggles in the new European spaces, of their own sociality being disrupted by the economic transformation and their temporary labor migration.

Moreover, while *Speranța* targeted the Roma minority as it was increasingly being identified by the European community as a problem, at the local level, the relocation was also an event that pointed to a remapping of the Săvinești family. Scholars have argued that collective memory is rooted in the idea of a shared experience and can be best understood by exploring the unit of the family as one of the smallest models of a collective (Ricoeur 2004; Halbwachs and Coser 1992; Anderson 1983). Regardless of various differences among individual family members, shared experience of daily life makes it possible for family recollections to develop in the consciousness of each individual. Moreover, constant renegotiation of ideas—“exchange of impressions and opinions among family members”—aids in constructing a more or less uniform understanding of the past and strengthens the bonds between the members of the domestic group (Halbwachs and Coser 1992, 50). Whether or not feelings can be transferred from one person to the next can remain up to debate, but the way feelings are expressed can be regulated by the family sphere just as any other social behavior (Halbwachs and Coser 1992, 56–57). Thus, it becomes possible to imagine a collective

that expresses certain feelings in a specific way and grounded in specific images of the past without questioning the authenticity of such feelings based on the lack of a collective mind or soul.

In the case of Piatra-Neamț sociality, “the family” becomes the location where transformation is mediated and made possible. The need to break from the socialist past has required the Săvinești family to turn from its origins in surrounding villages and at the factory and to engage instead with a new transformation: that of transition or “returning to Europe.” Often, collective remembering happens at moments of transformation that threaten the particular grounds onto which feelings of belonging have been constructed. Whether the relationship to the past is invoked to contest the meaning of Auschwitz as a site solely for Jewish suffering in Poland (Zubrzycki 2009), or to resist the incorporation of the Garifuna religion into a broader diasporic set (Johnson 2007), the moment of recollection is directly linked to present conditions that have provoked this collective action (Connerton 1989).

In failing to remember *Speranța* as discriminatory action, Piatra-Neamț community points to a matrix of other communal struggles and to the intricate ways they are coping together in the ever-shifting landscape. However, “what happened” left material traces such that, “that which is said to have happened” can be reconstituted (Trouillot 1995, 29). This material evidence of the past limits the way in which one can write about history while present social and political contexts regulate what evidence is relevant in the process of writing. Some scholars have argued that materializing the past in texts, objects, and memorial sites is a product of our recognition that memory has become scarce (Nora 1989) and that the act of materialization signals the gradual

disappearance of memory (Anderson 1983, see Ricoeur 2006 on Plato). Such artifacts ground segments of the past in an imagined continuous chronology that legitimizes the current state of affairs (e.g. the nation-state). This is particularly salient in understanding how Piatra-Neamț museum actors select artifacts and exhibits for the writing of a new local history that is shared with and extended towards Europe and breaks with socialist history. But the materiality of the city itself cannot be escaped by the people living there who look upon their past to make sense of current situations and struggles. The industrial ruins that welcome you to the city and the socialist remnants repurposed into housing projects for the Roma compel the writing of a different history, one that even museum actors struggle to negotiate in their roles as members of the local. In the endless recalibrations of the local materiality, stark distinctions emerge among those who have molded their lives and their children's futures in relation to the factory. A new environment of transformation, that of the transition to Europe, is necessary in making sense of, and reproducing local sociality in Piatra-Neamț. Paradoxically, to prevent the complete collapse of the social structures, continually adopting and reifying the discourse of transition has become a necessary condition, which prevents the community from ever considering itself transformed.

### **Dissertation structure**

This dissertation is structured into three parts, each corresponding to a major theme of inquiry unfolding over two chapters. Because so many Piatra-Neamț residents invoked the local industrial past to explain their current reality, the themes around which this dissertation is organized are metaphorically linked to previous technical processes in

the factory: weaving textiles, recalibrating machines, stretching threads and fibers. **Part one** traces space as catalyst for the *weaving* of local sociality in the process of building the Săvinești factory and a city for its able-bodied workers. Guided by a multitude of factory worker oral histories, memoirs, and archival materials, I navigate between worker migration to the new city in the 1950s, and between the city and the factory as daily routine unfolds. **Chapter one** is about space as distance to be travelled, as fenced in and policed, as distributed by the state, as locations for love, competition, gossip, work. Space mediated the creation of new persons, allowed for compliance with and resistance against the socialist state, and blurred the boundaries between public and private life (Lebow 2013; Fehérváry 2013). For the workers at Săvinești, the textile factory was not just a job; it constituted a way of life, it provided the time and space where particular ties among employees could be forged and sustained; it was a place where lines between public and private life were blurred, if not erased. The factory's location, the need to juggle between shifts, the structure of the collective, as well as the various life conditions imposed by the socialist state, allowed for the creation of particular kind of sociality characterized by what I call "implicit bonds." **Chapter two** exposes the complexities of this sociality in particular contemporary spaces: practices that were understood as commonsensical have been redefined as corrupt, illegal, or backward, depending on their spatial location or the material objects emplaced in a given location. People found creative ways to navigate this gray space between new legality and illegality, to extend and/or adapt their existing way of life to new practices (such as banking and ideas about debt).

**Part two** is an exploration into movement and spatial shifts informed by people drawing mental maps and charts and coming to terms with their position as they navigate



and get stuck in a seemingly familiar space. **Chapter three** explores the challenges faced by local activists as they are shuffled between government buildings and marginal apartments, and argues that inability to spatially settle new concepts—such as “human rights,” “democracy,” “civil society”—is indicative of how the concepts are perceived ideologically in Piatra-Neamț: temporary and in a perpetual state of metamorphoses. **Chapter four** analyzes how socialist urban space has been reconfigured over the past two decades to fit certain models of Europeanness. Forced relocations, shifting pedestrian walks, introduction of curb ramps, alter the way people map themselves in space and society. Therefore, the chapter explores the processes through which various “others” have been carved out—physically and ideologically, intentionally and accidentally—from an emerging European capitalist “normality.” These chapters work together to expose the way in which Piatra-Neamț residents continually stumble and refamiliarize themselves with a patched up and recalibrated reality. It is an exploration into the rigidness and flexibility evoked in interactions between material public spaces and the human mind.

In the **third part**, I explore instances in which local space seems to transcend regional and national borders. It is an inquiry into the material historical evidence for European belonging and the paradoxes in the lives of those who sought temporary labor abroad and cannot recognize the home they left behind. **Chapter five** exposes local restoration projects and museum renovations as they are made into historical evidence of a newly established meaningful history—a shared European past. The **last chapter** deals with the consequences of closing down the Săvinești textile complex and the mass

worker migration to Western Europe, as local families learn to function “out of place” and in a constant state of waiting for the temporary and brief return of their loved ones.

I conclude with a discussion about a space built by and for socialist factory workers who, paradoxically, find themselves incapacitated between the partial transformation and loss of functionality in their material world. Feelings of paralysis and perpetual waiting in the midst of rapid recalibrations encompass the tensions between concomitant desires for stasis and transition. These feelings of paralysis also point to the contradictions between a national political rhetoric that tries to distance itself from a communist past and people’s needs to call upon their personal history and communal practices to cope with transformation.

The following text might seem, at times, poorly organized, jumping from one theme to another seemingly unexpectedly, loosely tied to a main thread spun with fear of betraying the technician’s inexperience and inadequacy. While some instances might be testimony to a never quite completed writing process, the structure is in fact intentional. It is meant to recreate my experience in the field listening to fragmented stories and attempting to trace social bonds. Its purpose is to transport the reader, at least temporarily, into the lives of those who shared their realities with me: with all the confusion and the shifts, forcing memories into stories to make sense of an ever-changing present while feeling out of place in their own home.

## **PART I – WEAVING THE LOCAL: PRODUCING FACTORY TOWN SOCIALITY**

The following two chapters trace space as catalyst for sociality in the process of building the Săvinești factory and a city for its able-bodied workers. Guided by a multitude of factory worker oral histories, memoirs, and archival materials, I navigate between worker migration to the new city in the 1950s and between the city and the factory as daily routine unfolds. The first chapter is about space as distance to be traveled, as fenced in and policed, as distributed by the state, as well as locations for love, competition, gossip, work. Space mediates the creation of new persons, allows for compliance with and resistance against the socialist state, and blurs the boundaries between public and private life (Lebow 2013; Fehérváry 2013; Foucault et al. 1991). The second chapter highlights the complexities of sociality in particular spaces: practices that were understood as commonsensical are now redefined as corrupt, illegal, or backward, depending on their spatial location or the material objects emplaced in a given location. People find creative ways to navigate this gray space between new legality and illegality, to extend and/or adapt their existing way of life to new practices (such as banking and ideas about debt).

## CHAPTER 1 – THE RAW MATERIALS OF A NEW SOCIAL FABRIC: MODES OF BEING IN A FACTORY TOWN

*The occupational transformation of farmers, animal breeders, woodcutters, rafters, cartmen into chemist switchboard operators, leaders in complicated technical processes, which manage millions of dollars, is a process of human “growth”, of the achievement of our days. Concomitant with the production of new goods materialized in fibers, threads, fertilizers and more, the people here were also molded.*  
(Botez et al. 1975, 357–358)

### Introduction

I stumbled into research when I least expected it. I had been conducting fieldwork in Piatra-Neamț, Romania for almost a year when I visited Elena at her house in May 2011. She is a local photographer specializing in family and young children and I was there for a photo shoot with my daughter. At the time of our appointment, Elena lived with her parents in a newly constructed home a couple of kilometers north of the city and her studio was in the basement. Entering their spacious yard reminded me of an American suburb. The flawlessly mowed lawn, a tennis court and a mini golf course, as well as the architecture of the brownstone house, seemed completely out of place in the rural Romanian landscape. I wondered if the family had spent time in the United States.

Elena greeted me and guided me to a back entrance leading into her basement studio. Her father was setting up a grill on the patio and welcomed me cheerfully, as if we had known each other for years. Elena must have told him my name and that I lived in

the United States and it soon became clear he had done some additional research of his own. When we met at their house I was not surprised by the way he approached me: “Oh, you’re S.’s niece!! He was my supervisor at the factory before he moved abroad.” He proceeded to tell me about the warehouse they worked in, what a great supervisor my uncle was, and proudly asserted that he had visited my uncle in the United States several times. This kind of interaction was not unfamiliar to me; any conversation I began in Piatra-Neamț with members of the factory worker generation eventually turned into a story about the Săvinești Industrial Complex (SIC). This story placed the present interlocutors in a specific hierarchy or signaled an *implicit bond*: a bond that had the potential to serve the connected parties and materialize in various ways in the future. To actualize such bonds, the stories invoked (Silverstein and Urban 1996; R. Bauman 1986) were anchored in particular materialities while breaking up and rearranging chunks of time to make sense of present and conceivable future interactions. In an attempt to be more specific about my familial ties and continue the conversation with Mr. Mitica, I explained that I was actually related to S.’s wife and noticed his disappointment.

Mr. Mitica was not just making conversation and I was not just a client at his daughter’s studio. My kinship ties with my uncle as well as Mr. Mitica’s shared factory experience with him, made Mr. Mitica and me, to a certain extent, family. By downplaying my relationship with my uncle, I was shutting down the connection Mr. Mitica was trying to acknowledge we had. In fact, during my interviews with former factory workers, they most often made sense of my interest in their lives through my personal roots in the city and my family’s history at the factory. One of my interviewees, Mrs. Georgeta, insisted that she must have known my grandmother. She asked me her

name and proceeded: “Oh yes, I know her. She was blonde, no?” As I shook my head in disagreement she continued, “Did she change her name? What was her married name? I’m sure I know her.” In another instance, someone told me laughing, “Well if you weren’t from here why would I help you?” and suggested that favors are meant “to come back around.” In order to understand the ways in which such connections function in contemporary Piatra-Neamț, one has to trace their historical local origins and the circumstances in which they emerged.

In this chapter, I explore the way in which such *implicit bonds* became norms of social interactions in Piatra-Neamț, focusing on how they were conceived and performed in relation to the emerging industrial landscape between the 1950s and 1990s. The Săvinești Industrial Complex was a site among many that fostered the creation of particular kinds of social bonds during the socialist period in Romania. I show that the kinds of social patterns and behaviors often attributed to the scarcity economy seem to have older and more complex roots. In fact, individuals resisted and fought against imposed regimes of economic limitations by activating or making explicit/legible the partially existing relations or implicit bonds they had built in the previous decades. The capacity of such bonds to outlive the communist regime should not be superficially explained as an obstacle that still stands in the way of progress towards capitalism. Simply rendered as corruption under the “Western” gaze and assessment, the informal activity of social networks in contemporary Romania is understood to have ignored a presumed transformative event—the fall of communism in 1989. But what happens if, instead of assuming this given/imposed temporality, we take a closer look at the ways social networks emerged in Piatra-Neamț and their relationship to space/time?

Social bonds here are not understood solely through the actions of their members but also as things—material entities, travelling through space, embodied by certain individuals, born out of and mapped unto the factory and city, materialized into properly tailored skirts, marriage certificates, and apartments. Thus, networks are not only tools that aid human actions and experience but become social actors themselves (Appadurai 1988). In other words, similar to the Kula exchange system (Malinowski 1920; Munn 1986), these social bonds have the capacity for “material agency”—to act upon and alter a worldview (Knappett 2008). They become fundamental in instances of transformation.

As such, in recounting oral histories, people in Piatra-Neamț often attached their stories to particular places they navigated daily while marking particular instances of spatial transformation. Social relations and individuals surfaced only in association with the material qualia and indexical meanings of these spaces (Munn 1986; Lemon 2013; Gal 2013). Thus, I would find out about a love affair in talking about an unusual bus stop, or about the existence of one’s sister because of her reaction to acquiring a new apartment, and the details of a friend’s life because she used to cover one’s shift at the factory. It is in spaces like this, governed by particular social or state-imposed regulations, as well as existing social practices that Piatra-Neamț residents wove a particular kind of sociality. They constituted a fabric of *implicit bonds*, in a perpetual state of potentiality, always emergent and dependent on the systematic accumulation of what seemed like random information about those around them. However, the extent to which this sociality functioned was always directly linked to people’s interactions with particular spaces and with one another within these spaces.

Located twelve kilometers outside Piatra-Neamț, the SIC employed over twenty thousand workers who commuted daily from the newly emerging city and the surrounding villages. Factory workers migrated from all over Romania, young engineers from university centers were assigned to the SIC, and construction workers were continuously in demand as Piatra-Neamț was expanding. Local technical schools were established to train rural youth who sought to move to the city. They also offered opportunities for factory workers to acquire skills for promotion in the factory. The youth from neighboring villages secured unskilled worker jobs until they graduated technical high schools and moved up in ranks. While this opportunity allowed them to contribute financially to the livelihood of their rural families, these young workers were also motivated by their hopes in progress and an industrial future. Most other professional opportunities in the city were directly linked to the development of the factory, the planning and construction of the city, and to providing the daily necessities for workers and their families.

Piatra-Neamț was reconfigured in the 1950s as a city for able-bodied<sup>6</sup>, young, factory workers most of whom had few or no familial ties to the city. That is to say that little about the social interactions was yet implicit at the time. Urban planning was seen as a “holistic endeavor,” conceiving of architects as “social engineers whose expertise must extend into areas [...] well beyond those of classical architecture” (Lebow 2013, 21). Such areas included health and hygiene, education and childcare, as well as leisure. Like many such places in the former Eastern Bloc, it was a project of creating proper socialist citizens *en masse* by controlling their public and private spaces, means for

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss this in further detail in chapter 4 by focusing on the material characteristics that made Piatra-Neamț a city for able-bodied factory workers and the consequences of this space after the industrial collapse.



sociality, diet, family structure and roles, etc (Kotkin 1995). In the case of the Roma minority, the socialist state adopted aggressive policies to alter their lives and integrate them into the emerging proletariat. Leader figures within Roma extended families were offered managerial or bureaucratic positions with the assumption that they will also contribute to the transformation of their communities. As we will see in part two, this contributed greatly to the scapegoating of Roma for the failures of the socialist regime. In reality, the majority of Piatra-Neamt Romanies occupied unskilled labor within the factory, served as security guards, or were employed in street sweeping and janitorial positions in the city. These positions offered little to no opportunity for promotion or growth but allowed for a degree of movement that many Piatra-Neamt residents did not enjoy. Because of this, Romanies became indispensable to the second economy and to the community as a whole.

Similar to Nowa Huta in Poland and other rapidly industrialized centers in the former Eastern Bloc, “from architecture, design, and layout, to methods used in their construction, the new towns were to be nothing less than socialism made concrete in brick and mortar” (Lebow 2013). However, new subjectivities emerged not only in relation to the state and its imposed materiality; social subjects and their interactions were also shaped by the continuous negotiation of individual histories (particularly rural and urban provenance), career and personal aspirations, the emergence of new social ties, and the needs people identified in their new spaces. People anchored their relationships in the surrounding materiality and in creative ways that were not conceived or intended by state planners (Fehérváry 2013). At the same time, the material qualia of objects and places provided unexpected means in which a social bond could be marked and solidified

relative to a given environment (Lemon 2013). In “Ideology in Infrastructure,” Caroline Humphrey shows how the built environment is in a refractive, rather than reflective, relationship with ideology. That is to say, student dorms inspired imagination from the bottom without negating or opposing official ideology (Humphrey 2005).

The flow of people, exchange of goods and services, apartment distribution, etc., formed “an intricate time-space-person system” (Polanyi 2005 cited in Munn, 1968), which outlived the conditions of its inception and extended beyond borders in intricate and ingenious ways, as people made sense of and engaged in their own transformation. While “embodied experience of materiality contributes to the process of signification” (Fehérváry 2013, 7)<sup>7</sup>, in the Piatra-Neamț case, it is also evident that “actions within the landscape are incorporated into narratives that link biography and history to place” (Kirsch 2001, 246)<sup>8</sup>. By accumulating information and exchanging objects and services, people understood to be making connections not only with their immediate “consociates” (Schutz 1962 cited in Munn 1986, 6), but with contemporaries or Piatra-Neamț residents with whom they could envision or expect a potential future interaction.<sup>9</sup> Such interactions were linked to the materiality of the factory and one’s place within the process of navigating the city.

### **Commuting: Waiting and Surveillance**

A worker’s day began long before clocking in at the factory. The bus stops, train stations and the commute itself provided central spaces for socializing and represented,

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<sup>7</sup> See also Lemon, Keane, Hull, Munn-Fame of Gawa, Manning and Meneley on qualisigns, Meneley on the qualities of olive oil, Manning in Semiotics of Drinks and Drinking etc.

<sup>8</sup> See also Connerton (1989) and Mueggler (2001)

<sup>9</sup> See Nancy Munn (1992) on “sociocultural spacetime” particularly for discussing materiality and eliciting the past and present in the future as well as Alaina Lemon’s work on chronotopes (2008; 2009).

for fellow passengers, state-crafted windows into one's personal life. From the ways in which people carried themselves—what they wore, walking tall or gazing at the ground—to whom they interacted with and in what ways, observers accumulated knowledge about their fellow commuters and assigned them different social statuses. Commuting or *navetism* developed in relation to industrialization. It has been argued that commuting emerged as directly linked to the women's role in the labor market (Moskoff 1978). As the Romanian economy was shifting from agriculture to industry and construction, labor planners had to secure food production in rural areas while supplying necessary labor to the emerging industrial centers. In an attempt to prevent mass migration from rural areas to urban centers, the state controlled allocations of both jobs and housing in urban centers (Fuchs and Demko 1977; Sárfalvi 1970). In the early years of socialism, women were to occupy the majority of the agricultural labor sector,<sup>10</sup> while men were expected to commute to their new jobs in industrial centers (Moskoff 1978). Commuting in this sense was seen as a series of “work movements that require journeys outside [one's] administrative district of residence” (Fuchs and Demko 1978, 172) established to prevent rural-urban migration.

However, in talking to former SIC workers, a series of distinctions emerged between the kinds of commuting one engaged in: those who took the train from other small towns and villages, those who rode the factory provided buses from Piatra-Neamț and immediate villages, and, after the 1960s, those who traveled by personal cars<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> This was due to an assumption that women could not carry out the heavy tasks of construction and industrial labor while they were also needed close to home to tend to their children and housework. Agricultural work was also ideologically tied to the home in rural areas, thus tying women to working the fields as well.

<sup>11</sup> The prospect of owning a personal car becomes available in the sixties, after mass production begins at Mioveni.

These distinctive types of commuting were also understood as migration stages to Piatra-Neamț from the surrounding rural areas, a process that has been described as “deferred urbanization” (Fuchs and Demko 1977, 464). However, regardless of the stage one occupied in the process of migration, commuting never really stopped. Even though the SIC was located in Săvinești<sup>12</sup>, Piatra-Neamț was seen as the urban center directly linked to the industrial development the SIC represented. As young workers secured jobs at the SIC, they continued to live with their parents in their villages and traveled to Săvinești by train. As Adriana H. told me, she was seventeen when she began working at the factory. She continued attending a vocational school while helping her parents financially and moved to the city only after she got married and had a child. Both Adriana and her husband were from the same village and both worked at the SIC, but they were employed by different companies (*intreprinderi*) in the textile complex. Even though they now lived in the city, they referred to their movements to and from work as commuting.

*Coloana* (translated literally as *convoy*), or the tens of buses that collected workers from all corners of the city and the immediate villages, defined the surrounding space as distance to be traveled as well as locations for waiting<sup>13</sup> (Verdery 1996). From waiting for the bus at the stop to waiting in the bus to reach the destinations, workers consumed time actively and in distinct ways depending on their personal, immediate concerns. Such concerns included climbing the professional ladder within the factory, acquiring an apartment, finding colleagues with similar hobbies, etc. Commuting for former factory workers was an act of doing—*faceam naveta*<sup>14</sup>—and in recalling

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<sup>12</sup> Săvinești is considered a *comuna* or small town and many workers lived temporarily in worker housing in Săvinești until they could move to Piatra-Neamț.

<sup>13</sup> Although, instances of “waiting” became ubiquitous in almost all aspects of Romanian life.

<sup>14</sup> Literally translated as “doing the commute”

experiences of commuting, workers proved that travelling to the factory was never a passive act. As Kleinman (2014) has illustrated in her study of migrant interaction at the Gare du Nord in Paris, infrastructure has the ability to shape social interaction but also be altered by the existing modes of interaction and exchange. In the Săvinești case, while movement depended on schedules and spaces that were part of an existing or emerging infrastructure, workers' social interactions and exchanges were employed in a way that both extended the purpose of the given infrastructure and those of existing rural practices of socialization. As we will see, workers used their commute actively and consciously to gossip, network, observe, or pretend to sleep with specific goals in mind, which contributed to the development of *implicit bonds*.

The flow of worker bodies to and from the factory depended on the three main shifts in a workday and the position one occupied at the factory. Most administrators only worked day shifts (morning or afternoon). The rest of the workers shuffled their daily life between the three shifts that enabled continuous production at the factory. Eventually, workers locked into a specific routine: even when they switched shifts from one week to another, some fellow commuters shifted as well, which meant that more and more faces became familiar on each bus ride. Neighbors who worked for the factory commuted together, met before work, walked together to the bus stop, took the same bus, and socialized with the same people. Similar to Howrah workers, for whom the “ship was a scaled up body made vital by their acts of labor,” (Bear 2013) Săvinești workers moved as collective bodies bounded by their neighborhoods, commute, and factory work.

As such, deviation from the norm in one worker's behavior would signal other workers as “vital organs” in one's body. Many Săvinești workers talked about their “vital

role” in the “collective,” signaling an understanding of the collective as a life endowed entity. Moreover, my interviewees claimed that any break in their routine would attract attention from those worried about their wellbeing as well as those collaborating with the *Securitate*.<sup>15</sup> Thus, people were very intentional in keeping certain people informed about their whereabouts and the kind of information they would share. Workers understood the *Securitate* not just as an institution but as a set of surveilling practices that people employed—tracking friends, collecting information, cross referencing sources, formulating hypotheses about people’s lives—both in service of the state, and to contribute to a social fabric that was slowly gaining contour, patterns, colors, knots, stitches. The *Securitate* was embedded in this fabric and not just hovering above it (Betts 2010).

The location of one’s waiting was widely known. Workers knew where people got on and off the buses, whom others interacted with, and in what fashion. Unlike other scenes of encounter, the bus offered the opportunity to gaze, listen and be surveilled for an extended period of time, whether in the service of the state or to feed a more informal, communal network of information. Thus, any break in the widely circulated pattern of movements and waiting could become a central subject for gossip. I interviewed Mr. Cristian, a retired Săvinești chemist, in September 2011. As he told me about his first years in Piatra-Neamt in the 1970s, he remembered how much thought went into his act of commuting:

When you worked for the factory, daily life was always interesting and you had to think about every move you made. As a young man, I had to think twice about spending the night elsewhere [smiling] ... people would know I was at the wrong bus stop in the morning ... and sometimes you just had to make a choice, arrive at

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<sup>15</sup> Securitate was the Romanian socialist secret police. For more on the specifics of how the Securitate functioned see Katherine Verdery’s work.

the factory late and take a penalty, but even then, you never really knew who you would run into.

When Mr. Cristian moved to Piatra-Neamț in 1972, he was in his early twenties, single, and did not have relatives or acquaintances in town. According to him, his reputation was not built on his family's name, social status, or the chemistry degree he had received with honors. He knew that his every move would be analyzed and had the potential to affect future promotions, his ability to acquire an apartment, the kinds of social circles he would be welcomed in, and whom he would eventually marry. As a young man, he was expected to behave a certain way to gain and retain the respect of his peers. He continued to talk about his experience of commuting as a performance of his good character. In selecting which bus to embark, he would assess the potential consequences of a single man on a bus full of women and carefully craft stories to explain why he was at a different bus stop on a particular morning. He never allowed himself to display feelings of shame as he accidentally ran into a group of colleagues and he needed to stay informed about the rumors that circulated about him.

Mr. Cristian asserted “false gossip could be used in your favor if you kept properly informed.” His stories had to align with those already circulating in order to not raise more suspicion:

If people knew you were single they looked for hints you entered a relationship...to create another connection with you, to be your friend on another level...from one family man to another (*de la familist la familist*). You allowed people to say this and even encouraged it when you were having an affair with a married woman. And this happened all the time,”

he said smiling.

Accuracy was less important. What really mattered was one's skill in swaying his/her peers into questioning their own conclusions. “Let me tell you a joke,” Mr. Cristian said:

“During Ceausescu’s time a man is seen coming out of a pharmacy. He runs into a comrade who asks him ‘Are you sick? I saw you coming out of the pharmacy.’ To which the man replies, ‘And if you saw me coming out of the cemetery, would you think I was dead?’” Similarly to the main character in his joke, Mr. Cristian preferred to avoid direct answers about his whereabouts. People learned to be witty and to think of comical alternative ways in which to challenge their interrogators’ conclusions. While encounters with one another were at times accidental (as in the joke above), the commute represented a setting in which people expected encounters and their unfolding in particular ways.

Commuters witnessed flirting, friendships, judged others by how they smelled, what they wore, and how wrinkled or starched their clothes were. Many retired workers recall the commute to be personally embarrassing, as they often found themselves falling asleep, resting their head on a stranger’s shoulder. For them, sleep was a deeply intimate endeavor when you could not control the movements of your body and how it interacted with others. People talked about the sounds and visible characteristics of sleeping bodies as well as the certainty of being watched. My interviewees assured me that it was not the act of sleeping in a public place that was embarrassing, but the fact that they commuted with coworkers, supervisors, potential future spouses, etc. The potentiality for *implicit bonds* surfaced as they commuted and waited together and nobody could be rendered a simple stranger.<sup>16</sup>

How one slept could also raise suspicion among fellow commuters about pretending to be asleep and one’s motivations to do so. While sleeping may have been

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<sup>16</sup> This contrasts Simmel’s discussion on stranger sociability in the city (2011).



accidental for many individuals, Lenuța, a former accountant at the SIC, defined her commute as the time to extend her sleep.

Commuting was, very often, a way to continue your sleep. After a while you had your own seat because you commuted day in and day out. You would choose to sit next to a cleaner person...there was a problem with detergents back then, it was hard. I, for one, managed (*descurcat*).

I asked Lenuța to explain why she was so intent on sleeping on the bus and how she knew who was “cleaner” than others before sitting next to a particular individual. She explained that before moving to the city, she used to commute from a smaller town by train. The trips were longer and she had to wake up earlier to get to Săvinești on time, which had made the catching up on sleep a necessary habit. She also explained that, after moving to the city, people on the bus did not mind their own business, so it was her way to protect herself from participating in and being a subject of gossip. Sometimes she just pretended to sleep. Although Lenuța consciously worked to make herself look passively asleep, she also actively categorized people in various ways.

Active gossip or its passive observation was in many ways a form of evaluation and knowledge production in the sociality of “managing.” The potential of bodily odor was visible to her as she shuffled through the bus looking for a seat. She explained that people did not just smell but looked like they might smell. A starched and ironed shirt on a man signaled the care of a woman and possibly a good personal hygiene. For women, a well-tailored dress and coiffed hair indexed possible access to foreign bought perfume. The presence of such material qualities, as well as their absences, were grounds for interpreting a person’s social affiliations (Lemon 2000b). As such, in this process of evaluation, commuters assessed the criteria that made others eligible for future social exchange, the weight they placed on their own local reputation and the ways in which

they performed trustworthiness. At first she seemed to address the problem as a consequence of a larger socialist market problem rather than personal hygiene by clarifying that detergents were hard to come by in those days. However, as Lenuța explained, unlike other people she “managed,” bodily smell, or the ability to alter it, became indexical of a network of relations and resources through which one acquired goods that were not readily available. Selecting a seat next to a person who embodied a certain social network was to recognize an implicit bond—either your belonging to or aspirations to join an assumed network.

The meaning of the verb Lenuța used—*a se descurca*—depended greatly on the context and the social status one identified with. While for some *a se descurca* meant “to make do,” “get by,” or “make ends meet” (Kideckel 2006; Pesmen 2000) with as little as possible, for others, like Lenuța, it meant “to manage” and it was a triumph over various obstacles imposed by their reality. To be able to acquire detergents through an informal social network was to have control, at least to some extent, over one’s own material world (see also Ledeneva 1998 on blat-manageing and social relations and Sampson 1985; 1987 on the informal economy). Because “class position is generally indexed by the extent to which people have control over their material worlds” (Fehérváry 2013, 7), Piatra-Neamț society seems to have been highly stratified regardless of people’s professional position in the factory.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as individuals recounted their stories, they walked a fine line between placing responsibility with the state or individuals for one’s inability to exert control over her material world. While Lenuța did not attribute

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<sup>17</sup> See chapter 4 for a related discussion of social stratification and what happens when people who consider themselves as belonging to distinct classes, literally “get stuck” together in the contradictions and inadequacies of a transforming materiality.

someone's potential bodily odor to the lack of hygiene, particularly because detergent was hard to come by, she did address the person's inability to "manage."

Many Piatra-Neamț residents explained to me in various circumstances that one did not need to know someone personally in order to identify a certain network they were part of or to belong to the same web of acquaintances. Many times, the commute with its corresponding spaces for waiting—the bus stop, the circuit for money circulation for tickets, the bus<sup>18</sup>—was the perfect location for identifying these networks. The spatial configuration of buses helped in identifying the travelers' relationships with one another. Until the late nineties, each bus was staffed with a ticket clerk. Almost always a female, the clerk occupied a booth by the back door of the bus. Most of the times, travelers embarked on the bus through the back door, passing by the clerk to purchase a ticket or to get their monthly pass stamped. However, buses travelling to and from the factory were always significantly overcrowded as workers traveled hundreds at a time. They embarked the buses through all the doors and circulated money, tickets, or bus passes through the crowd to and from the ticket clerk. The provenance of money or destination of the ticket was very often marked by the worker's name and their spatial position in the bus: "[Pass this to] Miss Ionescu, in the front." Several workers explained this process to me as an informal roll call. Nobody could escape it and, as the buses were always crowded, it lasted almost the entire journey.

Workers could identify each other by name even if they had not met in person. People joked about the kinds of monetary bills one paid with or the means by which someone secured a seat on the bus instead of traveling standing up. Some commuters reserved seats for each other, others incorporated seat exchange into flirting, while some,

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<sup>18</sup> See Julia Elyachar's work on the political economy of movement and gesture (2011)

particularly married women with higher authority in the factory, “publicly shamed” younger men for not offering their seats: “Well, sure! Mr. Popescu lacks elementary education/civility!” (*Pai, da! domnul Popescu n-are cei sapte ani de-acasa!*)<sup>19</sup> These interactions allowed one to recognize existing relations between some of the individuals and the authority they could extend outside the factory. Some workers were neighbors and could be observed disembarking the bus at a particular stop, others were colleagues at a particular warehouse and walked together to and from the buses, others were involved romantically and their affections would be evident. Women workers I talked to claimed that they could identify which women used the same seamstress by the fabrics they wore and the length and tailoring of their skirts.

Even though people began to acquire personal cars, commuting was rarely a solitary endeavor. Friends crammed themselves into the small socialist vehicles and followed the same route to the factories as the buses. Very often, cars would slow down by the bus stops as colleagues waved at each other. It was a privilege to not only own a car but to be visibly associated with someone who did. Traveling by personal car offered the opportunity of partially escaping the waiting, but also became the subject of a particular kind of gossip, as people speculated about the secret conversations that happened in personal automobiles.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of one’s means of commuting, the buses and cars continued to be crucial settings for observing, establishing, maintaining and actualizing implicit social bonds. As the factory and city expanded, people made sense of their own migration to the city through the community they were building and becoming

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<sup>19</sup> Translated here as “elementary education/civility” the Romanian expression can also be translated as an individual lacking “the first seven years at home” referencing the age when most Romanian children enter the school system. By this time the child should have basic training in good manners and be familiar with expressions and behaviors indicating politeness.

<sup>20</sup> For more on socialist automobility see the work of Lewis Siegelbaum (2013)

a part of in such settings. Moreover, because buses were not exclusive to the Săvinești collective, workers could briefly interact with store clerks, urban planners, priests, etc. and often expanded their networks into the city.

### **The factory as private sphere**

As the decades passed, SIC coworkers became best friends, fishing partners, husbands and wives, children and neighbors. Some *implicit bonds* became explicit, tangible relations. Workers saw each other as more than just a community; they were a family encompassing all the intrigue, competition, love, drama, and grief that make up daily life of any family. Some marriages were born out of the Săvinești collective while others fell apart there. Workers competed for better jobs in the factory, but also for the affection of coworkers, various goods that circulated informally, getting on lists to acquire apartments and personal vehicles. Many times workers competed for the care and attention of parental figures they found in the factory. As Elizabeth Dunn observed in *Privatizing Poland* (2004), workers often regarded factory managers and supervisors as parental figures entrusted and expected with the care of their employees. While Dunn attributed this sociality to the shortage economy, in the case of Săvinești, these fictive kin relationships seem to have predated the years of scarcity (mainly the 1980s) and the industrialization project.



Figure 4 – The Săvinești Industrial Complex 1980s

One of the key parental figures at Săvinești was Mrs. Anuta who moved to Piatra-Neamț in 1960 with her husband, a machinist temporarily contracted by the factory. Initially, Mrs. Anuta worked as the director of the Social and Political Sciences Bureau (*Cabinetul de Stiinte Social Politice*), and people described her as the person they would go to when they needed a problem solved. Most of the cases she dealt with were housing and job related. Workers seemed to believe that she had the power to move people up and down the lists and that she was *fair*. People came to her with their stories, pouring details of their lives until she deemed them worthy or truly in need of what they were requesting. When I interviewed Anuta, she did not mention having had such an influential job before joining the factory collective. I found out the details of her position from people she had helped and also in an interview with her son. I asked him what he thought qualified his mother for this seemingly central position and he responded smiling: “She had a big mouth and knew how to get things done.” In fact, at the beginning of our interview, Anuta also told me she spoke loudly at times, but told me it was a habit from working in the noisy factory for so long: “I can hear just fine but people needed to hear me.”

Anuta finished a technical school and took a shift supervisor job at the factory, which, to many, might have seemed like a step down from her initial position. She worked at Săvinești for twenty years before she retired.<sup>21</sup> In our conversations, Anuta focused on her work at the factory. She was a WWII refugee from what was now southern Ukraine. Her family was split by the war and she was forced to move around from one relative to another. For her, feeling connected to a family and having an education were the “ultimate gifts from life” and that is what made the Săvinești position more valuable to her. She took immense pride in being able to finish technical school in her forties. Anuta talked about “her girls,” the young workers she supervised in the plant, as in need of her guidance and protection. She taught them about life, relationships, parenting, hygiene and women’s health, because she believed “it was easy for a young girl to take the wrong path without any motherly guidance.”

Because of her connections and her previous positions, people also feared her in the factory. Her best friend, Viorica, told me that “she had this way of walking tall and proud. She felt that she had gotten much farther than her destiny intended and she wanted others to do that too with a certain integrity.” She always paid attention to people’s behavior and circulating rumors and she kept “her girls” away from love affairs with married coworkers. Many times she approached married colleagues and “explained to them how she saw the situation.” She smiled to me and paused. She expected me to know what she meant, but I asked her to clarify:

“I never had to say more than that. You allowed people to imagine the worst without threatening them in any way. That [threatening someone] could get you into serious trouble. But there was an interesting mix of fear and respect that people had for well-connected individuals and by that time, I had learned how to

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<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, Anuta passed away two weeks after we recorded her life story and I never got a chance to have a follow up conversation with her about her previous position.

use that. Nobody really taught me but I was always good at stealing one's trade [*furat meseria*]. I never had to go to someone's wife or to get a promotion postponed but I'm sure people thought I was capable of it."

In other words, it was crucial for someone to be recognized by others as connected to a large and powerful network, and it was important for this identity to be performed with confidence. *Implicit bonds* needed to be seen. Workers walked a fine line between portraying themselves as "in need" or as "having too much." The idea of "managing" allowed for the fluidity between these social statuses. In fact, "managing" seemed crucial for the formation and endurance of the social relations built in and around Săvinești: to manage through one's social network, a person had to perform both particular needs and assets. However, having too much was seen as dangerous to the entire potential network, because it was likely to attract attention from the secret police.

Workers often talked about the factory as "fenced in and policed" (*ingradit si pazit*) space, although, they insisted they were not seeking "pity" or "compassion" in telling me this. They were proud of the various ways in which they "tricked" the system to escape the factory walls or to extend their personal lives in the work place. In fact, workers performed pride in various ways, as they talked about their childhood, the way they had come to work at Săvinești, as well as the intricate ways in which they managed in the decades of factory work. This seemed particularly intriguing as most of my interviewees initially claimed they did not have much to share about Săvinești. They did not see themselves as crucial actors in the factory and always encouraged me to talk to former directors or managers who might know more about the topic. Săvinești workers had little sense of being a part of an industrial labor force because they saw themselves in



a constant process of training with little to no expertise.<sup>22</sup> This struck me as particularly distinct from other cases in the socialist bloc. In *Magnetic Mountain*, Kotkin (1995) shows that workers internalized distinctions based on work efficiency quite rapidly. Even though I began all interviews asking workers to tell me about their experience at Săvinești, they approached the question differently depending on their position within the factory. While engineers and higher administrative officials talked briefly about the factory in terms of work, most of my interviewees saw the factory as an extension of their personal life.

In an interview with Maria she explained: “My husband left me for one of his interns at Săvinești, I met my second husband there; my stepsister worked in the same warehouse as him and thought he would be perfect for me. Our first encounters/dates (*intalniri*) were at the factory.” Workers rarely talked about domestic or down time as completely separated from their factory work. What they cooked, when and where they took a leisurely walk, who they dated, was very often linked to Săvinești relationships and spaces. Private life happened at work: sneaking into empty offices to consummate new found love, taking long walks around the plant, going for rides in various factory vehicles. Planning house chores also happened between the factory walls: Adriana explains:

I would come to work and tell my husband what I did, cooked, cleaned and what else needed to be done when he would leave work. He would do the same when he arrived at work the next day. We barely ever saw each other at home. Our son has known from an early age to wait for one of us to get home after the other one left.

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<sup>22</sup> This was not unique to the socialist factory environment but could be attributed to rapid industrialization and economic transformation transcending historical and political boundaries of East-West. For the miners of Carmaux in Trempe’s study, for example, “at least forty years were required for the hired cultivators to become miners professionally, workers socially, and politically, challengers of the socio-economic system in which they were integrated” (Trempe 1971 cited in Berlanstein 1981).

The material design and organization of the factory also facilitated this: production processes were split among hundreds of buildings each with its own distinct role. Workers moved constantly, shuffling between chemical labs, administrative offices, cafeterias, greenhouses, production warehouses within the factory complex. If a problem surfaced with the production of a particular thread, a machinist would be called from a different section; he would call the parts manufacturing workshop and place an order, stop by administrative offices to handle necessary paperwork, and walk to the workshop for order pickup. He could cut through the chemical research building to consult with scientists on a new idea that could potentially increase quality and production quotas. Arriving in the middle of conversations between workers, he would hear about people seeking promotions or women pursuing suitable husbands, and he would offer advice about a person to contact or altering the length of a skirt (for similar stories see Munteanu 1979). By constantly socializing and providing skills and opinions, the mechanic ensured others would continue the conversation for him, from administrators who would reward him for hard work and innovation, to female friends who would consider him an appropriate suitor.

The factory's remote location, coupled with the social structure of the community, enabled people to view time in unique ways. Nina, a lab technician at the factory, recalled: "You would get someone to sign you in so while you were *at work* you could take care of things in town. The days you were on first or second shift (day shifts), it was hard to find certain foods after work so you took care of things the best you could (*rezolvai situatia cum puteai mai bine*).” From Nina's point of view, time could be more viscous: it could involve multiple tasks/events and allow for people to be in two places at

the same time.<sup>23</sup> One's social network could manipulate time in such a way that space and physical presence became irrelevant. When missing work was not an option, people would exchange items and services with coworkers to meet each other's needs. In a sense, one's social bonds carved out "efficient time"—they allowed members to go about daily life when work schedules made it impossible to do so.

Implicit bonds worked as unique entanglements of social, cultural, and symbolic forms of capital (Bourdieu 2011). While many of such bonds became explicit kinship ties, others were actualized periodically depending on one's needs and accumulated capital necessary for a particular conversion. Capital value shifted often as people made sense of their new everyday lives. Some workers told me it was not uncommon, at first, to avoid conversations about their own rural background and limited communications with their rural families. They told me how ashamed they were of where they had come from and the lack of education among their family members. Some believed that strong associations with their families could prevent them from climbing the hierarchy in the factories, from being considered a "worthy and fully capable worker," as one former worker explained.

However, as the quality of state-provided foods dropped, and because working in shifts at the factory made it impossible sometimes to acquire produce and dairy at the store, the factory network extended into the rural areas adjacent to the city. As a result, a worker's rural background afforded her more capital than initially anticipated. What followed was a kind of restructuring of rural social relations, where money and products from the factory (thread, bags, utensils etc.) came into the villages via factory workers and food made its way back to the town via informal barter networks. Establishing social

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<sup>23</sup> See also Ingold's (1995) work on time and task in the case of British engine operators.

bonds that extended to the rural areas allowed workers to escape long lines in front of the state-owned grocery stores and secured a healthy diet for their family. As many former workers told me, it had become a luxury rather than something to be ashamed of.

However, in order not to raise suspicion, people still needed to perform according to expectations, and many workers told me they still stood in lines, but on their own terms, and not being particularly worried about the supply being exhausted.

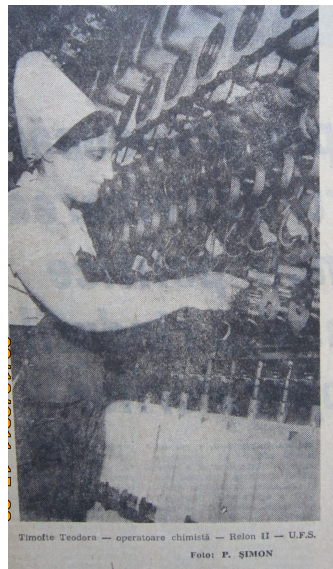


Figure 5 – Teodora Timofte, chemical operator at Relon II, Săvinești Industrial Complex

The social bonds people wove at the factory were also not created equal. The strength of each bond, as well as the direction in which the network's webs extended, depended on numerous factors: which company within the factory you worked for, which shifts, the position you occupied, your official commitment to the socialist party, etc.

Maria worked in the administrative offices at the factory and when she recommended I talk to her sister who had worked in the actual plant, I asked her how their lives compared:

My sister worked many years at the factory; she retired from there. Her experience wasn't very different from mine; she could take vacation, it wasn't a problem but she also worked in shifts because she was a technical professional, you know? She worked right in the plant. I never had to work in shifts because there was nothing to do in the office [at night]. She still has a friend from there; they are both retired but kept the same relation. They are like sisters and worked together since 74-75. They [the Săvinești plant workers] are very close in general and they all attend the funerals of their colleagues.

These differences translated into distinctive kinds of social ties and many workers expressed their jealousy of those in administration or working in different companies within the factory complex. While Maria's sister gained a family that extended all across the city with numerous benefits at the time, Maria's administrative position allowed her to easily translate her skills and acquire a new position in the city. No longer having to commute, she could take advantage of things that most Săvinești workers could not: enjoying family meals, walking her children to school, shopping at her own convenience. When I interviewed Maria in 2011, I could not help noticing the stark difference between the comfort of her home and the rest of the workers I had interviewed. Her apartment had been remodeled several times in its entirety, her furniture was custom made, and the front and interior doors had been replaced (the room doors matched). In contrast, most other former workers still owned furniture produced during socialism and tackled remodeling projects piece by piece. Some had replaced their front door and only the interior ones visible to guests (kitchen, living room and not bedrooms). Others had replaced their interior doors in separate projects and talked about no longer being able to purchase matching ones. Despite this stark difference, when Maria talked about her life at Săvinești, she expressed a strong desire for the kinds of social bonds plant workers had forged among themselves and around the city. For her, these bonds always pointed to "the future" and enabled possibility. Describing Săvinești sociality in kinship terms

pointed to the capacity of such bonds to outlive the original members of the network—the workers—through their children and Piatra-Neamț community at large.

As workers saw their networks extending beyond the commute and the factory, they began to assign great value to relationships that transcended borders that were impossible for them to physically cross: international borders. German engineers and architects trained the first wave of machinists and urban planners. Scientists at the factory navigated an international community of scholars through their work. However, the possibility of such bonds was unimaginable for the average factory worker until 1973, when RIFIL, a new kind of factory, opened at Săvinești. RIFIL was the product of a Romanian-Italian partnership and became the first foreign capital company in Romania since 1945. Using fibers manufactured by Melana (also at Săvinești), RIFIL produced colored synthetic wool thread that was meant exclusively for export.



Figure 6 – RIFIL spinning machines (Presentation brochures were written in Romanian, Italian, and English)

While RIFIL and Săvinești workers initially commuted together, “working for RIFIL was completely different,” explained a former RIFIL spinning technician. “Our supervisors had western expectations, we worked western hours, and we all had vacation together in August.” Most Săvinești workers I talked to complained about working three

shifts, but only RIFIL workers spoke about the workload and the long hours. At RIFIL, workers claimed there was no time for leisure because “production quotas were taken seriously.” However, people talked about being able to learn basic Italian from their supervisors and some talked about having access to goods smuggled by the company’s truck drivers from Italy. As we will see in chapter six, those who worked for RIFIL used their social network and linguistic skills to find work in Italy after the collapse of the communist regime. As in contemporary attempts to justify Romania’s place in Europe, Săvinești workers seemed to have looked for recognition from western players as well. Workers compared practices between Romanian companies and RIFIL and measured their success against what they regarded as an already advanced industrial system. This shows that Săvinești workers understood themselves as part of a larger transnational Europe despite obstacles imposed by the regime and long before discourses of Romania’s European Union accession. Moreover, the structure through which Săvinești workers understood social bonds enabled the development of tensions and hierarchies between RIFIL and the rest of Săvinești workers. As the next section will show, the materiality of the city enabled further distinction making within the worker collective. Once differences were established, they were articulated and strengthened within the Săvinești factory framework.

### **The city as factory extended**

*The Săvinești industrial platform instilled a new rhythm in the lives of the locals, who remember today, without regret, their arcadian dwellings on these lands, fairly churlish in fruition. They changed their old livelihoods, beliefs, education and trade, moving away from their austere occupation of log driving on the*

*Bistrita [river] towards the fine craft of chemical plant operations.*<sup>24</sup> (Botez et al. 1975, 203)

Factory workers rarely talked about people they knew without grounding them somehow in the Piatra-Neamț landscape. From the buses, factory warehouses, to the rapidly transformed city, each location represented knots and patterns in their new social fabric. While the swift industrialization project enabled these social bonds, the transformation itself was rendered manageable through the network. And nowhere was the network more visible to its members than the city itself, where the reproduction of labor power was meant to take place (Althusser 2009). People categorized each other in relation to a “home,” particularly because so many workers did not have a permanent place upon their arrival to Săvinești. It was also in our conversations about the city that workers articulated ethnic difference for the first time. Some Jewish families were rumored to have moved to Israel and abandoned their homes. By extension workers talked about them as having abandoned the progress that the industrial project represented. A couple of workers talked about the Roma as having occupied abandoned houses meant for demolition, which slowed down urban development, but they could not offer further details about where these Roma families came from. However, what became clear was that contemporary Piatra-Neamț residents understood that Roma families have been relocated several times in the name of urban development and transformation.

As factory workers acquired their own apartments, they differentiated between those who paid rent and those who made payments towards owning their apartments, as well as the time it took for them to acquire the apartment. The size of the home as well as

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<sup>24</sup> *Platforma industrială Săvinești a insuflat un ritm nou în viața localnicilor, care își aduc astăzi aminte fără regret de locuințele lor patriarhale de pe aceste pamanturi, destul de zgărcite în roade. Ei și-au schimbat felul de viață, concepțiile, educația și profesia, de la aspra meserie a plutăritului pe Bistrita, la meseria fină de operator chimist.*



the location were meaningful in identifying the position one occupied in the local social structure. I was first introduced to the socialist transformation of Piatra-Neamț (1950-1990) in a conversation with Andrei, a small entrepreneur in Piatra-Neamț. When I asked him about current events in Piatra-Neamț, and the Roma minority's relocation to *Speranța*, I felt forced into a time-machine as he grabbed a piece of paper and began to draw (Figure 7). He started with the Cuiejdi River and the perpendicular street where the Unic supermarket<sup>25</sup> still stands, to offer me some reference points. He drew a little house on one side of the river and a couple of rectangles on the other side and began to number them "block 7, 8, 9, 10." He told me that as children, him and his friends would throw rocks across the river at the Roma kids. "We called that the *Cote d'Azur* because everyone was always naked and sunbathing as if they were at the beach...on vacation," Andrei said.

"After that, they opened a gas station there, the Roma were moved out and the *duplex blocks* were built [in the 1970s]." As he talked about the gas station and the new apartment buildings, he drew them behind the little house that had initially marked the *Cote d'Azur*. "But maybe I should start from the beginning", Andrei told me, and he proceeded with his story about the Piatra-Neamț he remembered from his childhood when his parents moved to work for the factory in the late 1950s.

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<sup>25</sup> UNIC supermarkets, translated as unique, existed in every major city in socialist Romania. They usually occupied the spaces of previous production cooperatives.

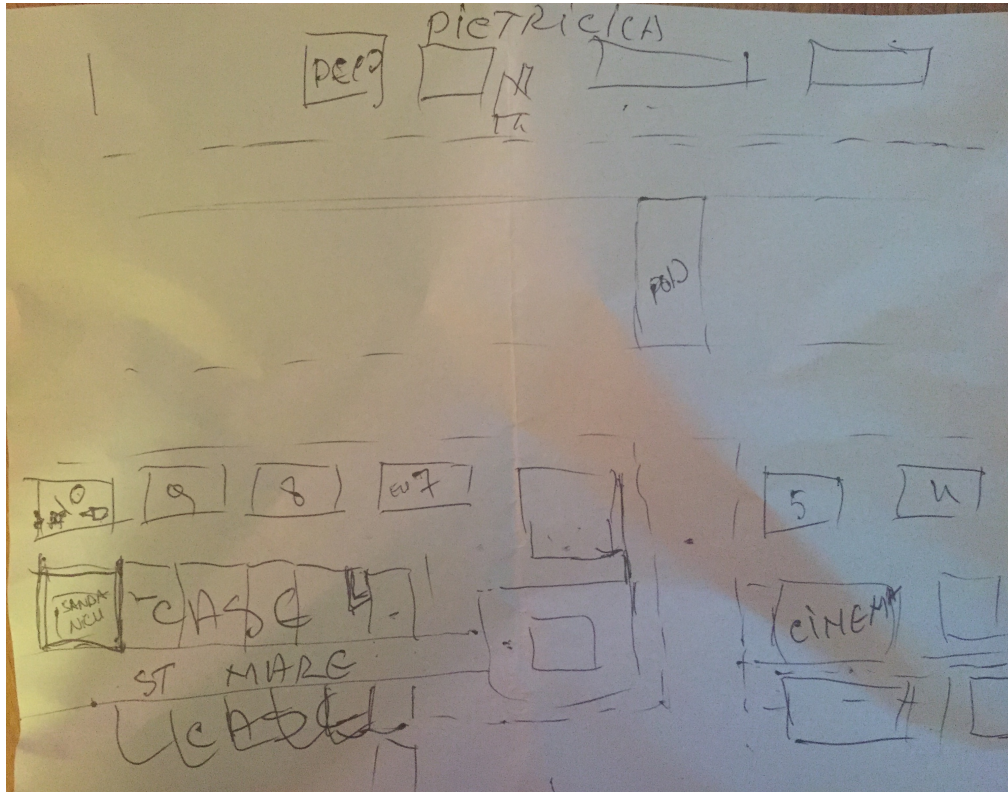


Figure 7 – Map produced by interviewee

Andrei did not label many things and I refrained from asking him to do so as I found his choices particularly interesting. He marked the natural landscape at the top to signal the location of the Pietricica Mountain. He labeled pieces of important infrastructure that were added after his childhood clashes across the Cuiejdi River: the word PECO marked the gas station that replaced the demolished houses and the word POD (Bridge) pointed to the fact that what used to be *Cote D'Azur* was now connected to the city center, and by extension, its people. He labeled the apartment building he used to live in with the word EU (me) next to the number seven and pointed several times to block ten where many of his friends used to live. The Pietricica Cinema also figured as an important landmark as well as the old main street (ST. MARE) along which he drew several row houses. One of them stood out as he labeled it with the names of his two childhood best friends.

According to Andrei, it was the last house standing before the demolitions were complete and the new apartment buildings were erected. But what Andrei's map masks is that his story was about people; with each marked spatial alteration, he recounted people's shifts, his relationship to them, their professional trajectory and place in the local web of acquaintances.

The first apartment buildings in town were designed and equipped with the temporary worker in mind. *Blocurile germane*, or the German blocks were the first ones built in Piatra-Neamț and the commune of Săvinești in relation to the SIC (See also Christina Schwenkel's work (2012; 2013) on German built blocks in Vietnam). Because the factory was initially planned and assembled through a partnership with East German engineers, these "German blocks" were built by and for the temporary German workers and for the first wave of Romanian migrant workers to be trained by the Germans. During WWII, Andrei's father worked as a mechanical engineer for an enterprise that built plans and war machinery. In the 1950s, the enterprise, based in Bucharest, repurposed their engineers in the service of the socialist industrialization project and dispatched them to build new assembly lines all over Romania. These were temporary jobs and one never knew how long an assignment would last as new warehouses and factories were added to each industrial complex. However, the German partnership had a serious effect on Andrei's family. They never moved from Piatra-Neamț as his father noticed the social status he had gained in the factory community. He also made extra money as the factory managers competed in the industrial transformation. One company bought a new machine from an international expo and called Andrei's father to take it apart and reassemble it without any written plans or instructions. Speaking German also became a highly valued

skill and Andrei had to learn it from an early age. When RIFIL opened, he also learned Italian. His linguistic skills and the social network his father had built became crucial in the 1980s when Andrei started smuggling goods from abroad and needed to exchange foreign currency. He masked his business by volunteering as a tour guide for German and Italian tourists, some of whom joined his circle of exchange. Because of this informal commerce experience, Andrei became one of the first private business owners in town after 1989.

The town's main street, *Strada Mare*, was lined with mostly Jewish, merchant houses that served both as small businesses and shops as well as the owners' residences (Figure 8). Some Jewish residents were rumored to have gone on a visit to Israel in the 1960s and not allowed reentry into Romania.<sup>26</sup> Their houses were considered "abandoned," appropriated by the state, and subsequently demolished. Other houses were deemed unsafe after the surrounding houses were taken down. Because adjacent houses shared a support wall, the houses left freestanding were in danger of collapsing. As the old houses gradually came down, multi-family, socialist-modernist apartment buildings began to redefine the town's architectural landscape (See Chelcea (2004) for historical background on home nationalization in Romania).

Others were convinced to sell their property to the state in exchange for a place in the *Prestarea*<sup>27</sup> Cooperative and an apartment in an area of their choice. While the coop was owned and administrated by its members (as opposed to state-owned enterprises), it depended on factory production and was entangled in its social webs. Nelu agreed to join

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<sup>26</sup> Documents from Israeli archives and the Securitate archive confirm that many Piatra-Neamț Jewish families asked to immigrate to Israel and their cases were subject to negotiation depending on how valuable they were considered to the socialist project.

<sup>27</sup> This translates literally to provision.

the coop in the 1970s when his house was scheduled for demolition and he moved his family into an apartment. He specialized in packing supplies, boxes, and envelopes. He made intricate and vibrantly colored storage boxes for furs and hats as well as packaging for objects to be shipped. He told me that joining the coop was not really a choice, as his business would not have survived much longer if he refused the Party's offer. Moreover, he regarded his coop membership as better than working for the state, because it offered a certain degree of control and independence. However, as state-owned cooperatives also emerged, Nelu had to rely on the people he knew at Săvinești, or hire people within the network, to secure enough work for his workshop. Nelu explained:

You did not hire people who knew how to do the job. The trade could be learned as long as we had orders. I hired my daughter's friend whose parents both worked in management positions at the factory—he was always in my workshop after my daughter's skirt anyway. After that, I hired a neighbor whose wife was a spinning supervisor at RIFIL and he secured orders meant for export and so on.

As such, children's play and flirting, as well as the mere proximity of a neighbor, could be translated into business success (Bourdieu 1977) through the bonds one established implicitly with the Săvinești collective.



Figure 8 – View of the single's dormitories before the demolitions on Strada Mare and the reconstruction of the city center.

Piatra-Neamț apartments were built and owned by the socialist state and were distributed for occupation through varying processes. These processes, as well as a building's location, technological attachments, such as elevators and *centrala* (heating plant), and apartment spatial arrangements (*decomandat* vs. *nedecomandat*), stratified the local population.<sup>28</sup> People assumed that *securitate* informants lived in the center of town, that workers who occupied managerial or administrative positions lived in buildings with elevators, and that people with connections could pick a lower level apartment in buildings that were not equipped with elevators. Those who lived on the upper floors complained about water pressure and the fact that even when the water did make it to their floor, it was almost never hot.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 9 – View of the Ceahlau Hotel (single's dormitories in the back) from the Stefan cel Mare Park in the center

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<sup>28</sup> See Collier (2011) for a discussion on the ways in which institutions, infrastructure and practices articulate small planned cities.

<sup>29</sup> See also Nikhil Anand's (2011) work on water pressure and social stratification in India.

Similarly, access to heating during winter depended on the proximity to the heating plant. In most neighborhoods, a heating plant serviced 10-12 buildings in the surrounding area. In some cases the plant was attached to one of the apartment buildings, which shared a wall with the plant horn. These apartments were considered prime real estate. Emilia B. was lucky to have been a previous owner of such an apartment. She told me that her bedroom would get so hot that, at times, it was insufferable. They occasionally opened the windows in the middle of winter to bring the temperature down. She lived in entrance A of the apartment building on the sixth floor. She remembered how hard it was for those who lived four entrances away and on the top floors. "Heat never made it there. Our other rooms were almost always freezing because the heating elements were barely warm...you can imagine how cold the other apartments must have been, especially on the other side of the building." When she sold her apartment in the early 2000s, people had not all switched to personal heating units and the proximity to the central heating plant was still a desirable feature that added real estate value. Emilia explained that this value made up for the poor location in the marginal Darmanesti neighborhood and its reputation. "Gypsies lived right behind our building. In the four-story apartment buildings. They destroyed everything there."

However, the location seemed tremendously convenient: it was steps away from a medical clinic, a daycare, and a kindergarten. It was also a couple of minutes walk away from a school, farmers market, and a major end of line bus stop serviced by the factory commuter buses. The Orion commercial complex was also a ten minute walk away. The only aspect of the neighborhood that rendered it unfavorable was the presence and stark visibility of the Roma minority who were relocated there from what Nelu called the *Cote*

*D'Azur*. If keeping the Roma away from the city center was a goal, the Darmanesti neighborhood was the perfect place to relocate them. Located on a small hill, the ten minute walk into Darmanesti from Orion commercial center was quite a challenge: one could pass through a cluster of apartment blocks and climb a set of stairs through a small forested area, or circle the part of the neighborhood all together. This latter option almost doubled the time it took to Emilia's former apartment and one still had to walk uphill for quite some time.

Piatra-Neamț residents acquired their apartments in various ways. Some flats were allocated to local enterprises or sections of factories. Thus, workers employed by these institutions were assigned a particular unit depending on the size of their family and in exchange for a monthly rent. The application process was intricate and one's place in the social network often, if not always, trumped the order in which apartments were to be allocated. As new buildings were constructed, waitlists for these newer apartments grew longer. Other institutions offered their employees an opportunity to buy an apartment in buildings that were still only in planning stages. These future tenants would begin paying their apartments years before being able to move into their home but the bulk of the construction costs would be subsidized by the state. Regardless of their future homeowner status and the illusion of having a choice about what they invested in, the socialist state still tried to impose a limit on the space each person was allowed to occupy and call home. In theory, larger families received larger apartments.

However, the size of the family was fluid and open to manipulation (Chelcea 2004). When I interviewed Maria in October 2011, she remembered how she acquired a flat in comparison to her sister. When I met Maria, both her and her sister lived in



*Maratei*, which was a convenient location for those working at Săvinești, being one of the neighborhoods closest to the industrial complex.

The city hall handled the distribution of apartments for *fondul locativ*. At least that was true for Săvinești. When I was hired, the city hall distributed existing apartments to enterprises and I know that at least in this building, in this entrance, both my fourth floor neighbor and I received apartments because we were work colleagues. It was a good thing. My sister, who worked at the factory, could not get an apartment because there were too many requests there. She built one at the H blocks because you could do so in monthly payments. They took out a loan, registered for an apartment, she got one at the H-block next to Ciresica but she paid for it. Thus, she was not a renter, but a homeowner and this meant a lot more money. On the other hand I was paying rent and it was manageable. It was not hard...I was paying 220 lei, I believe and the monthly salary was around 3500. At least that's what I made when I left. I got hired for 2000 lei a month. When my sister saw that they were giving me an apartment...the law did not allow you to have a lot of space and you had to justify the space with the number of family members so we took in my parents on paper to get the numbers and we got this apartment. My sister was saying: "Oh, it's too big. Look at me struggling because we do not get apartments...unless you know the right people." We did not have both children then and that is why we took the parents in.

Maria's parents became legal residents of both Buhusi, their home-town, and Piatra-Neamț in the late 1970s. The family boundaries became elastic and people multiplied as they legally appeared on paperwork in several spaces. Retired parents served as convenient child-care as well as place-holders for future children in a "large enough" apartment. One of the largest social transformations in Piatra-Neamț was the complete recalibration of these roles after the local industry collapsed (see chapter 6).

*Blocurile de nefamilisti* or the singles' dormitories and the two tower apartment buildings were built soon after the German blocks. They were meant for young single engineers and chemists recruited by the SIC before their college graduation. These particular buildings were partitioned into small studios with shared bathrooms and no balconies. They fostered socialization similar to university dormitories (Humphrey 2005), as one of my interviewees explained: "It forced you to interact with your neighbors even

in the most uncomfortable situations.” Professional and economic success was indexed by moving out of these apartments. Applying for and acquiring a larger apartment implied the skillful navigation of series of networks performing layers of an idea of a model citizen: family oriented, aligned with the Party’s political mission, dedicated to the industrial progress, etc. Thus, the home was not seen as separate from the work or the state. Work performance, public perception most often gauged through gossip and the way in which one made herself available to serve others, directly impacted whether one’s request form actually left the factory administrative offices for processing at city hall. The dynamics of this process were beautifully captured in Constantin Munteanu’s novel *Ziua Magnoliilor Viscolite*. Largely biographical and controversially received in 1979 by the local community, the novel is an account of daily life in a socialist factory town. Similar to his protagonist, Munteanu was an engineer at Săvinești and a literary and screenplay writer.

Many buildings looked the same, most apartments were compartmentalized in a similar fashion, the furniture was most of the times the same as many of your neighbors’, the tiles in the kitchens and bathrooms were often pre-installed and identical. The balconies, where people hung their laundry to dry, was the display of proper homemaking, as all laundry had a particular way in which it had to be hung: sheets and towels out to the street, clothes that were worn in public were next, and as the clothes lines approached the home, the most intimate garments could be hidden from public sight (see also Drazin 2001). Many buildings were equipped with a designated common room for drying clothes, but they were rapidly repurposed as storage areas since people rarely actually used them to dry their clothes. In one instance, a group of men turned the drying

room into a meeting place for their game club. They met regularly and played backgammon and chess so they “wouldn’t annoy the wives anymore.”

As we have seen, workers built friendships while commuting, flirted, planned vacations together, and gossiped. They also learned where to get the best meat or where to find certain scarce products, they exchanged recipes and information about the best tailor or shoe cobbler<sup>30</sup> in town, all during the forty-five minute commute to and from Săvinești. Similar interactions happened while waiting in line at the grocery stores. While the neighborhood grocery stores attracted a closer network of neighbors, the bus interactions happened among workers from all corners of the town. Between the two “waiting” locations, Piatra-Neamț residents extended their social networks to factory workers outside their neighborhoods as well as neighbors who worked outside the factory. Actively gathering information about those around you was seen as a common and necessary practice and a central component of “managing” or “getting by.” One engineer told me that having background information about an administrator’s extra-marital affairs helped him accelerate an order he needed to increase production in one of the warehouses he was responsible for. A female worker chose her seamstress after she overheard that the wife of an official responsible for processing apartment requests also went there.

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<sup>30</sup> These shoe cobblers and dressmakers were mainly independent. Some lived on disability pensions and supplemented their income by making goods and distributing them through the second economy. Others had day jobs and manufactured things for friends in their spare time. Their work was crucial to maintaining and performing a certain degree of individuality as goods available in stores lacked diversification, color, and originality.

One's ability to manage was also directly linked with standing in line at the store. For some<sup>31</sup> it was a necessary performance so people would not suspect they had everything they needed. Every detail about the line was interpreted in relation to what one had in the fridge: when one got in line, how long s/he waited, did they have someone save their place, did s/he leave a chair in line while running other errands, etc. At the same time, one's continuous presence in lines and signs of perpetual struggle indexed their inability to "manage." When Lenuța told me she "managed," she also made it clear that, for her, standing in line was not the norm:

I also stood in line at times but I can't say I didn't have what I needed. Everyone complained that they didn't have "They didn't have!" but you barely had any space in the fridge to put more. There was this worry, that's my opinion; a stress that you always have to find food. You couldn't display what you had because the person next to you didn't and you couldn't help him. There were too many to help and you couldn't ... but everyone had food.

As spatial reconstruction was dictated by the socialist state, it was also expected that new socialist persons would emerge from the interaction with the new industrial and urban materiality (Lemon 2000b; Fehérváry 2013; Lebow 2013). The transition to socialism required social means and it was not necessary that any apparent socialist action would create the kinds of envisioned socialist persons. This required understanding socialism as:

a totally novel culture, with a new dominant philosophy, a new concept of reality and of human potentialities, new ways of incorporating the individual biography into societal history, and new patterns of interhuman relations, rather than as a mere institutional change in the titles of ownership or a reshuffling of the ruling garrison. (Z. Bauman 1976, 75)

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<sup>31</sup> It is hard to assess how many people "managed" better than others as everyone I talked to remembers the lines, people's stories of hardship but also their own personal triumphs, even if they needed to be masked in certain performances such as standing in line.

It is the particularities of one such culture this chapter has unravelled while navigating old practices, tangled histories, novel spaces, and recalibrated social exchanges, as they were made into raw materials for a new social fabric. Understanding these complexities historically is key to analyzing the way in which unmaking socialism has manifested in Piatra-Neamț and similar urban centers in the decades that followed the regime's collapse.

## **Conclusion**

In 1993 the Săvinești textile complex began to shut down its factories. Many warehouses were auctioned away, thousands of people were laid off, thousands more were forced to retire and life for Piatra Neamț inhabitants was completely transformed. As this chapter has shown, Săvinești was not just a textile factory; it constituted a way of life, it provided the time and space where specific ties among employees could be created, sustained, and extended beyond unimaginable borders; it was a place where lines between public and private life were blurred, if not erased. As mentioned above, the factory's location, the need to juggle between shifts, the structure of the collective, as well as the various life conditions imposed by the socialist state, enabled the creation of a unique sociality characterized by webs of implicit bonds waiting for their actualization.

It was not the fall of communism in 1989 but the closing down of Săvinești in the 1990s that transformed life in Piatra Neamț. Searching for new jobs, new ways to pass time, readjusting to retiree life, required the Săvinești network to be activated for new purposes and in new ways. Recalling particular events and linking every aspect of life to Săvinești was not a form of nostalgia for the past, but an effective way to connect with

people in order to make present interactions meaningful: patched up bits of time persuaded people into hiring someone, helping with a credit application, recommending a cheaper plumber, providing various discounts, etc.

While transformations in the material reality and landscape “destabilize the conditions through which societies reproduce themselves” (Kirsch 2001, 244), it is crucial to take into consideration people’s experience of the surrounding materiality in addition to the “social processes” they contribute to and rebuild out of interacting with landscapes under transformation. Rather than conceptualizing “new modes of being-in-place,” Săvinești workers reproduced and reconfigured old modes of being in a new place (Fitzpatrick 1999). Similar to Dunn’s project of illuminating larger questions about the transformation of state-socialist societies by looking at Alima-Gerber experiences, (Dunn 2004, 5) my project seeks to shed light on the realities of a factory collective whose members have lost track of the waves of rapid transformation they are expected to undergo.

As the formation of new persons was being mediated by and through socialist spaces under construction, people developed ways to work with or push against the limitations of the surrounding spatiality, to interact with the state, to negotiate public and private life, to stretch, compress, and divide time in creative ways. However, the socialist state was not the sole force in shaping people’s lives. The dynamics of factory life (Burawoy 1985), similar to those across the Iron Curtain, as well as various rural sociality models (Lampland 1991; 1995) people imported into their new locality, had an equally crucial role in shaping community among Săvinești workers. In my conversations with former factory workers, they very often expressed their reservations in giving credit to

the socialist state for the innovative ways in which they wove their local networks and daily routines. As will become apparent in chapter two, the implicit bonds and unique sociality forged out of these interactions became a source of both political tension and creative coping with the faults of a new political system and economic reality after the local industrial collapse in the late 1990s.



Figure 10 – Piatra-Neamț view with the Săvinești Industrial Complex ruins in the background 2013 (photo credit Adrian Alazaroaei)

## CHAPTER 2 – PATTERNS OF SOCIALITY AND EXCHANGE: COPING WITH RECURRING INSTANCES OF TRANSFORMATION

*Same Maria, different hat!*  
-Romanian proverb

### **Introduction**

At the beginning of 2015 Piatra-Neamț mayor, Gheorghe Stefan, fell under investigation for corruption, abuse of power, and money laundering. He was incarcerated for several months during which several debates emerged among the Piatra-Neamț locals. While those who questioned mayor Stefan's character pointed to previous investigations he had been the subject of, those defending him never attempted to dismiss or discredit the claims brought against him. Instead, this latter group focused on Stefan's accomplishments during his twelve years in office. They also seemed extremely surprised that the mayor could be reprimanded for things that for decades, have been considered fair play in Romanian politics and everyday life. At the time of my fieldwork in Piatra-Neamț, people still grappled with the concept of corruption and what it entailed, especially in relation to their own social practices. In most cases, whether or not a behavior was qualified as corrupt was not just about scale or degree but weighed against what people could visibly discern as positive change. In other words, as long as the exchange of payments, formal and informal, and services were deemed acceptable, they



were justified and understood to function outside new legal regulations and definitions of corruption.

As evidenced by the previous chapter, the SIC was not just a factory; it constituted an intricate web of actualized and potential bonds that extended into and was further defined by the socialist city. Following the discussion of the Săvinești-centered lifestyle, this chapter analyzes the way in which *implicit bonds*, social relations, friendships, *fictive* and religious kinship ties, have been employed and extended to new practices as the political and economic environment shifted from the socialist regime, and particularly after the factory began to close down in the late 90s. Here, I discuss how Piatra-Neamț residents have incorporated and adapted existing local social practices into new realities: i.e. banking practices, transformations in public transportation, business opportunities, forming temporary relationships with strangers etc (see also Ledeneva 1998; Rivkin-Fish 2005).

Secondly, I aim to convey that Piatra-Neamț dwellers, faced with the new economic and political realities, have recreated an environment of gossip through which information circulates and the community is policed similarly to the Săvinești era. I argue that people see this as participation into the new system rather than evidence for their inability to escape socialist roots. Moreover, Piatra-Neamț experience shows that the preexisting sociality created formal (rather than informal) avenues for post socialist transformation by offering alternatives when faced with inflation and financial troubles and enabling possibilities for successful private businesses. As we will see, this positive effect has led to overall confusion about definitions of and ideas about “corruption.”

## Explaining and reproducing webs of sociality

*We're not going to go to Ion empty handed.  
It's not nice. It's not human. Maybe the lad needs inspiration.  
-from the film (Plictis) si Inspiratie*

“All politicians are the same; they all steal. At least [mayor] Stefan did something for the city. Show me another town in Romania that has changed in such obvious ways!” a retired factory worker urged me. Piatra-Neamț developed visibly under Gheorghe Stefan’s mayorship. Every time I returned to the city, change was obvious in the streetlights, traffic control, the colors of the apartment buildings, the restoration of historical sites and monuments, etc. As we will see in future chapters, local urban transformation was at times so drastic and rapid that people found it hard to navigate their own hometown. Color, particularly orange, was ubiquitous as one walked through the city: the stadium, the public waste bins on the street, the cable carts that ascend to the new ski slope, the ANL apartment buildings.<sup>32</sup> Color did not indicate just progress but the political affiliation of that progress, and in Stefan’s case the color of the Democrat Liberal Party (Partidul Democrat Liberal-PDL). In 2012 the public orange waste bins (*europubele*) in Piatra-Neamț were replaced with green ones (see figure 11) and called by a reporter an “electoral friend” (Gaidau 2012) suggesting that by simply changing a simple aspect of everyday materiality, people’s political affiliation would also change.

The term *europubela* belongs to a wave in Romanian lexicon where various words gained the *euro-* prefix in the 1990s as discourses about Romania’s accession to the European Union began. During that time, many such words connoted the negative feelings about the accession process: *eurospaima* (eurofear), *eurostres*, (eurostress),

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<sup>32</sup> ANL (Asociatia Nationala a Locuintelor) offers subsidized housing for low income families as well as credit packages for young first-home buyers.

*euroviitor* (eurofuture) (Masichevici 2007). Other similar terms, mostly imported from French, were meant to denote the direct link of a particular concept with European institutions or entities, i.e. *europarlamentar* (a member of the European Parliament). In Romanian, the lexical construction of euro-words has been done abusively (ibid) as the resultant terms like *europubela* index forced and unnecessary transformations; in essence an attempt to make everything *euro*. As we will see in chapter four, the *europubela* was part of a change in everyday waste management and recycling practices.



Figure 11 – Changing the waste bins in Piatra-Neamț (2012) (Photo credit Mihail-Sorin Gaidau)

Particularly because waste bins and waste management are part of daily routine, when a rupture in those practices occurred, it could not go unnoticed. For instance, it did not take long until people started commenting on the shortcomings of the new design: “It didn’t used to rain in the orange bins,” a Piatra-Neamț woman told me, as she pointed at the newly installed green bins on the street. However, her tone said so much more; her comment was as much about the shortcomings of a material reality as it was about trust

and expectations from the people elected to make informed and better decisions than this. Progress was orange for her, not green<sup>33</sup> and the functional qualities of the waste bins were evidence of that. In a way, as PDL was losing political ground, the association of green waste bins with lack of functionality, enhanced the visibility of orange, functional, progress around town.

This constant need to adapt in the face of continuous waves of abrupt change was exactly what resonated with mayor Stefan's supporters as they also engaged in various processes of adaptation. They did so to move forward economically and they relied on strong local and translocal social bonds to do so. During my fieldwork people claimed that mayor Stefan employed his son's company to produce curb blocks and paving stones, who in turn, outsourced the job to another construction company. People also talked about Stefan's daughter owning all the family's local businesses even though she lived in the south of France at the time, as well as the fact that Stefan's godson was managing the mall next to the central farmers market.

As I asked my contacts about these different rumors, many treated them as non-issues for a series of reasons. First, nobody thought that the local "mentality" was going to change and for the time being, working within one's particular acquaintance and kin network was the most appropriate way to get things done. Second, they understood these behaviors as part of a local culture or spirit where everyone comprehended the practices and engaged with them in similar ways. Thirdly, they often indicated that criticism of these practices had external roots stemming from the process of European Union

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<sup>33</sup> Before the orange ones, which took over the urban landscape in early 2000s, waste bins were dark green made of a heavy metal and they swiveled up and down to be easily emptied in larger bins by waste collectors. It was not clear if these bins were ever replaced or repainted regularly but people claimed this was the same design as the waste bins before 1989.

accession and these new regulations or definitions did not easily align with local realities. Thus, the social bonds and kinship ties that helped people manage the limitations of the socialist shortage economy also served community members in coping with a new, broken, and ever shifting economic and political system. However, with the factory closing down, people's movements had changed along with the way they managed their active and implicit social bonds. As such, people had to adapt, to recreate spaces and interactions similar to the ones offered by the commute or the socialist urban spaces the community inhabited beginning with the 1950s. Thus, not only were social bonds a way of coping with a new transformation, but the transition to Europe itself enabled the continuous reproduction of the network.

Rituals like baptisms, weddings, and funerals proved the ideal settings to observe Piatra-Neamț sociality materially and in the (re)making. Wedding guest lists and seating charts revealed one's position in the network in relation to the organizing family. It is not surprising that seating charts were often the most delicate task to carry out along with choosing the bride and groom's godparents. In Romania, godparents are selected for both baptisms and weddings. When parents select godparents for their babies they base their decisions in qualities of parenting, care, as well as social class. When a young couple chooses an older couple as godparents for their wedding, it signals admiration for the godparents' family, relationship, communication models between man and wife, as well as economic success. People have to afford to be godparents both financially and socially, as the rituals involve spending significant amounts of money and godparents are also required to invite people from their social circle to the events. When two families came together in these rituals, their social networks took control over the event: who

could serve as godparents was not only about guiding the newlyweds or the newly christened child; this created a multitude of implicit bonds that people maintained and activated for numerous other purposes (acquire jobs, tap into the godparents' network to expedite various services, advance political goals, etc.) long after the ritual has been carried out.

Sometimes these rituals were directly intertwined with and could be employed to maintain the implicit bonds people forged at Săvinești. Liliana was in her early twenties when I talked to her in 2012 and even though she did not have personal memories of the Săvinești era, she saw her life directly marked by her family's role in that local past:

It is not surprising that most often I get a good seat at weddings. After all, I am the granddaughter of A., manager at warehouse IV, and F., general director of warehouse III. I also married into the family of A who worked at FIFIL and of course the niece of D, lead engineer at Săvinești.

Event guest lists and monetary gifts signaled debt and obligation. After the event, organizing families made more lists of guests in attendance and the amount of their monetary gifts. Other families kept the actual gift envelopes, each indicating the name of the guest and the amount of money the family received from the respective guest. They gathered dust in a drawer or cupboard for months until an invitation would come in and the collected artifacts would reference to the family the debt they owed.

Former factory owners told me that as soon as their children were born, and they invited people to their Christening, invitations for weddings and baptisms began flooding in. When one decided to attend a wedding or to send a family representative they fought reluctance with "We have an obligation! (*Avem o obligatie!*)" In the same vein, when deciding upon guest lists, a family assessed if a relationship based on obligation already existed. One family I observed in this process debated over inviting one of the bride's

father's colleagues. The coworker had three children while the bride was an only child. The family decided, in spite of the father's insistence, that the exchange would not be equal since they would have the obligation to attend and contribute to three weddings: "Why should we make thee obligations for ourselves? (*De ce sa ne facem trei obligatii?*)?"

This reception model around various religious and life rituals was meant to secure a certain amount of financial support for the new or newly extended family. One woman explained to me that, "Long ago, people could really start their new life with the money they received from guests." Thus, rituals were not only meant to alter one's life but they were also understood to provide the necessary finances to do so. While this might not be different from similar rituals around the world, one bride told me:

"You have control over your wedding money. You can choose to put a down payment on an apartment or travel to places you never could before. People do not impose their own needs or expectations on your life by getting you a toaster. Especially since here [in Romania] you cannot exchange gifts you do not like."

Because gifts are always monetary, people regard attending weddings as a financial transaction. So much so that members of the younger generation in Romania sarcastically refer to invitations they receive as *amende* (sg. *amenda* ticket or traffic citation) especially if they originate from families they have never interacted with but to whom their parents have an obligation. Their parents though, born in the 50s and 60s, see the monetary exchange as a loan: money that comes into the family when it is most needed and that needs to be returned in similar circumstances: a gift that needs to be reciprocated equally, taking in account inflation, and in the same circumstances.

As such, these gifts are also signs through which relationships of value and exchange are established. While monetary wedding gifts are reciprocated equally, social

ties and future service exchanges are also traded in the process. Their value is established when such implicit bonds get actualized and depends on circumstances and needs: i.e. helping with a credit application might not have the same economic value as providing flower arrangements for a wedding but socially they are considered equal at a specific point in time. Thus, monetary gift exchanges in Romanian weddings provide a lens into the context in which they function and the multiple meanings they acquired in that context.

In the past few years, young couples have attempted to alter these events in various ways. Some have introduced RSVP cards, which they often complained guests do not use properly or at all. Parents have mocked this by saying “In my day you knew that if the person had an obligation, they would come.” From the guests’ perspective some have told me they do not understand the use of the cards since the families know “we have to attend.” Other young couples have decided to have smaller parties and invite only friends and family they know personally which has led to debates with parents over who qualifies to make the list or not. The small number of couples I have talked to who have managed to escape this model have told me “We did not care about the money and just wanted to have fun with our friends.” However, this implied a certain level of financial independence that most young Romanians do not have. Weaving local sociality into life rituals is also common in the cases of middle and upper class families, as they understand guest lists and seating charts as extensions to their business and political ties. These rituals, and similar practices (semi-public transportation, social media groups and interactions, etc.) enable the reproduction of Piatra-Neamț sociality among younger



generations while also providing a model for other, newer interactions that involve financial transactions, such as banking.

### **The personal and emotional nature of banking practices**

I had been living in the United States for nine years when I returned to Romania for research. During this time I had established a strong professional relationship with my American bank based on a particular kind of trust: I trusted them with my money and they trusted me to comply with their terms and conditions when it came to my checking, savings, and credit card accounts.<sup>34</sup> This was a relationship between myself, as a client, and my bank, as an institution, regardless of whom I interacted with when I visited the bank or made a transaction. In contrast, banking in Piatra-Neamț is very much conditioned by the acquaintances people have, how they have served each other in the past and the ways they can continue to do so in the present and future.

During my stay in Romania, I told one of my contacts I needed to make a money transfer at a bank.<sup>35</sup> Even though there was nothing unusual about this transaction she seemed excited to take me to a particular bank: “I know where to take you.” We entered the small local branch of Ceahlau Bank<sup>36</sup> and I paused as the interactions between my friend and the bank clerks unfolded. She threw her purse on a chair and went straight for the bank director’s office to ask for assistance while she waved and smiled at the three clerks sitting at their desks. Adrian, one of the clerks asked me if I needed any help so I

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<sup>34</sup> For more on banking and trust in the American context see Ho (2009)

<sup>35</sup> I had become an informal importer of various goods from the U.S.: UGGs, Guess brand clothes, Nine West shoes, Ralph Lauren clothes, etc. (see more in chapter six)

<sup>36</sup> The names of the banks as well as those of my interlocutors have been changed to protect their identities. Particularly because of the topic addressed in this chapter, these individuals could face serious consequences because of the nature of their interactions.

explained to him the purpose of my visit. He asked for the bank's name, SWIFT code and account number. Confused, I explained I have a routing and account number but did not know what a SWIFT number was. After examining the number of digits on the routing number he concluded it did not qualify as a SWIFT.

What followed was a long search over the Internet and phone calls to my bank help line where the representative seemed as confused as I was. Angela, the bank director, followed by my contact, came to assist us in our search. She asked me where the bank was located, if it had branches nationwide in the U.S. and if it was part of a larger bank. Another bank clerk listening to the conversation exclaimed: "We had another customer from Michigan, maybe you have the same bank." She walked towards an unlocked filing cabinet, searched through the files and located the customer's information. I was lucky enough that we did share the same bank, Adrian retrieved the SWIFT number and Angela invited us into her office while the transaction was being processed. I asked her if I could have the SWIFT number for future transactions. Minutes later, one of the clerks came in and handed me a piece of paper. It was a Xerox copy of the other customer's information: his name, U.S. address, Romanian address, bank name, account, phone, and SWIFT numbers.

According to everyone present, my reaction was highly unconventional: I jumped off the chair and put the piece of paper down, wrote down the SWIFT number in my organizer and asked the clerk to destroy the copy. As we left the bank, my contact explained that I should not worry; interactions at the bank were based on trust and my information was safe. However, this concept of trust was evidently different than the one I based my relationship with my American bank on: trust, in Piatra-Neamț circulated

between individuals and not between a person and the bank as an institution. As I became increasingly interested in this topic, I discovered that banking practices were entanglements between social networks, new forms of financial management, as well as rapidly economic conditions particular to the transition years.

Due to economic crises that had disrupted business relations around the globe, and because of ambiguous relationships many Romanian business owners had established with various foreign investors, business projects and investments in Piatra-Neamț were stalled and numerous transnational business partnerships dissolved. Faced with monthly dues for multiple credit lines and no returns on their investments, Romanian small business owners had to strategically postpone debt without disrupting the configurations of their everyday life. As such, Piatra-Neamț small business owners began moving debt between various local banks. In doing so, banking practices were reconceptualized in local ways, taking advantage of the diversification of Piatra-Neamț banks available for managing business and personal finances, and of the local sociality structures in the service of individuals' banking practices.

Piatra-Neamț small business owners engaged in debt moving practices through the exchange of services and information and by activating “partially existing” (Latour 2000) social ties or implicit bonds. Shifting debt between banks allowed one to take advantage of various grace periods offered by banks as incentives for new customers. In some cases banks offered better interest rates, which lowered monthly payments, but what made some banks more desirable over others were the grace periods (one-two months) when payments were not expected. However, Piatra-Neamț business owners did

not base their decisions primarily on these incentives. When I asked Marius, the owner of a local transportation business, how he decided on his new bank, he explained:

Well you have to think about who you know and how they can help you...that goes for both banks though. I knew my previous bank's director through a circle of friends, and he helped me understand the process of acquiring a loan at a different bank. However, the only other person I knew working at a bank was a woman I had gone to school with and who was now a clerk at [Credit Bank]. She told me who had the authority to approve loans and even the moods they were in a specific day. That's why I chose to apply there.

Marius' answer pointed to the key aspect of this particular kind of transaction: the circulation of information—especially unconventional information when it comes to banking practices—which as he claimed, was only available through closer personal networks (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). Social capital accrued before the fall of communism was thus transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu 1977) in post socialist, democratic Romania (Badescu, Uslaner, and others 2003). For the successful activation of such networks or to bring them into full existence, Piatra-Neamț residents identified shared personal memories and constructed a cohesive story that reified the salience of the particular relationship for both parties: in this case, bank representative and client. Marius had not talked to Maria, the Credit Bank clerk, in years but his call on comical school memories and long passed youth days, managed to close the temporal gap between the two. “You have to reconnect/catch up first. After talking to her a bit it seemed like we had not seen each other since yesterday,” he explained. Various scholars have examined the roles of personal networks before and after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern block everyday practices (Kideckel 2006; Ledeneva 2006; Tomoff 2002; Verdery 1996). Personal networks are still central in

everyday practices<sup>37</sup> in Romania and shifting debt between various banks successfully, was not an exception. “Catching up” entails itself the exchange of information, shared histories, symbolic objects that the parties use in assessing the potential for other exchanges in new environments and practices.

During my observations I concluded that transactions between banks and Piatra-Neamț business owners happen in three layers: an individual personal level, an individual official/professional level, and the institutional level. At the individual personal level, the bank representative and client interact as members of the same social network (i.e. grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same school, etc.) and the bank representative exchanges information and services with the understanding that the client will match it simultaneously or sometime in the future: this can vary from a free meal at one’s restaurant, providing flower arrangements for a wedding, to discounted vacation packages. At the individual professional level, both parties acted as representatives of the bank or business they belonged to and the service exchange was conditioned/limited by the bank’s terms and conditions. Finally, at the institutional level, a business and bank enter a contract following set and agreed upon guidelines. In this transaction, a specific amount of money is granted to the respective business and the payment plan is arranged.

What is unique in these cases of shifting debt is the simultaneous exchange of money and bartering services in what is understood to be a single banking transaction. As many scholars have argued, barter seems to emerge most often on the margins of monetized economies or places with high inflation rates but is also utilized in cases where monetary transactions are avoided deliberately (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992;

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<sup>37</sup> See Rivkin-Fish on how social networks become even more intense after the collapse of the communist regimes

Thomas 1992). The scarcity of goods during the socialist period increased the value of goods such as cigarettes, coffee, jeans, etc. in barter transactions (Verdery 1996). Various new consumable items became readily available on the market after the collapse of the communist regimes and money became “trusted” in exchange for “faster” or “better” services (Rivkin-Fish 2005). However, such practices were easily labeled as corruption under the gaze of the European Union before Romania’s accession in 2007 and many have shied away from accepting “bitter money - money with a taint of an immoral act” (Shipton 1989). However, local sociality provided practices of exchange that still enabled certain advantages to materialize.

Alina, a wedding planner in Piatra-Neamț explained that: “coffee and cigarettes will not do anymore. You have to give flowers or something similar so they know you are there for them, but you can expect them to turn to you in the future for a favor.” Unlike coffee, cigarettes, and money, offered usually “under the hand” or hidden from the others’ view, flowers (especially potted plants), cards, etc. are not associated with corruption and they can be offered visibly at one’s office. These objects serve as constant reminders of the relationship two people have established and signal the guarantee that a bank clerk can turn to their client for a service in the future. In the case of my informants, services are bartered at the individual personal level to achieve a certain objective at the institutional level. Objects, such as flowers do not complete the barter transaction but become symbols for a later fulfillment of the exchange. The economic value of the services provided by the bank representatives is not set by these objects but by what they represent in a future transaction (Appadurai 1986).

Although transformed, barter never disappeared but, in many cases, became part of what were understood to be new, capitalist, and democratic practices. Over the past few decades, anthropologists have actively engaged with barter as a mode of exchange with its own particular characteristics and operating in a specific moral space (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). This has been an attempt to work against earlier explanations of barter as an archaic version of monetized market or gift exchange. However, in the struggle to differentiate strongly between these systems, some scholars have argued that, as opposed to a capitalist debt system based on credit, barter does not involve trust between the two agents (Anderlini and Sabourian 1992). However, as my informants have explained to me, drawing on your social networks to engage in a barter of services is successful based on exactly that: trust (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992). Monica, a Piatra-Neamț business owner explained to me why she does not use her online banking and prefers face-to-face interactions with her bank’s representatives:

Nothing gets done if you don’t go there in person. You have to show them you exist, that you need a certain service taken care of. I’ve had online banking for two years but I have never used it. If I go to the bank things get solved right away. They have to ask you how you’ve been, how your business is going, and sometimes more personal details about your family. It is a way to know if or ...when you can turn to someone, especially if you’ve helped him or her in the past.

As Monica suggests, clients have to engage in direct interactions with the bank representatives who have helped them with their previous loan applications. One has to establish rapport<sup>38</sup> (with a bank representative—to gain personal credibility rather than “credit”—for the exchange to take place.

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<sup>38</sup> See Munn (1986) on establishing rapport and its uses in place of or alongside beauty or the ability to “convince.”

While credit checks have been centralized in Romania, having multiple credits at different banks was not always grounds for disqualifying one's application. Similar to the U.S. context, it was a matter of self presentation in various required forms of documentation. Because of the local proliferation of bank branches, shifting debt between banks was a way for Piatra-Neamț business owners to take advantage of the competition between banks. Since my first research trip in 2005 until the summer of 2009, more than 12 different banks had opened multiple new branches in Piatra-Neamț. Alina had been working for the past five years with German investors to purchase land on the outskirts of Piatra-Neamț and planned to build a subdivision of new houses. In order to purchase some of the land she took a large loan from Ceahlau Bank and one from Almax Bank where she placed both her house and business headquarters as guarantee. However, because she did not have a contract with the German investors, the latter withdrew from the deal fearing the global economic crisis threatening real estate development globally. Alina was left, at least temporarily, with high payments on her loans and the land that was rapidly losing its market value. A wedding planning business seemed most cost effective to her but she decided to shift some of her debt to Credit Bank.

Angela, the director of Ceahlau Bank used to attend the same fitness classes as Alina and offered to help her out with the process. After inquiring about the latest loans available at Credit Bank she completed all the paperwork as she saw fit for a successful loan application and called Alina to sign. In the mean time, Alina contacted her friend, Simona, a clerk at Credit Bank, to let her know she will be applying for a loan. Thus, all wheels of a successful debt shifting transaction were set in motion. It took approximately three weeks for the loan to be processed with the help of all the agents working for their



own gain: Alina was going to receive eighty thousand Euros and a three month grace period to help her with her debt and growing business, Angela was convinced her client will pay in full what she owed to Ceahlau bank, while the Credit Bank clerk expected Alina to match the equivalent of her services sometime in the future.

Alongside trust, deception is also present in barter transactions and everyday practices (Galasinski 2000). Thus, deception is also a central characteristic of successful debt shifting transaction. Alina knew she had no profits to begin paying her debt, while Angela knew that her bank did not prefer repossessing real estate because of rapidly shifting values on the market. While bank managers and clients did not regard locating loopholes in the credit system and the use of social networks as deception, they entered these processes of shifting debt knowing that payment would not be possible any time soon. Surprisingly, they used different forms of responsibility towards one another to justify their lack of responsibility towards repayment and the bank, as institution.

Angela believed it was her responsibility to provide her client with any information about competing banks while serving both her bank and the needs of her client. When she helped Alina to receive a loan at Almax Bank, she assumed Alina would pay in full what she owed to Ceahlau Bank. She also explained that she was helping the managers at other banks get more business rather than deceiving them into accepting Alina as a client with “slightly modified” information about her financial situation. Alina explained to me that omitting certain information on loan applications (such as open credit accounts with other banks) is what one needs to do to “get by” (Kideckel 2006) in these tough economic times. She never intended not to pay her debt to the banks so deceiving and collusion become questions of perspective. “Getting by” has become a way

to describe grey area practices that can neither be encouraged nor condemned through legal means; rather they are understood as emerging naturally out of certain economic, political, and social conditions.

These local practices became obvious to actors in corporate bank offices. Many of the people I had talked to at these banks, fell under corporate investigation for their “unconventional” ways of interacting with clients. I met with Jean, a French expat who was responsible for the transformation of a Romanian bank after its acquisition by a foreign bank. When I asked him what surprised him most about banking in Romania, he talked about how “emotional” people were. To him, it seemed that people had long histories together at the bank and rarely did they shift positions, not even to climb the professional ladder within the bank. They especially did not switch firms. This did not surprise me, considering that many previous factory workers and public servants I had talked to regarded their jobs as permanent and for life. However, it was not clear to me what the connection was between “emotion” and extended experience people had in an institution. He explained that people held long lasting grudges, formed cliques and sabotaged each other, they competed for the attention of the foreign members of the team, and performed anger, love, loyalty, in the most intentional ways. He also explained that, when it came to small local branches, the bank had to introduce additional steps to credit application reviews to bypass the local sociality bankers were part of. Every credit application had to be evaluated, in the end, by an external reviewer who could prove he/she had no pre-existing ties to the community.

## **Gossip and sociality in the service of business development**

While sociality was understood as a measure to manipulate imposed forms of interacting with institutions, it also fostered the opportunity for business development for community members who did not previously see themselves as entrepreneurs. Carmen is a young and successful jewelry and accessories designer in Piatra-Neamț. She began her business in 2011 but she claims that the possibilities that made her business successful were took shape during her childhood. Her father had worked for *Reconstructia*, a state owned enterprise responsible for urban planning during socialism. He died in a car crash when Carmen was a teenager, leaving his wife, daughter, and two younger boys devastated. Through different family acquaintances, Carmen began working unusual part time jobs to supplement the family's income, most of them in retail and paid on commission. These jobs were temporary and offered no job security so Carmen had to take advantage of every moment to sell. She tapped into her parents' and neighbors' networks to sell in any way she could. She rapidly developed her own social networks and in exchange for the business she received, she connected people and helped them in any way she could: arranged doctor's appointments for friends, discounts for people at businesses she worked with, organized events where she could market not only the goods she was selling but those of acquaintances she had made. However, this exchange was made possible through great amounts of gossip. Carmen spent hours with clients, listening to their life's problems, their grudges, their love affairs, figuring out what she could do for them, as well as what they could do for her other clients. People often told me Carmen could sell "excrements on bread" if she put her mind to it, "and she would make you feel pleased with the purchase."

In 2008 she secured a retail job at an eye clinic, selling frames, contacts and other accessories but she continued to supplement her income with various gigs. She would tell people who else in town had purchased a specific frame and how much they paid for it. She created social value for glasses that already exceeded local average salaries and she offered deals. These deals materialized in further business, as well as services she could exchange with other clients: “I gave doctor M. a great deal on a pair of Pradas and I’m sure I can get her to see you short notice.” In 2010 she decided to follow her partner to the United Kingdom, where he had moved a few months back. Not long after her arrival she found out she became pregnant and she returned to Romania, realizing it would not be easy for her to find a job pregnant in a foreign country. But she also did not have a way to sustain herself financially at home, as her old position was no longer available. She desperately looked for opportunities until a friend of hers told her: “Why don’t you make something? You can sell anything.” She was six months pregnant when she began experimenting with beads and threads, and giving away her creations to friends. Business started pouring in as her friends displayed bracelets, necklaces and earrings at work, in cafes, or at school. She created a Facebook page where she posted pictures of her accessories she took with her phone.

Business took off as she continued to listen and contribute to gossip. Similar to the workers commuting together to the factory, she collected any knowledge about the community she could. If she heard someone had given birth, she would make red thread bracelets for the child, a talisman of protection, and found ways to deliver them through acquaintances and friends. She also stayed connected to tabloids and national gossip, found out about fashion trends, imitated and altered them in unique ways. She slowly

moved to precious metals and gems and bought tools to engrave her work. She presented these creations on her website, along pictures of celebrities who wore similar accessories. Four years later, bloggers and celebrities all over Romania, display Carmen creations on their websites and she has become the go to person for personalized and unique gifts. She attributes her success to an already available sociality, networks of relations, that she has learned to navigate and manipulate. Her business trajectory fundamentally contradicts designers of post-socialist economic transformation, who have argued that people of Eastern Europe needed to break from various “constraints of communism” for their “natural tendencies toward capitalist economic rationality” (Dunn 2004, 3) to be actualized. Carmen’s success is only an example among many businesses who emerged out of the social framework built around the Săvinești factory and continue to thrive in Piatra-Neamț.

Most of these businesses emerged out of informal commerce during socialism when people supplemented their factory income by taking trips to Moldova or Hungary and bartering different local goods for things not available in town. Gossip served as the pulse of the network: it helped uncover local needs that one could address in these exchanges while was used as a marketing strategy. The only way people knew who had scarce merchandise available was to listen to the pulse and activate social bonds to acquire those goods. After 1989, many of these “merchandise smugglers” became engaged in private small level commerce. As we will see in chapter 3, some used their business profits to become involved in the transformation in new ways, such as opening human rights non-governmental agencies. Gossip continues to be a crucial part of how local sociality reproduces itself even though some of the initial conditions for observing

others (i.e. commute to the factory) have transformed. As commuting is no longer necessary, people have found different ways of travelling together and observing each other, while also interacting with the new Romanian state.

### **New ways of transiting together**

Upon closing the factory there seemed to be a crisis of detachment between individuals—especially those who did not quite interact but experienced each other’s presence, in anticipation of future contact. There was a new interest in the details of one’s life, their history as far back as one could discover, a new way of identifying who is more authentically Neamțean through proximity or whether they received/purchased land in the rural areas around the town. People negotiated constantly a shifting self against other people and the new state. City buses travelled empty, in a continuous circuit, like in a post apocalyptic landscape where the infrastructure continues its established course, long after humans have found their demise.<sup>39</sup>

Maxi-taxis, or vans that can carry around ten passengers, are now the preferred method of public transportation. They provide the environment where relationships can be carried out according to previous commuting guidelines at a smaller scale: “people are as nice to fellow travellers as they used to be in the buses,” a woman told me. They exchange stories, hold seats for each other, become familiar with each other’s usual pick-up and drop-off stops. Arguably, this might happen less frequently and it has not been presented to me as a necessity as former factory workers had. However, it is important to acknowledge that Piatra-Neamț residents continue to seek these personal interactions in

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<sup>39</sup> See the edited volume by Olsen and Hocking (2007) for similar descriptions of post-industrial Detroit.

the public sphere. Moreover, the maxi-taxi becomes more personal than the bus, as it is privately owned. Passengers claimed that they would rather pay a person working for himself than the state because nobody could control where state money is being allocated. Maxi-taxis also navigate the neighborhoods' smaller streets and the drivers are flexible on where to drop passengers off in unfavorable weather or if they are carrying a larger load of groceries than usual. Some passengers have told me that occasionally drivers are also flexible and allow some people to ride for free, particularly because drivers receive extra money as tip (*spaga*). The term *spaga* is used synonymously with both tip (*bacsis*) and bribe (*mita*), which denotes a level of social acceptability for bribing and an overlapping of concepts related to corruption. Understanding the idea of corruption as a category of thought and organizing principle allows us to examine its political and cultural implications:

Looking at corruption from an anthropological perspective necessarily draws out attention towards problems of meaning and representation, rather than the more conventional institutional approaches and theoretical model-building that seem to characterize so much of the corruption studies literature. (Shore and Haller 2005, 2)

If corrupt behavior is that which “harms the public interest,” (Friedrich 1966, Heidenheimer 1989a, 1989b) then the use of the term *spaga* enables one to shift between public and private sector, individual and institutional responsibility and leave the concept of corruption open to interpretation.

At the same time, public servants, such as police officers are not always perceived as protectors of public interest. For more than a decade after 1989, people talked about the benefits of corrupt practices in their interactions with traffic police. There was an understanding that all you had to do was fold a monetary bill in your driver's license to escape citations and points. In time, these practices have slowly disappeared and people

often complained that the state should focus on more important issues than traffic violations. The fees were extremely high and the laws were often unclear about when an officer was allowed to confiscate a driver's license. As such, car owners repurposed the use of commercial driving communications for private and local use. That is to say, car drivers invested in radios that are used in communications between commercial truck drivers to build a new kind of community in transit among private car owners.

As such, complete strangers driving in opposite directions greet each other as colleagues (*colegu/a*), as their paths intersect and communicate to one another, the traffic conditions ahead. The main purpose of this new model of transit community is to prevent drivers from getting speeding tickets although I have seen it used in a variety of circumstances. Drivers exchange knowledge of alternative routes when accidents are blocking traffic, they keep each other awake when driving at night, they comment on the appearance or driving skills of female drivers, and greet those with different license plates into their county. Female drivers are less likely to engage in conversations but still access the information being circulated through the radio. Every interaction ends with a courtesy greeting specific to this community, "My colleague, may you have good roads! (*Drumuri bune, colegu'!*)"<sup>40</sup> Of course, radar detectors can also prevent drivers from speeding citations but many of my contacts have assured me they "are not as reliable or fun." Their use is also limited to radar detection and they do not account for shifting conditions in traffic or other information such as the presence of police in motion rather than a radar. In essence, this new way of moving together is built on the premise of

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<sup>40</sup> "Colegu/a" implies a shared community of colleagues or coworkers but it is different from "tovaras/a" which was the required form to address someone during socialism. "Tovaras/a" has been reclaimed recently by the younger generation as slang for close friend or intimate partner.



existing social interactions and allows for flexibility while engaging with transformation directly.

These old approaches to new settings argue against a need for a total “culture change” in transforming the socialist society (Fogel and Etcheverry 1994; Fogel 1994). Some actors have argued that, “privatization was necessary but not sufficient condition for economic restructuring” (S. Johnson 1995). Others have claimed that socialist mentality is basically at odds with the spirit of capitalism (Dunn 2004, 5). However, these views do not account for the diversity of attitudes and thought that emerged out of socialist societies and completely dismisses the idea that socialist ideology might not have been entirely successful in changing existing cultural and social norms (Almond 1983). In the Piatra-Neamț case, it is not that relationships were not shaped in some form by socialist conditions, but it is the people who defined their roles in these networks. Community members prove the flexibility of their sociality in unique ways and by engaging with the transformation. It may be the case that former workers and current residents of Piatra-Neamț understand flexibility differently than those who have claimed their cultural rigidity. People in Piatra-Neamț see themselves as already highly adaptable and resourceful individuals because of their socialist experience and the webs of acquaintances they navigate. Also, the lack of trust for the socialist system is often performed through a reluctance to entirely adopt a new imported system on the sole premise that others tell them it is better.

Concepts such as corruption are not easily translated onto social practice as they signify a different set of social norms or they only work in specific “frames.” Already in 1955, Gregory Bateson recognized the importance of signs as potential signals and only

signals, “which can be trusted, distrusted, falsified, denied, amplified, corrected and so forth” (1955, 178)—that is they acquire their meaning placed in a context. Thus, in order for signs to become meaningful they need to be placed in a specific “frame” that qualifies the interaction: “this is play” or “this is ritual.” Bateson argues that placed in these specific contexts, signs cannot denote anything else but what they were meant to: the playful nip cannot be mistaken for a bite, which would be implied by a different frame—“this is combat” (182). Geertz’s distinction between the twitch and the wink can also be understood in similar terms: the wink acquires cultural meaning because it is assumed by the actor to be understood as a wink and denoting some kind of future conspiracy. At the same time, Geertz offers us two more frames in which the wink could take place: parody and rehearsal, and thus winks should be understood in those specific frames to be deciphered correctly (Geertz 1973, 5019:6–7). In making sense of corruption, Piatra-Neamt residents either play with or find it hard to differentiate between the frames that render local practices corrupt or legally acceptable. The continuous uncertainty in the last couple of decades, coupled with the fluidity of new laws and evershifting concepts, have allowed people to retrospectively explain and justify their actions by pointing to specific circumstances and contexts. In other words, when the European Union required Romania to combat corruption, average Romanians agreed. However, they also insisted that their own daily practices and interactions should not fall under the same regulations as political parties and corporations. As such, in their eyes, corruption is not only bound by its frame and context; it is also a question of scale. Similarly, categories such as “the West”/ “the East,” acquire their meanings in the specific context in which they emerged and were utilized. Relegating all that is “developing” to the “Third World” is only

meaningful in a global context in which “the West” has defined itself as the symbol of the developed world (Appadurai 1986) and is allowed to dictate levels and forms of corruption as well as consequences for this behavior. As we will see in chapter three, the boundaries between the West and the Rest also become fluid and often blurred in translating ideas about civil society and human rights in the context of local non-governmental organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Piatra-Neamț small business owners engage in debt shifting practices through the use of partially existing social networks that have to be (re)activated for this specific purpose. In a small community like Piatra-Neamț establishing credibility at the individual personal level, rather than credit at the institutional level, is key in submitting a successful loan application. As shown above, a system of service barter emerges where information circulates between banks and among individual agents to create the favorable conditions for receiving a loan. Trust in future repayment of services, as well as deception in the circulation of knowledge/information sustain the existence of this transformed barter system alongside capitalistic banking practices in contemporary Romania.

“Structure of feelings” and social acceptability of particular conventions are negotiated to reproduce the network in a new economic landscape. Because there must always be an inner dynamic by means of which new formations of thought emerge, Piatra-Neamț pre-existing sociality frameworks enable community members to see new possibilities and become entrepreneurs. What seems to concern politicians in Piatra-

Neamț as well as the average person is the immediate gain, change, appearance of progress, comfort, etc. with little regard or vision for the nearest future: a sort of recognizable instant gratification that is not necessarily personal but shared within the community. When looking at contemporary sociality in Piatra-Neamț, there is nothing that strikes as particularly communist and outdated because it engages with new, innovative, European concepts. Characteristics of an old sociality are repurposed, at least temporarily from one generation to another, from one political system to the next, particularly because they are understood to work. Moreover, people do not regard their social networks as remnants from a socialist era. That is to say, this system was not built or imposed by the regime and is no way incompatible with the new political system. In fact, the flexibility in these patterns of sociality to address multiple periods of transformation, to help people cope with the scarcity of one period and maximize the possibilities of another, makes this social model adaptable to any political regime.

## **PART II – MENDING THE LOCAL: LIFE IN PATCHES AND RECALIBRATIONS**

Part two is an exploration into movement and spatial shifts informed by people navigating and getting stuck both ideologically and physically in a seemingly familiar space. While the first two chapters have presented the complexity of Piatra-Neamț sociality as a structure of implicit and explicit bonds through which people manage life in creative ways, the following two chapters deal with the consequences of renovating life. Chapter three explores the challenges faced by local activists as they are shuffled between government buildings and marginal apartments. This chapter argues that inability to settle new concepts—such as “human rights,” “democracy,” “civil society”—spatially is indicative of how the concepts are perceived ideologically in Piatra-Neamț: temporary and in a perpetual state of metamorphoses. Chapter four analyzes how socialist urban space has been reconfigured over the past two decades to fit certain models of Europeanness. Forced relocations, shifting pedestrian walks, introduction of curb ramps alter the way people map themselves in space and society. The chapter thereby explores the processes through which various “others” have been carved out—physically and ideologically, intentionally and accidentally—from an emerging “normality”. Thus, these two chapters work together to expose the way in which Piatra-Neamț residents continually stumble and refamiliarize themselves with a patched up and recalibrated space. Simply put, this section is an exploration into the rigidity and flexibility evoked in interactions between material public spaces and the human mind.

### CHAPTER 3 – “PLEASE EXCUSE OUR DISORDER. WE’RE TRANSITIONING”: GRAPPLING WITH CHANGE

*In the attempt to build momentum, today’s country leaders tell us that Romania can modernize itself only by allowing to be civilized by the Occident; namely beginning from the state of colony. A colony in which they are and remain “governors” or “vice-kings.” In other words, Romania, as a failed nation state, could become a modern nation state only after it will be reeducated by the occidental metropolises. Thus, the country’s independence would be abandoned, as it were, not to obtain external warranties to maintain internal reigns but for re-civilizing Romanians and bringing them, on a superior plane, to the state of nation. On the other side, those who deplore Romania’s colonization and call for action against such a state are told that the fight for decolonization is premature for “the colonizing mission” is not over and, thus, the work of civilizing through colonization has not been completed yet.*

-Adrian Severin, Romanian politician and diplomat

*The language of Europe is translation.*

-Umberto Eco

#### **Introduction**

Katherine Verdery noted early after the collapse of the socialist regime that the Romanian political discourse had divided into two groups when debating the nation’s relation to Europe. One group supported notions of civil society as they relate to European practices. In contrast, the second group regarded Europe as a neoimperialist force Romania should avoid (Chari and Verdery 2009; Verdery 1996). At the level of political discourse this division still stands. Moreover, this separation has also opened new possibilities for post socialist inquiry by dividing the world into the “West” and the “Rest” and enabling comparisons between postcolonial and post socialist experiences (C. Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery 2002; Mandel 2002; Kalb 2002). In practice, there are

instances when the boundaries of this separation seem to blur. This was particularly true in my experience working with members of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Piatra-Neamț, who see themselves as members of and advocates for both worlds.

Throughout my fieldwork I rarely encountered people who uttered the word “transition” without accompanying it by an ironic smile or comment. In these exchanges, Piatra-Neamț actors would explain to me why certain things were not functioning *yet* the way they were *supposed to*. While some individuals genuinely anticipated the moment when particular processes would be rendered *functional* by foreign evaluators, most people found it outrageous to expect the same outcomes in Romania as in other places. In a humorous tone, they would apologize for the apparent chaos by adapting a famous courtesy notice: “Please excuse our disorder: We’re transitioning!” (*Scuzati dezordine. Suntem in tranzitie!*) Since the 1989 Romanian revolution, the metaphor of “returning to Europe” has often been used to refer to the years of Romania’s transition from communism to capitalism (Ciuhandu 2007). Scholars have explored and often criticized the use of the term “transition” to explain changes in the former socialist states (Abramson 2001; Mandel 2002).

At the same time, this process of change has also been articulated in terms of a “recalibration” or “adaptation” to European standards.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, Romania was to “mold itself onto” European practice, to “conform” to international norms and “connect itself” to the economic and political union properly (Luca 2015). It soon became clear that various levels of interpretation were necessary to match expectations from abroad with local Romanian practices. This gave rise to numerous domestic non-governmental

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<sup>41</sup> See Dunn (2005) on European standards and new forms of personhood.

organizations (NGOs) that charged themselves with interpreting, for their communities, the meaning of Europe and proper democratic practices for the imminent “return”. Unlike foreign NGOs and foundations whose missions are most often unidirectional and static regardless of their location,<sup>42</sup> local Romanian NGOs occupied a mediating position between communities undergoing alteration and the forces attempting or sanctioning their recalibration.

This chapter is an exploration into the daily lives of Piatra-Neamț NGO actors as they negotiate the roles of interpreters of foreign concepts with that of members of the local community. While most literature on NGOs focuses on the institutions, I approach activists as members of the community who manage, like everyone else, their own place in the social fabric. In doing so, these roles complement and conflict with one another as best practices are articulated and partnerships are established. As activists present themselves as promoters of a new civil society (*societate civila*),<sup>43</sup> they select and gradually introduce new concepts, frameworks, and practices into their work at the local level. As Piatra-Neamț residents begin talking about their “human rights,” (*drepturile omului*) questioning the need for “volunteer work,” or thinking about “discriminative” practices, they struggle to understand their applicability in their lives as they have unfolded thus far. Consequently, people understand such concepts as temporary, flexible, and in a perpetual state of metamorphosis. As new concepts and frameworks are introduced, activists and politicians find it necessary to engage in various levels of interpretation. For these concepts to become meaningful locally, they have to not only be

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<sup>42</sup> For a history of NGOs and their originating and structuring forces see Riles (2001)

<sup>43</sup> The concept of civil society has been analyzed in detail by many scholars of Eastern Europe and beyond (Kligman 1990; Creed 1991; Rau 1991; Verdery 1991b; Dirks 1992; Christopher Michael Hann and Dunn 1996; C. M. Hann 2002)



translated from a foreign language to Romanian, but new and old values have to be negotiated as they relate to a given concept. This work becomes a process of commensuration in which EU and US notions and practices are made portable across cultural and linguistic barriers. Paradoxically, the portable nature of NGO work has also materialized in their periodical physical relocation from one part of the city to another sanctioned by the local government in the process of economic transformation and spatial recalibration.

### **Entrepreneurial activism and nodes in local sociality**

As I mentioned in the introduction, this project began with my interest in the forced relocation of the Roma minority to the *Speranța* neighborhood. As I researched the topic from abroad, media articles claimed that local and international human rights NGOs were the key actors in publicizing and condemning the project, which led to the initial plans to be drastically altered. I was thus surprised not to find Roma activist groups in Piatra-Neamț. I decided to volunteer for a local, self-identified, human rights NGO: *The national agency against corruption, abuse, and for human rights* (NAACAHR)<sup>44</sup> hoping that this would lead me to work related to *Speranța*. I wanted to understand how human rights activism emerged locally and what made their activity possible in Piatra-Neamț.

Alex G. who served as the agency's president established NAACAHR. Alex was born and raised in Piatra-Neamț and he was 43 years old when I met him, in 2008. He was highly energetic, always spoke fast and rushed through daily tasks. In addition to

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<sup>44</sup> This is a literal translation of their official name

directing NAACAHR, he owned a clothing *stand*<sup>45</sup> in one of the town's shopping centers.<sup>46</sup> Twice a month, he travelled to Turkey and Bucharest to supply his *stand* with merchandise. His business did not bring much profit but it managed to provide enough to cover rent for the *stand*, a part time sales clerk, and a salary for himself from which he managed to modestly help with his mother's medical bills. He owned an old car he tinkered with regularly to keep it running. He would often make fun of me for allowing myself to be seen in such a car. Driving to a few meetings in the constant pursuit of partnerships, he would point to newer, faster, more silent cars and tell me "That is what you're used to! Not this!" as he battled to shift gears.

From his limited business profit, Alex also provided most of the financial support for NAACAHR's activities. The rest of the agency's expenses were covered by modest contributions from a limited group of paying members. Most of these members were personal acquaintances of those who worked or volunteered for the NGO. In exchange for their membership, they were invited to their events and mentioned as sponsors, but they also exchanged all kinds of services: school teachers would ask last minute for in-class presentations when they had an emergency, Alex would call members for meal discounts or hotel rooms at certain venues, etc. For those seeking the agency's help, membership was required but the fee was flexible and modest. The agency's lawyer explained to me that membership was necessary to represent their clients in court.

I asked Alex how he became interested in human rights work and what human rights meant to him. I was intrigued to find that it was actually the post socialist land

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<sup>45</sup> Former socialist department stores were privatized and compartmentalized into small commercial spaces to be rented out to small businesses. Such a commercial space was called a *stand* (pl. *standuri*) and unlike mall shops, they were not completely separated from one another making this a constant area of conflict.

<sup>46</sup> Alex's business exemplified a kind of private small level commerce born out of the socialist era informal commerce I discussed in chapter two.

restitution process that exposed Alex to the concept of human rights. He told me that several years back he had a personal encounter with the corrupt Romanian judicial system. Alex's family owned land before the socialist party rose to power. As decollectivization began after the revolution, people like Alex and his family started the procedures to recuperate their land. However, the Romanian decollectivization process became a complex and problematic endeavor that led to "the shrinking and stretching of land" depending on the kinds of evidence one could provide and the individual influence/power of the disputing parties in addition to various shifts in local landscapes (Verdery 1996). Because his family had moved to Piatra-Neamț to work for the factory, they had no relations and, hence, no influence in the village.

The process of land restitution was delayed for years and Alex's family was given back only a very small portion of the land they initially contributed to the collective farm. They believed their rights to be property owners, "their human rights," had been violated and Alex began inquiring into other cases and the proper procedures for land restitution.<sup>47</sup> His family also believed they had been cheated out of their land in favor of a wealthy villager who they suspected to have "bribed" the judge. Moreover, obstacles for land restitution did not begin at the local level; the national government directly influenced the process by not providing proper training and information to the parties involved: topographers, representatives of the law, citizens eligible to apply, etc. Also, the government refused or delayed any interventions from abroad that might have expedited the process. Katherine Verdery argued that delaying such interventions suggests a ministry and government that did not prioritize resolving ownership questions. Verdery

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<sup>47</sup> This framing of property rights as human rights became popular in postsocialist Romania in relation to housing restitution where current tenants saw themselves "deported" as the original owners regained the titles to their homes (Zerilli 2006).

notes that “this kind of stalling and resistance makes the experience of property restitution a disheartening one for many villagers, as they seek to participate in shaping their futures but find themselves thwarted much of the time” (Verdery 1996, 224–225). Alex’s parents were no exception to this. In addition, Alex could not be the one pursuing the restitution, as he did not have a claim on the land, yet. The founding of NAACAHR became a loophole through which Alex could carry out his parents’ battle, not as a son, but as protector of their human rights.

Alex eventually won back the land that was “rightfully theirs,” and thought he could help others do the same. He noted that most people with similar experiences do not have the tools and knowledge to fight and most of them do not recognize it as a violation of their rights. Listening to Alex talk I realized that his understanding of human rights collapsed the institutionalized and internationally regulated version of Universal Human Rights with a colloquial understanding of fairness. The structure of the Romanian language enables this slippage, as the translation of the concept of Human Rights (*Drepturile Omului*) is, more or less, identical to the grammatical word assemblage of “a man has his rights” (E dreptul omului).<sup>48</sup> This confluence created an imaginary of human rights as personal and more attainable at the local level.

It was never clear from our conversations if NAACAHR was meant to have survived passed the outcome of this initial legal case. However, the success of his first legal battle in defending his idea of human rights, made him famous among his acquaintances. Friends and distant relatives sought his guidance, which encouraged him to pursue a law degree part time and take on more cases. There was a certain degree of flexibility with which he approached situations in life, and latching onto the concept of

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<sup>48</sup> See Elshakry (2014) for a discussion of similar linguistic complexities while reading Darwin in Arabic

human rights was just one example of being creative and resourceful towards an end goal. When he talked about approaching each case of NAACAHR, I remembered how factory workers talked about solving their own problems or meeting their needs: “You take a problem and you start thinking who and what can help you at the most basic level and you leave from there. And you have to ask yourself what you can give for this problem to get solved...and to whom,” Alex explained. This parallel between former factory workers and activists strengthened as I got to know Alex and other activists outside their NGO work.

For Alex, life as an activist had serious repercussions for his business. In a conversation he told me that since he had established NAACAHR many of the *stand* owners in the shopping center had been trying to put him out of business. He explained that all of them pay the same rent, but some commercial spaces are larger than others or they are in high traffic locations. He had taken it upon himself to advocate for fairness with the center’s administration. He also explained that this is only made possible through “corruption” and “nepotism.” During my time volunteering for NAACAHR, Alex’s stand was visited by Consumer Police officials claiming to be verifying whether all *stands* comply with consumer laws—particularly a new law stating that all merchandise information had to be translated into Romanian. After reviewing all documents and inventories, they fined Alex for not having sizes translated on the shoes he had for sale—even though shoe sizes were indicated in numbers on the soles of shoes and do not normally require translation.

The fine (500 RON) was the equivalent of a sales’ clerk monthly salary—incidentally, also about the amount Alex invests in NAACAHR every month. This was

not a unique episode, Alex told me: “they come on surprise inspections all the time. They visit my *stand* and leave. There are over 120 *stands* in this shopping center but I get the random surprise ones all the time. Nothing is changing.” Alex suspected that some of the business owners were continuously filing false reports about his merchandise to the consumer police. However, it was also clear that, by challenging the rent costs, he had betrayed a network of implicit bonds his fellow business owners had established with each other. Constantly explaining his misfortunes through the use of words like “bribes,” “corruption,” “nepotism,” and “nothing is changing” he was positioning himself, to me, as one of the people who understood what needed to change. Because of Alex’s continuous feuds with fellow business owners, it has been hard for him to keep a sales clerk on staff for more than a couple of months, which has interfered with his work at NAACAHR and the financial resources available to him for this cause.

During their special events, NAACAHR received small amounts of funding from various resources to cover food, flyers, venue rental, etc., but they did not have a continuous financial resource they could rely on. The only other member of the NAACAHR was the agency’s lawyer, Laura, who was initially hired as a paid employee right after graduating law school. She joined the agency after one of her friends left the position Laura was supposed to fill. Due to lack of funds, she now volunteered her services part time, while holding a full time job elsewhere. I asked Laura why she stayed after Alex could not pay her anymore expecting her to tell me about her commitment to the agency’s work. To my surprise, Laura explained that Alex had given her a job when she moved back to Piatra-Neamț with her law degree in her hand. “Who’s going to help him now?” she said smiling.

The organization's financial aspect was key to structuring their daily activities and also impacted the kinds of projects they could realistically tackle. The NAACAHR functioned from 8am to 12pm Monday through Friday, after which both Alex and Laura attended to their "real" jobs. These specific hours of operation were also problematic, Alex suggested, because most people worked during that time, and protecting their human rights was never a priority over putting food on the table. This situation is not unique to NAACAHR or Romanian NGOs. Steven Erlanger has explained the precarious conditions of Radio C, one of the first national radio stations established "by the Roma for the Roma" in Hungary, that functioned on a low budget and short term contract due to similar constraints as NAACAHR (Erlanger 2001). Alex told me that it is particularly these small institutions that fell through the cracks when it comes to European Union funding and strategies of reaching Eastern European populations at the ground level. Ironically, these were also the institutions that, Alex argued, had the most impact in the communities of interest to European Union.

Alex also talked often about NAACAHR as a business opportunity that he was investing in. He confessed how happy he was when I contacted him from the United States to volunteer, as he understood what this partnership could mean for the agency. "You know? People really make money out of this. There is a real opportunity in NGOs," he told me as he was explaining how NAACAHR grew from helping friends and family to people he had never met. His enthusiasm was often contagious. We began searching for funding opportunities and applied for grants to replace their computer. These were skills I imagined putting to good use when I initially volunteered. What I did not expect

was to become, yet again, a node in a network of connections that extended both locally and internationally.

When I met Laura for the first time we talked for hours. Writing in my field notebook that night, it occurred to me that our interaction was somewhat peculiar. The amount and kinds of information we had exchanged went far beyond our roles at NAACAHR. In fact, to an outside observer it might not have been obvious who was the anthropologist in that encounter. We realized we were the same age and I had attended the same high school as her for a year before I moved to the United States. We moved swiftly through our mental Rolodexes sharing stories of friends we had in common. However, in this process, she also identified the people I knew outside her network and implicit bonds surfaced. She repeated them out loud waiting for my confirmation: “You’re a close friend of the mayor’s son?” In some cases she knew more about my particular friends’ families than I did: “You know S.N. whose father owns the wood manufacturing factory? You know, they’ve filed for bankruptcy.” Details of our conversation became obvious in my subsequent interactions with Alex. When we were planning an event he would wink at me and address Laura, “Luciana could invite the mayor.”

At the same time, it was obvious that both Alex and Laura went out of their way to identify things they could do for me and that were in no way related to our work at NAACAHR. When I visited Alex’s stand once, he told me that if I liked something I should feel free to take it. In another instance they took me on a road trip to a touristic area in the mountains, in case I needed to buy souvenirs for my American friends. Laura invited me out for coffee regularly and after I returned to the United States she sent me



tens of emails with documents, reports, newspaper articles she thought might be useful for my work. She also never failed to send me short notes and wishes on holidays and on my birthday. There was never a doubt in my mind that the friendship we built was a sincere one, but in this process, I learned on a personal level how friendship has been and continues to be made, performed, managed, used and extended in Piatra-Neamț. Moreover, while Alex embodied the transformation towards Europe through his entrepreneurial activities and NGO work, he continued to reproduce and be entangled in the same webs of sociality he was trying so hard to work against. As the next sections will show, these entanglements with the local social and culture become, paradoxically, enablers and obstacles for carrying out the work the NAACAHR was set out to do.

### **Human rights as ideologically and physically portable**

For Piatra-Neamț, as elsewhere in the eastern bloc, “the more than twenty years since 1989 have certainly brought their share of semantic and epistemological chaos” (Lebow 2013, 179), and local activists played a central role in the search and articulation of a new sense of order. NGOs like NAACAHR charged themselves with interpreting, for their communities, the meaning of Europe and proper democratic practices for their “return.” In my observations of NAACAHR’s activities, concepts like “human rights” became portable, not just as ideas that can be imported and re-emplaced in the local context. On one hand, human rights became movable in the material space of the city. On the other hand, the fight for one’s human rights could be transferred through one, very specific, document.

When I began volunteering for NAACAHR, the agency was located in a Piatra-Neamț neighborhood called Lenin. The district is infamous for crime, public disturbances and known to house a large Roma population. In the instances when Piatra-Neamț residents claimed some kind of affiliation to Lenin, they characterized themselves as strong individuals both mentally and physically. To get by in Lenin, by their definition, could be equated to everyday life in the rough neighborhoods of American cities. Needless to say, people do not venture into Lenin unless they really have to.

NAACAHR was located in a former residential building owned by the local government where the apartments had been converted into offices for lease. Some were occupied by small private firms or workshops, and some served as branches for different segments of the local government to assist the immediate community. NAACAHR occupied one of the rooms allocated by the mayor's office to agencies that qualified for subsidized spaces. The agency had been recently relocated there. Before moving to this location, NAACAHR had shared a downtown building with numerous other NGOs. Alex explained that the central location had been crucial for their activities: NGOs for the youth, the physically disabled, and job placement agencies, made NAACAHR easily accessible for groups also seeking these other services. Alex continued:

One day we just received a notice that our space was given to another NGO. They only got it because they knew someone in the mayor's office...and the bureaucracy is so complicated it's almost like they want you to give up. You never know who to contact and if you call them they just tell you to send a petition (*cerere*) to their office.<sup>49</sup>

The lack of funding had caused NAACAHR to relocate multiple times, making it harder for people to find them when they needed their services. Because their location is subsidized and provided by the local government, they can be shuffled between

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<sup>49</sup> Recorded Interview August 2008

administrative and residential buildings, from one neighborhood to another, depending on what government actors prioritize at a given moment. In the 2007 annual report, the members of the NAACAHR mentioned this as one of their main challenges:

Between **May-August 2007** our association's activity was obstructed by the following factors: we were forced to move out from our previous location and met numerous difficulties in obtaining a new space. Our limited funding and the rising prices for office-space have seriously impacted our normal activity. Currently the association functions out of a space inappropriate for its activities (a single room smaller than 7X10 sq. ft.)<sup>50</sup>

Once again Alex explained their relocation as a consequence of nepotism, and nothing could be done about it. However, he also acknowledged the relations he had built with activists in other NGOs at their former location and how these led to increased activity for NAACAHR. The particularities of sociality fostered by fifty years of communist experience are still key in the way Romanian social relations are negotiated and understood as well as the way things and/or services are acquired. As mentioned in the previous section, this is particularly true in former factory cities like Piatra-Neamț.

But there is another aspect of this dynamic that is key for understanding how the concept of “human rights” enters this local discourse: unlike other NGOs focusing on agricultural issues, development of infrastructure, etc., NGOs active in areas of human rights and discrimination are more likely to be moved, without proper notice, to other locations. This shows that government officials prioritize certain aspects of the transformative process over others. It also points to the difficulty of incorporating external priorities into domestic daily life and to the inability to ground concepts like “human rights” both spatially and ideologically at the local level. Moreover, the very

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<sup>50</sup> 2007 Annual Report—NAACAHR Archives (accessed summer 2008)

nature of these concepts as transferrable from the western context to Romania, could explain why some actors treat them as spatially portable.

Moreover, the bureaucratic framework at NAACAHR renders the fight for “human rights” transferrable from a client to the agency through the drafting of a very specific document, a *cerere*. For anthropological inquiry, documents are “artifacts of modern knowledge” that “provide a ready-made ground for experimentation with how to apprehend modernity ethnographically” (Riles 2006, 2). My own roots in the community and my role as a volunteer in a bureaucratic system governed by the drafting of these documents, made it difficult for me to understand, at first, what the *cerere* did in and for the context of NGO work.<sup>51</sup> NAACAHR cannot represent a person in court without producing evidence that he/she has requested the agency’s support. Thus, the agency’s activity is conditioned by a properly drafted *cerere* for each of the cases they address. In this process, transferring the fight for one’s rights from the victim to a person fit for the fight becomes mandatory.

A *cerere* is a handwritten document that an individual constructs to state his/her grievance; the word can be translated as *petition*, or *complaint*, and can be understood as the equivalent of a *standard form* depending on the situation. Because of its format, a *cerere* is a unique personal interaction between an individual and a specific institution from which one can assess the writer’s level of education, social class, and networks he/she belongs to, and possibly racial background. The document is governed by very specific set laws. The following are fragments of a *cerere* retrieved from the NAACAHR archive:

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<sup>51</sup> See also Strathern (2006) and Brenneis (2006) for examples of self-analysis where anthropologists shift to roles of bureaucrats.

The undersigned, Popescu Maria, residing at [address], personal ID number XXXXXXXX, age 30 request the support of NAACAHR in filing suit against the Education Committee of Piatra-Neamț for placing my daughter Popescu Elena, residing at [address], age 7 in a Special Education School after claiming that all children need to be assessed when entering first grade. [...] I add that my daughter Elena Popescu has been reading since age 5 and has been assessed by other individuals as fully competent to attend a normal school. I believe that NAACAHR has the qualifications and experience to represent my daughter and I in court regarding this matter and I give its members full access to trial records and any other information they might need to fulfill their obligations to me as a member of their agency.

Respectfully,

Maria Popescu<sup>52</sup>

Maria is an ethnically Roma woman who found out about NAACAHR from a friend. Her daughter's experience is not unique among the Roma community in Romania, many Roma children being assessed as "unfit" for normal schools every year. In addition, children who identify and those who "pass" as ethnically Romanian are not required to take part in this assessment. By children who "pass" I mean Roma children who do not fit the stereotypes or myths associated by Romanians with the Roma population. Roma who consider themselves "traditional" represent visual markers of ethnicity for Romanians and thus, are understood to fit in specific social spaces. Moreover, Roma traditional myths "mirror the ways in which public spaces are marked out as settings for social action" (Lemon 2000a, 58), which further complicates the relationship Roma understand to have with Romanian public spaces such as schools. Stereotypes like "Gypsies do not want to send their children to school" as well as actual Roma attitudes towards the Romanian educational system can be explained through numerous incidents when Roma children were treated as unwanted. The increasing visibility of traditional Roma in urban schools have created various strategies of institutionalized racism such as the case of

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<sup>52</sup> NAACAHR Archive (accessed summer 2008)—All personal information has been changed.

Elena mentioned above. Moreover, because drafting a *cerere* requires bureaucratic familiarity and literacy, the process of submitting such documents at schools, government offices, or NGOs marks those lacking these skills as unfit.

As Alex mentioned above, in his role as NAACAHR president he had to submit a *cerere* to acquire a new space for the agency. Constructing a *cerere* does not only imply literacy but also the knowledge of its proper format to be recognized as a valid document. In the case of the NAACAHR members from rural areas both of these characteristics are problematic—many members are not literate (at least not enough to write a *cerere*), others do not have valid identification and cannot provide the necessary official information. Moreover, some members have expressed their skepticism towards this document recognizing its format and salience during the socialist period. The *cerere* was not just a document during socialism but a crucial part in the intricate bureaucratic system that recorded and tracked a person's every wish and grievance. Official documents are revealing in such cases, even if only as a condensation of ideas and practices that might not be explicitly recognized otherwise. That is to say that people do not usually talk about practices they perceive as having survived the collapse of communism unless a present interaction with such practices creates feelings of immobility, of getting stuck. In the case of *cerere* drafting, people lacking the necessary skills talk about being held back or delayed by the process.

Because documents become obstacles in the fight for human rights, activists become involved in the petition process by guiding clients through the proper structure. In a sense, activists partially petition themselves. Consequently, documents shape behavior within the organization (Ouchi and Wilkins 1985) by enabling activists to shift

between victim and advocate. They also create alliances (Raffel 1979) and mediate social relations (Smith 2002). The dynamics around *cerere* drafting have also created a variety of partnerships between the agency and its members as well as between institutions. In the case of NAACAHR one such partnership emerged with a department within the Neamt District Library, the Center for European Information. According to Mirela, the center's director, the institution was born to keep Piatra-Neamț residents informed about European integration. The center provided numerous books on human rights, information about the European parliament, European Union related funding and procedures for applications, as well as templates for various letters and documents, including *cerere*. I asked Mirela how she thought *cerere* drafting should be approached. She proposed the establishment of information centers in the courts where people could find out what their next step is should they be unsatisfied with the outcome of their trial.

They come to the library, but not any simple person from the country knows, when they leave the court that they could go somewhere else. It is hard. They go to law offices but not all of them have the financial resources... while we provide the information, for those who do reach us, for free. We list the models for *cerere*, we provide that terminology dictionary, [tell them] how to proceed, who to address but I think it would be much better if they were informed by the courts themselves.<sup>53</sup>

This scenario assumed an already existing situation in a specific setting: an already lost trial and people's interaction with the local court. In the case of Maria and her daughter Elena, none of the above mentioned problems were the case: they were both literate, they had the proper documentation, and their social relations had brought them to NAACAHR with ease. However, Romanian law states that you have to be a "contributing member" of an NGO before they can represent you in court. Again, this being a formality and "contributing member" being loosely defined, it is another way in which the process of

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<sup>53</sup> Recorded Interview August 2008

defending one's rights is postponed in the Romanian judicial system. After receiving the *cerere*, NAACAHR represented Elena in court and won the case. "Elena's case was a lucky one," Alex said, "it was one of the easiest cases we had because her mom was so involved in getting any documents we needed to win. Many families don't have those resources and sometimes we can't help them because of that."<sup>54</sup>

A *cerere* has the ability to transport and also obstruct movement, to create alliances and disable them at the same time, to recall socialist bureaucratic practices while being recognized as an artifact in the process of post socialist change. As such contradictions have manifested themselves, the document itself has produced situations that lend themselves to continuous public ridicule: A rural mayor in Neamt County, a physician by trade, submitted, in his role of doctor, a *cerere* to the Mayor's office to be granted the right to purchase the local village clinic (Figure 12). In his role of mayor, he approved his own petition (Cana 2014):<sup>55</sup>

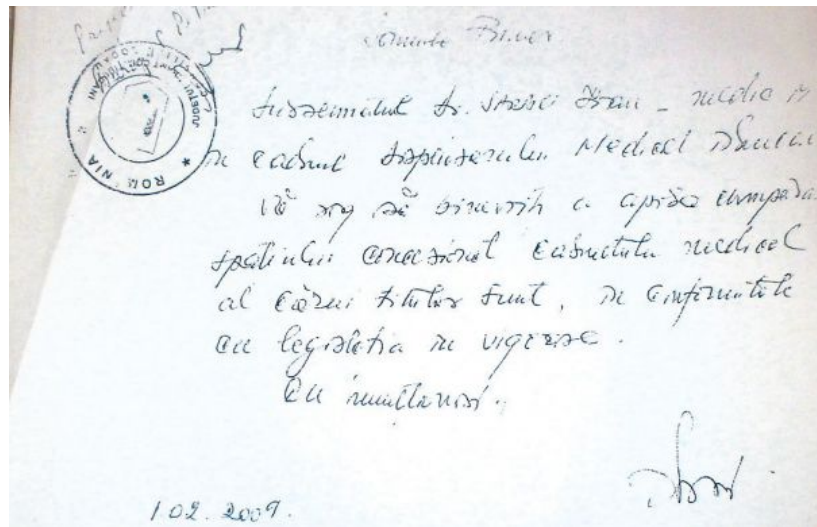


Figure 12 – The doctor's *cerere* with the Mayor's office stamp made public in the media

<sup>54</sup> Elena became an active member of NAACAHR attending educational programs where she told her story and raised awareness about the Roma community.

<sup>55</sup> I use this opportunity to also provide an actual *cerere* that is already public domain (for its format and aesthetics) since ethical concerns prevented me to reproduce the ones in the NAACAHR archive.



## Partnerships and translation work

As mentioned above, community network systems are crucial for the relationship between NGO representatives and local governments, but not unique to them. As Laura also explained to me, the judicial system—court decisions, prioritizing certain cases, hiring some legal counselors over others—is also built around such social guidelines; the laws are thus manipulated according to this network system. Many times “a little attention” (*o mica atenție*) is also associated with any kinds of interactions with these institutions. As we have seen in chapter 2, all of these are framed by both external actors and internal players in a language about “corruption”. In an interview with Laura she explained:

I think it’s the mentality after all...you know, here, that’s how the man has been taught...if he goes somewhere he has to grease someone’s palm (*sa dea spaga*)<sup>56</sup>...same thing with the public service individual...he says... “if he doesn’t give anything I’m not going to provide service” but if he does ...that’s it...they serve you immediately. I think the mentality is the larger of the causes for this system.

In the case of NGOs, the borders between corrupt practices and modes of networking were often blurred, as they found themselves between a society that functions through a particular kind of sociality and an international/European political language that condemns it. While NGO partnerships were established through acquaintances and exchanges of “small attentions,” their collective work seemed to condemn this system and was aimed at bringing its demise. Partnerships also transformed the social and linguistic space that NGOs occupied as they sought to acquire new funding, expand the

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<sup>56</sup> The most common translation for bribe is *mita* but she uses *spaga* (slang) in the interview. Many people in Romania only use *mita* when it comes to large sums of money and involves upper levels of local and central government. In the case of community network systems *spaga* is used as something different than *mita* and generally socially accepted.

territory of their activity, and negotiate various cultures of governance to achieve their goals.

During my time working with NAACAHR, one of the Family Planning clinics in Piatra-Neamț initiated a partnership project under the directive and sponsorship of SECS (The Society for Education on Contraceptives and Sex). The project was meant to bring together various local NGOs and public institutions working towards a common goal: to improve/increase their individual involvement in preventing and fighting HIV/AIDS locally (Neamt county).<sup>57</sup> The project was to take place in every county in Romania following a standardized model created by SECS. To begin the project, the lead Family Planning physician was to identify local NGOs and public institutions interested in this partnership and they were all to sign a contract. In the case of the Neamt County, the partnership contract was signed on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008, which established the Local Counseling Group-Neamt (LCG-NT). NAACAHR became involved because of their initial partnership with the library, which developed into the group's location for meetings. Alex had also talked about me to different NGO actors as a potential asset for the entire counseling group.<sup>58</sup> I attended the group's meetings, I provided any technical advice, took notes for the group, and had numerous conversations with Nina, the Family Planning physician.

SECS sent a “strategic matrix” containing questions to identify the locations in and populations among which individual organizations were active. The strategic matrix recognized several groups that the LCG-NT was to focus on when dealing with prevention of HIV/AIDS: the youth, sex workers, drug users, “men having sexual activity

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<sup>57</sup> Piatra-Neamț is the capital of Neamt county

<sup>58</sup> In the first LCG-NT meeting I was surprised that I had already acquired a nickname: “the American.”

with other men,” inmates, disadvantaged communities, which included only the Roma, and seropositive pregnant women.<sup>59</sup> During their first meeting, LCG-NT collectively went through the matrix and placed check marks in the areas they believed themselves active. Nina collected the data and identified the areas in which Piatra-Neamț NGOs lacked activity. While observing the way the partnership came to life, I paid attention to the notions that had come up in my conversations with Laura and Alex—funding, location, daily objectives and struggles—and their role in establishing LCG-NT.

Considering their objectives, I imagined SECS as an organization funded by numerous national sources, the Health Ministry, and the Romanian government. While I was initially surprised to find out that more than three quarters of SECS’ annual funding in 2006 was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development, this also explained the confusion I had noticed between NGO representatives and the proper language they used in talking about their role in LCG-NT. I was also surprised that none of the funding for SECS was provided by the Romanian government (see figure 13).<sup>60</sup>

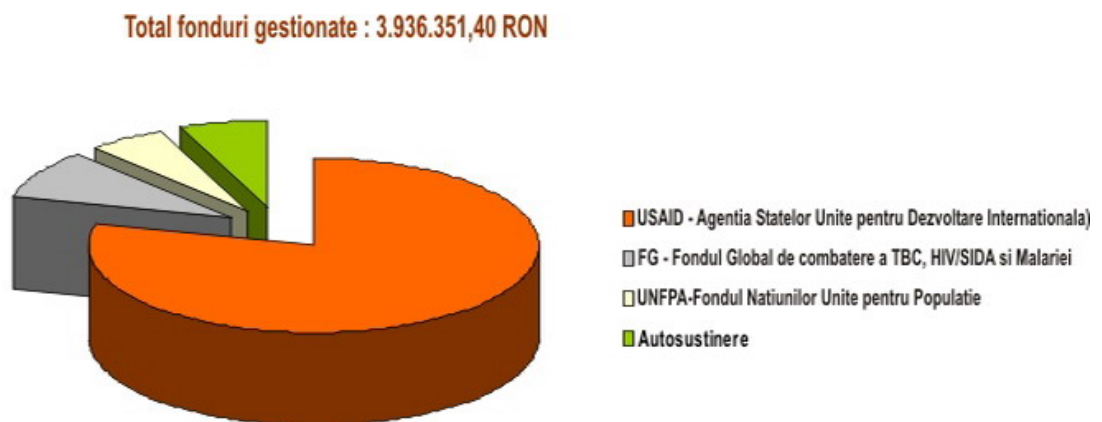


Figure 13 – SECS funding breakdown

<sup>59</sup> Strategic Matrix—LCG-NT

<sup>60</sup> ■ USAID ■ FG -The Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria  
 ■ UNFPA- United Nations Population Fund ■ Self-funded

Many of the principles advanced by SECS resonate with the core values and mission statement of the USAID and, I argue, there are implicit proper strategies that need to be learned and employed in this process. As the USAID mission statements suggests, the agency's goal is to:

Advance freedom for the benefit of the American people and the international community by helping to build and sustain a more democratic, secure, and prosperous world composed of well-governed states that respond to the needs of their people, reduce widespread poverty, and act responsibly within the international system.<sup>61</sup>

By providing the majority of SECS annual funds, USAID puts forth standards of what needs to be prioritized and how these goals are to be met. SECS is required to submit numerous and detailed reports every year in which they explain their activities and the way these have met the initial expectations of USAID. USAID examines the report and decides upon future funding possibilities and projects. In doing so, USAID is driven by and advances the following core values:

*loyalty*—commitment to the United States and the American people—*character*—maintenance of the highest ethical standards and integrity—*service*—excellence in the formulation of policy and program management with room for creative dissent and implementation of policy and management practices, regardless of personal views—*accountability*—responsibility for meeting the highest performance standards—*community*—dedication to teamwork, professionalism, and the customer perspective— and *diversity*—commitment to having a workforce that represents the diversity of America.<sup>62</sup>

However, some of these values often come in conflict with past socialist means of social organization and, as we will see further, they get problematized and reshaped in the process of cultural translation. A concept such as teamwork—symbol of building community—can resonate among Romanian citizens with the socialist concept of collective and thus, both have to be analyzed and reshaped in the process of translation to

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<sup>61</sup> USAID Strategic Plan 2007-2012, <http://www.usaid.gov> (accessed November 18, 2008)

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

appear in opposition to each other: a new modern concept to be learned from outside forces and an old socialist concept that the local population has to recognize as backward.

Moreover, even when funding is not the motivation for Romanian NGOs, the E.U. plays a key role in the process of deciding what democracy means and what it is symbolized by in Romanian society. This is done through the power the E.U. holds in including and excluding numerous states from the European political and economic space and the conditions it imposes for those being considered for inclusion. These guidelines have been in a continuous process of development since 1989 and have come to constitute a test for democracy. Pridham explains that:

The Copenhagen criteria were a more specific version of the stipulation in the 1991 Treaty on European Union about 'liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law' (article F). The Treaty of Amsterdam of 1997 then made these principles an explicit condition for membership and even envisaged the suspension of the rights of a member state in the event of a breach of these principles. It followed too that pre-accession progress towards membership could be stalled if not aborted were democratic practices to be violated in an applicant country. (Pridham 1999, 1222)

With that being said, it is important to recognize that Romanian NGOs have had to play a game for which the rules had already been established. Eastern European states had to go far beyond any other Western European practice of reporting success and identify the characteristics of their politics that have rendered them any less democratic than the rest of Europe. Romanian NGOs played a salient role in this process because they were not understood to be associated with the central government, and thus their reports were considered trustworthy.

This brought forth a series of questions about the motivations behind SECS, their projects, and the kinds of things international agencies prioritize in contrast with the

Romanian government and society. In an interview with Nina, she explained how she understood the initiation and the rationalization of this local SECS sponsored project.

Those who thought of this project started with the idea...that you can solve local needs easier by training the local partners. Training in the sense, to be reunited at the round table, to identify the local needs together, and to find the solutions together as well. I think that the initial idea was that although [the local organizations] are active on a common territory they do not know what exactly the other institutions, organizations do.

Her choice of the word “training” is key here, especially as she explained what she meant by it; NGO representatives meeting and discussing about their projects, the needs of the community, and how they can address them together hardly qualifies as “training.” Did SECS think that NGOs need to be trained in working together and if so what led to this conclusion? From my experience working with the NAACAH, NGOs often established smaller, more focused partnerships, even when competition over local funding and activity location occurred.

The central role of the E.U. and the U.S., seemed to the actors involved, was to discipline Eastern Europe into a democracy by adopting such training strategies and to create what would seemingly be a natural democratic state. The Eastern European states have to be trained so that such an order will not be disrupted by their communist past and ideology. Nina explained to me how she felt when she was initially approached about the project:

I was a bit reluctant in the beginning [thinking] that I wouldn't be able to get them all together... My greatest surprise was the interest they all manifested for this group because they understood that none of them will substitute others. Individually they keep their independence from all points of view but together we can, helping each other, be more efficient and cover a larger area both as territory and population.

In other words, what seemed to worry SECS or their sponsors, was the concept of collectivity, which resonates with the Romanian communist past. The task had become training Romanian NGOs to work as teams without encouraging some kind of socialist collectivity, which is often condemned in today's Romanian society. In doing so, SECS had to provide the language of working together and provide a series of target populations that would lead the partnership's efficiency. In many ways a collective (*colectiv*) and a team (*echipa*) are very similar, in the sense that they are both usually organized under the directive of a person or committee while all the members work together to achieve an objective.

However, in the case of Romania, these words are charged with political meaning: on one side *colectiv* being identified with a socialist dictatorship that forced Romanian citizens into collective farms for over 50 years, while *echipa* symbolizes the hope for a European home where Romania can become part of a team side by side with England, France, Germany, etc. It is the role of Romanian NGOs in the space of transition to translate *colectiv* into *echipa*, reshaping the similarities between the two to emphasize individuality and personal/private benefits of this system. Thus, disciplining Romanians into working together also meant translating the language of democracy in such a way that would not recall a shameful past. The focus is on individuality that is changing in transforming the collective into a team and what marks this discourse as democratic for the Romanian citizens. Fifty years of socialism have disciplined most in thinking of sameness and equality in economic terms, while the democratic state advocates for the same characteristics in the social realm and everyday interactions.

After going over the strategic matrix in the first meeting, none of the partners expressed their concerns with the project, or the categories provided to them by SECS. In the mandatory report Nina sent to Bucharest after this meeting she mentioned that: “no other extra activities were evidenced than those provided in the strategic matrix, the participants agreeing that this was comprising enough.”<sup>63</sup> She also did not mention the heated debates and confusion about how the group might address the needs of sex workers and men having sexual intercourse with other men; in the end they had no idea on how to identify or approach members of these groups. After countless work in fighting the labeling of AIDS as a “homosexual disease,” the local health awareness NGOs questioned the language of the category “men having sexual activity with other men.” Similarly, situating the Roma under “disadvantaged communities” and ignoring any other communities that might fall in this category—the poor—stigmatizes the Roma further as carriers of HIV/AIDS in addition to many other popular stereotypes. The social power of SECS in providing this language, and through them the influence of the U.S. Agency for International Development on the Romanian NGO activity, cannot be ignored. The Roma seem to always emerge as exceptional in these discourses even though that was not necessarily the case before 1989.

### ***Speranța and failures in translation***

Chakrabarty pointed out that “the activity of producing, [...] entails, through ritual big and small, the invocation of divine or superhuman presence.” Secular histories are produced by ignoring this presence and “represent a meeting of two systems of

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<sup>63</sup> Meeting Memo July 3, 2008



thought: one in which the world is ultimately [...] disenchanted, and the other in which humans are not the only meaningful agents.” In the process of writing history one system (secular) translates the second into itself, or is translated by certain actors to achieve certain goals (2009, 72). In the case of Piatra-Neamț NGOs, there is a similar process of translation in which the transition system of thought needs to translate not only the E.U. and the U.S. system, but also the past socialist system.

By drawing this parallel, I do not wish to present E.U., the U.S., and The Socialist Republic of Romania as imagined deities, but to encourage the recognition of their presence in everyday life in today’s Romania. By presence I mean that intertwined systems of thought become various discourses translated into one another, taking into consideration various symbols of transition, communism, and democracy: redistribution, collectivity, and teamwork, respectively.

As mentioned above, the Roma were one of the target groups for the purposes of the SECS project as well as in NAACHR regular activity. However, Roma individuals are not part of the order of command in these institutions. In the case of non-Roma NGOs,<sup>64</sup> personal experience and beliefs about the exceptionality of the Roma cause the overall lack of effectiveness. In many ways *Speranța* is the place where translating democracy fails, where the interactions between Romanians and Roma are conditioned by assumptions of normality that cannot be met. While proficient in the language of human rights, and actively involved in protecting the rights of the Roma minority, my informants employed a different, more detached language when talking about the Roma in the context of the *Speranța* project.

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<sup>64</sup> And even in the case of Roma NGOs who have to use a certain political language to be heard

When I asked Laura about what she remembered about the events, she asked me when this happened and a series of other questions to make sure she remembered the right incident. It was almost as if there was nothing unique about *Speranța* and/or not worthy of remembering. She then said:

In some way it was stigmatizing them. No...this is not a solution either. This is their style ...but they should be treated equally. You have to treat them equally because it is normal and correct in a democratic society...and to try to respect their rights just as you respect the rights of a white Romanian. It's not normal...but I know it is hard.<sup>65</sup>

Laura defended Elena's case against the Education Committee (mentioned above) and works with Elena during educational programs to raise awareness about the Roma minority. However, her comments above seemed to have come from a completely different person: a person that stepped outside her role of legal counselor, of community informer, of member of the democratic system she advocated for. When it came to *Speranța*, she switched the linguistic code, her sentences did not seem prepared anymore, and entered the personal realm of unstructured perceptions and beliefs. She talked about the Roma as outsiders, as "having a different style" and it was only because of this democratic new state that they were entitled to rights. In her professional daily life Laura follows specific rules of conduct, which are determined by her role as a judicial counselor at a human rights NGO. Sociologist Erving Goffman argued that "rules of conduct" impact individuals on two levels: "directly, as *obligations*, establishing how he is morally constrained to conduct himself; indirectly, as *expectations*, establishing how others are morally bound to act in regard to him" (Goffman 1956, 473–474). In other words, the way Laura talks about the Roma in court is conditioned both by her obligations as a lawyer and by the expectations of those coming to NAACAHR for help, but they do not

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<sup>65</sup> Recorded interview

interfere with the personal way in which she talks about the Roma in general, which are conditioned by other expectations.

As part of every educational project organized by NAACAHR, Elena recites what Alex called “a poem” about the Roma minority, which starts with a historical and social perspective on the Roma and continues into identifying four classical prejudices:

1. Roma steal: When non-Roma steal billions from the state budget and bring poverty over the entire country, their guilt is personal. When a Roma steals a chicken to feed the family, the guilt befalls the entire Roma community.
2. Roma are dirty: Due to belief in purity rituals, the Roma have strict hygiene norms limited by their financial status. Prejudices such as “Roma don’t wash” are thus due to skin color or social class.
3. Roma are uneducated: Another issue is discrimination at work. A Roma individual, even educated, has few chances of being offered a high-ranking position. Thus, education is not seen as a way to succeed in life for the Roma.
4. Roma are invaders: Another aspect commonly ignored is that the Roma were enslaved in the Romanian Principalities. The Roma are seen as invaders when in fact they were forced to stay on the territory of our land.<sup>66</sup>

The poem concludes by stating that the Roma have been trapped in a vicious cycle of discrimination and economic containment, issues that need to be recognized and understood before the circle could be broken.

It is exactly this process that the non-Roma NGO workers seemed to have escaped in their work with the Roma: they master the politically correct language of democracy while still being governed by perceived personal norms of how society operates around them. Civil society and democracy do not get translated in the case of *Speranța* the same way as in other social spaces. The mere existence of the District of Hope represents a mistranslation of European standards and democratic values, which is why it has been condemned in the international arena. The “poem” Elena recites presents us with uncertainty or an ambiguity that needs to be negotiated: “The Roma are seen as

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<sup>66</sup> Prejudices—NAACAHR Archive

invaders when in fact they were forced to stay on the territory of our land.” The poem was written and used by NAACAHR before they were presented with Elena’s case, so what does it mean to claim “our land”? With Elena reciting it, it opens the doors for Roma inclusion, seeing the Roma minority members as full citizens of Romania and having historical claims to the land they occupy. However, if it was written by a non-Roma it still presents the Roma as outsiders on “our land,” whether accepted by society or not.

Nina formulated her answer to my question about *Speranța* by completely ignoring the actual events of 2001 and returning instead to the idea of teamwork mentioned above. She says:

The Social Assistance Service has trained social workers from among the Roma group. They were the ones who informed the Roma women and they were the ones who brought them here [at the family planning clinic]. After that the medical system contributed in informing them (the Roma): I trained, and now I know what I’m talking about, I personally trained those mediators. You see, after all, why we need various actors in an intervention? Because they complete and help each other.<sup>67</sup>

Unlike Mirela, Nina is speaking in past tense but she is talking about a very recent past, after the relocation of hundreds of Roma families to *Speranța*. The mediators she mentions work in the *Speranța* local clinic and their role is to educate Roma women in visiting the family-planning clinic regularly. These programs, linked to the medical system, are not unique to ghetto projects (in this case a somewhat failed one), but also target rural Roma communities considered already segregated from mainstream society. To return to Europe, Romanians were advised by the E.U. to integrate the Roma minority, but in the case of non-Roma NGOs this process has been hindered by their own beliefs and prejudices: to integrate the Roma, they have to be separated/isolated and

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<sup>67</sup> Recorded Interview

altered and hopefully brought back into mainstream Romanian society as new, fit democratic citizens.

The problem with this approach is that it contradicts what the E.U. advocates when defining its membership: a community of nations keeping their cultures and individuality while working for a common democratic economic goal. Moreover, E.U. approaches to funding Eastern European projects have been criticized as focused on the higher level of society while not really being concerned with how they affect people on the ground level. Thus NGOs like NAACAHR have depended on larger NGOs for funding and partnerships, which came with various constraints. Richard Young argues that:

Civil society support is criticized for prioritizing a narrow range of elite, professionalized, -style political advocacy NGOs, rather than encouraging associative organizations around the kind of concrete social and economic issues more likely successfully to generate popular engagement. (Youngs 2003, 127)

This creates specific spaces in which translation can occur and gives power to particular players in Romanian society, while others are left dependent on set discourses and regulations.

Katherine Verdery has explored the process of building society in Romania soon after 1989 claiming that, in Eastern European countries, notions of “Europe” and “civil society” enter the language of everyday life differently than in the West. Verdery explains that “Europe” came to be seen as a symbol for the collapse of Party rule in Eastern Europe and thus, key to the future political, economical, and cultural transformations. Verdery states:

To build civil society, then, is to return to Europe. To talk of building civil society, like talk of returning to Europe, indicates one’s adherence to an entire program of social change (or at least one’s opposition to someone else’s

program). In this sense, “civil society” in post-1989 Eastern Europe is as much a feature of political discourse and symbolism as of societal organization. (Verdery 1991a, 7:104)

Thus, concepts such as civil society and democracy had to not only be implemented into policies and laws but also translated into the symbols of transition—as well as moved away from any association with a communist past—and presented and consumed in the everyday private and public spheres. The European Union had to come to terms with the way in which such concepts were being reshaped in the post-socialist states and recognize the need for diverse approach strategies. Geoffrey Pridham argues that, since 1989, significant shifts have taken place in the way democracy is advocated in Eastern Europe and the way the E.U. has advanced creating democratic states.

Increasingly, the EU's criteria have moved from mainly procedural conditions (e.g. rule of law, separation of institutional powers, free elections, freedom of expression) to include also criteria of substantive democracy, such as the role of political parties as a vehicle for political participation, the pluralism of the media, the importance of local government and an involved civil society. (Pridham 1999, 1221)

Thus, more recent E.U. approaches have attempted to reach closer to the ground in post-socialist states and recognized the diverse actors that play a role in constructing and presenting definitions of democracy to the individual citizens. The creation of numerous political parties in Romania, the privatization and diversification of the media, and the transformation of local governments as spatial symbols of the central democratic government, have produced new sources of information and political awareness in the post-communist society. However, this new influx of outside concepts and ideologies requires a continuous process of translation in which European concepts are transformed into Romanian laws, standards, and life-structuring guidelines.

However, as Pridham mentions above, E.U. approaches have shifted towards a substantive democracy, which implies multiple forms of democracy that have to be negotiated in Eastern Europe. Mary Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda have distinguished between two types of democracy: formal—“a set of rules, procedures and institutions”—and substantive—“a process that has to be continually reproduced, a way of regulating power relations in such a way as to maximize the opportunities for individuals to influence the conditions in which they live, to participate in and influence debates about the key decisions which affect society” (Kaldor and Vejvoda 2002, 62). In the case of many Eastern European states, the lack of government initiatives and focused programs has transformed NGOs into the key supervisors over proper forms of democracy and the ways these should play out at ground level (Tzvetkova 2002). NGO activists have taken on the challenges to organize and make sense of what democracy entails for the new Romanian citizen. Thus, translations of western concepts depend mostly on how they are being understood by NGO players and their strategies to make such translations accessible to the public.

## **Conclusion**

My explorations into the culture of Piatra-Neamț NGOs has revealed a series of practices, characteristics, and constraints in their daily activities of defining and promoting democracy in post-socialist Romania. Their culture is structured by intersecting vectors of power—funding resources, partnership opportunities, government and international regulations—that alter every activity they engage in. Romania’s aspirations to joining the E. U. have placed the tasks of appropriating, translating, and

preparing for social consumption western ideas of democracy, civil society, and human rights. However, as seen above, Piatra-Neamț NGOs have found themselves caught in a shifting space of multiple translations between past experience and present transitions. Rapidly changing legal codes and economic and social norms have all been imposed by the E.U., while dependency on the U.S. and E.U. funding has shaped the way values are appropriated and reconfigured to fit Romanian culture. Local NGOs have depended on the larger institutions, such as SECS, that can easily access large funds from the U.S. and E.U. and establish partnerships, but have also been constrained by particular regulations, terminology, and strategies of approach, regardless of what they identified as local needs.

However, the people who have paid the highest price have been minorities, and, in the case of Piatra-Neamț, the Roma minority in particular. Being identified as one of the “problems” of the Romanian state, they were to be integrated in Romanian society in order for Romania to qualify for E.U. membership. However, integration was understood by some officials, such as Ion Rotaru, as a means for further segregation and discrimination articulated in a different language. Relocating the Roma to remodeled housing blocks outside of town did not change the economic condition of the Roma and displaced them further from any kind of integration. Moreover, Romanian NGO activists fighting for Roma rights have been limited by local perspectives and prejudice and present the Roma community as exceptions to Romanian “normality” even in attempts to be politically correct. The Roma emerge as a group that needs to be fixed in a particular geographical and ideological space in order to fit in the young democracy; relocated outside the city, they now inhabit a place that promises them rights they do not enjoy otherwise.



By focusing on the way in which particular vocabularies (foreign, NGO, judicial, public) transform and intersect in specific practices, I have taken a dynamic approach to the question of how this dual level *translation* actually happens: in what circumstances, through the actions of which actors, under what constraints, etc. Because this translation process is never homogenous, multiple instances of failure and success become articulated. These moments allow us to see local NGO actors not only as supporters and leaders of “civil society,” but often as powerless and dispossessed local subjects of outside forces, continuously waiting for the final transformation to occur. Lastly, we find them as resourceful members of the local sociality presented in the first section, which allows them to creatively deal with unexpected/unfamiliar situations, while at the same time creating unusual constraints for the very concepts they are trying to import into their communities. The work of these activists is always temporary and subject to revision. The conditions and terms of their activities depend on an imagined external evaluation for success even when they do not depend on external funding, while their hopes for a new society often come into conflict with their own local and personal notions and practices.

Moreover, the in-between space in which NGOs are already situated becomes harder to negotiate when entering various partnerships. For years, the United States, European Union, and the United Nations have created the language of democracy and sponsored various methods for organizations to become proficient in this language. But in the process of translating this language locally, many NGO actors find themselves powerless, dispossessed in various ways, questioning their thoughts and ideas about who

they are and against whom, while perpetually waiting for the ultimate change: the moment when they could function independently as a nation.

## CHAPTER 4 – MAKING SPACE FOR OTHERS: DISFUNCTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND OTHER EXCLUSIONARY TECHNIQUES

### Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to explore the way in which socialist spaces have been reconfigured over the past couple of decades to fit certain models of Europeanness and in this process outlined characteristics that makes certain individuals more or less unfit for contemporary Piatra-Neamț life. In the first section I examine the way in which the inclusion and execution of curb ramps have reconfigured how some individuals understand change and ultimately navigate space. Exploring the materiality of the streets, the absence, presence, angle, quality of curb ramps illuminates the kind of society the socialist, local democratic, and European governments understand to serve/represent as well as the people who are rendered abnormal or unfit as they attempt to navigate these spaces. I call this group *accidental others*.

The second section examines the forced relocation of the Piatra-Neamț Roma minority to the renovated, former communist, chicken farm as a method for rendering an entire ethnic group invisible. I argue that the physical removal from the town to a place lacking infrastructure and the social networks that made daily life possible, led to increasing movement between the *Speranța* neighborhood and the town, making members of the Roma minority more visible in public space than before their removal.

By looking at historical instances of Roma discrimination—although not necessarily continuous—I call the group *historical others*.

The third section deals with a new category of outsider marked by previous occupation, trade or habits and in a sense they represent the town's elderly: they are recognized as stuck in factory worker mentality, they have set schedules, they recycle, they “collect” things or hoard things, they repurpose cans, margarine containers, coffee boxes, etc. For the new generation this behavior symbolizes communism and its remnants which has led to conflicting ideas about what is socialist behavior and what are contemporary eco friendly practices. I call this group *generational others*.

There is little interaction between the members of these groups as they all engage in intricate processes of distinction. As they mark each other by generation, gender, economic class, ethnic identity they also face the challenges of local spatial transformation. I argue that despite the differences people create or recognize in one another, they literally “get stuck” together in the contradictions and inadequacies of a transforming materiality.

There is a logic to the order of my explorations: the disabled is the clearly marked socialist other that can, most times be visibly identified; this last characteristic is shared with most Roma minority members although the group enjoyed a few short-lived benefits during socialism; similar benefits were extended to groups that were recognized as ethnic, like the ethnic hungarian in the third category, but what is more important about him is that he represents the ideal socialist subject against which all others are defined: he is the factory worker. His interaction with the material world around him, the hoarded containers in his apartment, the stairs, the apartment building imply a synergy with the

surrounding environment that is unfamiliar to the new generation who expects change. As spaces transform and require new skills the worker becomes the ultimate unfit other for the new European citizen.

### **Distorted Ramps: disability in the ~~post~~-socialist city**

It is surely not a secret that the socialist regime in Romania and elsewhere managed to keep so called “undesirables” out of public eye for decades. People with various disabilities and chronic illnesses benefited from pensions that placed them outside the productive proletariat force and made them invisible. City planners and architects seemed to have gone out of their way to create spaces that were impossible to navigate by those with physical impairments.

Most illnesses were collapsed into one category that defined the socialist “unfit” and most able individuals lacked the vocabulary and knowledge to explain the conditions of those around them. Interactions with disabled persons were kept brief and conversations never revolved around their respective impairment. In the numerous conversations I had with Piatra-Neamț dwellers, disability and one’s feelings towards it still appeared difficult to articulate.

Because Piatra-Neamț was built as a planned socialist city for able-bodied factory workers this was clearly exhibited in the materiality of the city. The grey asphalt covered sidewalks transitioned abruptly into the street with a step or sometimes more, pedestrian walks were frequent and present in every large intersection, most apartment buildings were five-story high and were not equipped with an elevator, while the eight to ten story buildings had small elevators that rarely worked. To enter most of these buildings you

had to climb a set of eight to ten steps before you could reach the elevator. Embarking a bus, entering a store, a school, a government building, entailed the same task: climbing up sets of stairs. As I asked about the city's architecture and its transformations people often explained to me that the ubiquity of stairs was not accidental; spaces were designed by socialist architects to give you a sense of climbing as you went about everyday life. While I have not been able to verify that this was the architects' real intention, several archival materials call for the creation of feeling of triumph and prosperity through the urban architecture.

As Piatra-Neamt residents seemed to suggest, the constant climbing of stairs to carry out the most mundane of tasks created a sense of instant, brief, and individual satisfaction as one made a purchase, paid a utility bill, returned a book to the library, and arrived home. As I listened to these explanations I realized that people understood this particular architectural trait of their space as unidirectional; people never talked about going down the stairs to exit their apartment building, the library, city hall, or the shopping center. They followed their trajectory through the socialist space, marked by the next set of steps they were to climb and their satisfaction was even greater if a shortage of time threatened their ability to arrive at their destination. People often talked about catching the bus to work and the success of climbing on that first step before the bus doors closed.

Distanced by over twenty years from their triumphs over flights of stairs my informants rarely spoke about moving downward and almost nobody talked about the individuals who, recognizing the effort it took them to navigate the public space, spent their lives watching the world from balconies and windows above. When I asked

explicitly, people began to recall the “unfortunates”, the disabled, physically or even mentally ill:

There was this girl on the sixth floor who was always on the balcony. She must have been sixteen or eighteen but she almost never came outside. Sometimes her father would come from the factory and take her for a walk but she could barely move properly and people never knew how to interact with her parents when she was with them. It was a sad situation to have to care for your child at that age.

Petrica recounts his neighbor’s daughter, Alina, who was autistic and did not undergo much treatment. At the time she was diagnosed in the early eighties not much was known about Autism and people told me they understood the illness as a hearing impairment. This might even partially explain why people felt they could not communicate with her. However, memories of similar reactions to other kinds of disability or chronic illness would most likely suggest that Alina was not unique. Moreover, as we have seen in Chapter 2, while memories of able-bodied acquaintances were dynamic and could be arranged in time and carved as evidence for a shared and meaningful past, there was always something static about remembering the disabled. In Petrica’s account, Alina is not only stuck in her routine of watching others from the balcony, or waiting for her father to take her for a walk, but she is also frozen in time. Even though Petrica has lived in the building for over 30 years and has known Alina’s family since she was a young child, he recounts her at the end of her teens when it had become obvious that she will always be dependent on her family.

Diana is in her thirties and works for a local newspaper. In our conversations about her growing up in the small factory town, she told me about her neighbor, Ms. Nina:

As a child I was always intrigued by our next door neighbor who was also my occasional babysitter. Most children in my building considered her a spy because

she was always home and made it her duty to tell our parents about our various mischiefs. She kept tabs on our visitors while our parents were at work and reported their times of arrival and departure. I finally asked my mother why Ms. Nina did not have a job; after all she seemed to be completely able and more than eager to help with the neighborhood children. My mother explained to me that Ms. Nina had a terrible illness called “epilepsy” which confines her to her apartment and for which she receives a small pension. It was true, Ms. Nina did not get out of her apartment much and when she did, it was only around the building. Sometimes she would catch us on our way to the market and ask us to pick up her groceries too. I never questioned my mother’s explanation of “epilepsy.”

Ms. Nina’s pension allowed her to remain in the comfort of her home because her illness had become unpredictable but the fact that she lived on the 8th floor in an apartment building where the elevator was mostly for decoration kept her from exploring the neighborhood. Rendered unfit by state policies and public architecture to participate in the social exchange she was also redefined as a spy in the eyes of those children who were just learning one’s duties in the “multilaterally developed society.”

Soon after the collapse of communism in 1989 some pension funds for the disabled were dissolved, caregivers passed away or migrated to find work abroad, and international foundations and NGOs arrived in Romania to represent people with physical impairments, autistic children, individuals with Down Syndrome, etc. They advocated not only for their acceptance in society but for their ability to acquire the skills and resources to navigate the mechanisms and spaces of that society independently. One such transformation, sanctioned and sponsored by the European Union, was the introduction of ramps: at the entrance of public institutions and retail stores, at all or major crosswalks, in parks, in linking parts of a sidewalk temporarily interrupted by a driveway, etc. However, because of shame or stigma in a culture where attitudes did not change as rapidly as the public space appeared to be recalibrated, it has been hard to assess the functionality of



these transformations and how they might aim at including the less than abled “others.” While those with disabilities are not necessarily more visible than before, young mothers, in attempting to navigate a familiar Piatra-Neamț public space while fulfilling their new role, have become temporarily or partially disabled.

I began thinking about curb ramps in Piatra-Neamț, Romania as I listened to people calculate out loud the time it would take them to meet me. In our phone conversations people would justify why, what seemed a five-minute walking trip, would take significantly longer. Because I had never solicited these explanations I was intrigued by the frequency with which some people excused themselves for navigating the city slower than others. I began to understand that women who had recently become mothers were more likely to offer such explanations because the way they navigated the space had recently transformed. It was easy to understand that now they had to feed and dress a baby, change a diaper, pack diaper bags and strollers with all necessities but these processes were never included in their apologetic calculations of the time to destination. It was the world outside their apartment door that caused time to multiply (or space to stretch) that presented them with obstacles and contradictions that required these women to remap the city and recalibrate the way they navigated a space that had been so familiar but suddenly so novel.

I was meeting Andra and her four months son on the terrace of Casablanca, a relatively new, posh and centrally located cafe. I invited her for a coffee and a walk through the park, which was just a short stroll away. She arrived just a few minutes late, physically tired and upset. She apologized again for being late although there was never a difference in how late the young mothers were compared to other people I would meet in

town. However, I could not help notice the universal frustration upon arrival among my friends who were new mothers. Andra began her story retracing her steps backward. She told me that in an effort to get to our meeting on time she crossed the street pushing her son's stroller at a different pedestrian walk than usual. She noticed the car heading their way but looked at the curb on the other side and assessed that it was low enough to be able to lift the front wheels of the stroller and get safely to the sidewalk. What she did not plan for was another extra step about a foot into the sidewalk that she would have to push the stroller over. She was stuck...

I'm stupid. I don't know why I didn't cross at the history museum. The driver saw us walking on the pedestrian walk but he probably didn't expect it would take me so long to get on the sidewalk so he had slowed down but lost his patience when he had to come to a complete stop at the crosswalk. He started yelling at me like I was endangering my child's life somehow. What was I supposed to do?

She told me about passing by the hospital but having to cross on the other side of the street because the crosswalk by the hospital ends in a high curb and the bad connection with the sidewalk causes the stroller wheels to get stuck. On the other side there was a quite functional ramp but you had to travel a bit out of your way. And there was also the crosswalk between Pietricica complex and the history museum, which is close to a large roundabout connecting five streets and is preceded by a curve so one had to watch for cars coming from all directions. She tried to avoid crossing there as much as possible and by making this choice she takes the longer route to her destination.

The streets and sidewalks in Piatra-Neamț have undergone numerous transformations since 2004. The sidewalks were repaved with gray and rose stone and curb ramps were introduced at most crosswalks through a project sponsored by the European Union. Roundabouts replaced traffic lights in all major intersections to help

traffic flow and many crosswalks have been moved to avoid congestion in the roundabouts.



Figure 14 – New sidewalk curb with no ramp (photo credit Andra Lungu)



Figure 15 – Extremely steep ramp

Aesthetically, the town has transformed dramatically, especially after the buildings along the main boulevards were repaired and painted in earthy or bright colors. The mission to transform Piatra-Neamț in a tourist attraction was well under way as I asked people about the transformations in their daily life. But people seemed distraught, angry, and only sometimes disappointed as poor quality and execution has been a part of their lives for decades. “What can you do? It’s just the way things have always been done here. You don’t even know who is responsible for anything” said Raluca, a young mother who, through her work at the mayor’s office, had become quite familiar with the way modernization projects unfolded in Piatra-Neamț.

When I conducted my fieldwork, women in Romania were still entitled, by law, to two years maternity leave and legislators were looking to cut that time in half. Thus, young mothers spent most of their time pushing strollers around town, shopping, meeting friends, walking in the park. Many of them routinely incorporated in their schedule two trips a day to the downtown area. Even those who owned cars and could get to their destination faster talked about the health benefits of walking the entire way for both their children and their recovering bodies. But even with this in mind, I have witnessed countless conversations about how hard it was to push a stroller over high curbs, up steep ramps, out of sidewalk gaps not filled properly or with enough sand. They exchanged notes and ideas of best routes and sometimes laughed at recalling an instance of bad planning on their part. It was during these conversations I first heard about one’s downward movement along side talk of climbing flights of steps. Young mothers offered a story that retired factory workers had buried behind their triumphant tales of upwardness.

Alina remembered slipping and falling on a ramp outside a general store close to her house. She was laughing while she was telling me her story. She was pushing her daughter's stroller down the ramp on a rainy day, slipped and slid down to the bottom of the ramp. She did not get hurt but the reason she was laughing was tied to the way in which the ramp, covered with shiny tiles designed for indoor use, was executed. "How did that even cross their mind? I can't even imagine using that ramp in winter. I really don't think they understand why ramps are necessary."



Figure 16 – Disfunctional curb ramp (photo credit Andra Lungu)

Ramona, another young mother, told me about the process of choosing a stroller before her son was born. She lived on the fourth floor of one of the five story apartment buildings designed without an elevator. Before she was pregnant, she never had to think about the potential difficulties of going down the stairs although planning grocery shopping and furniture acquisitions were always centered on the upward mobility of such

items. Being pregnant she realized how hard it had become for her to move downwards as well.

She decided to buy a two piece stroller: the base could stay in their car most of the times or in the underground storage area, the chair had to be light so she could carry it with her baby strapped in and a packed diaper bag over her shoulder. At no point did she mention the comfort or safety ratings of the stroller although I do not doubt those might have been factored into their decision making process. What she did not know to plan for was getting out of the building with the stroller as one of the entrance double doors had been painted shut a few years back, when the building was renovated. Needless to say, she has become quite savvy in maneuvering the stroller and swiveling its wheels in such a way to make it out the door but she does admit it takes time, after which there is another set of stairs she has to tackle carrying the stroller in its entirety. There have been attempts to include a ramp on the side of these external stairs but because the original plans did not include that, local governments do not provide authorizations for them unless there is enough space along the building. In cases where tenants decided to build one regardless, city officials sent workers to take the ramps apart or destroy them.

The socialist space, designed for able-bodied workers kept the disabled invisible. The inclusion of curb ramps as well as the partial modernization of socialist worker apartment buildings were sanctioned by the European parliament as a commonsensical step in returning to Europe and acknowledging the diverse needs of a society's members. However, the execution of these ramps and the unclear reasoning behind their necessity has reconfigured the way in which people understand change and ultimately how they navigate space. "Not much is changing when change happens here" says Raluca forcing

herself to smile. As we will see in the next section, the same is true in the case of the local Roma minority—not much has changed as European Union funds have been employed for the improvement of their social and economic conditions.

### **The marking and removal of the unfit: The Roma**

As the borders opened towards the European Union, Romanians of all ethnicities began to emigrate in search for a better future. Ethnic Roma and their “way of life” were rendered as a European “problem” as more and more illegal settlements emerged around key European cities. These problems echoed in the small town of Piatra-Neamț as well; local officials decided there was no place for the Roma in the tourist town they were trying to transform Piatra-Neamț into. As Ion Rotaru explained, the relocation project was meant to “extract this 'black plague' from the residential districts in the town,” render them invisible to expected tourists, and collectively forget that Roma and non-Roma coexisted in Piatra-Neamț for decades.

“Distinctions, they all tell us, are the basis of any orderliness” and “entities that are not clearly differentiated from their surroundings are practically invisible” (Zerubavel 1993, 1). Distinctions are constructed to create a sense of order, and as such things relegated to the realm of “dirt” are essentially “disorder” or “matter out of place” that are eliminated from environment through actions of continuous re-ordering. According to Douglas, dirt exists only in “the eye of the beholder” who interprets this relationship to recognize instances of “pollution” in a specific context or place. As we assign distinct purposes to different spaces in our environment, similar to religious distinctions between

sacred and profane spaces, we separate and define parts of our reality, the things and actions that fit our orderly world and create “islands of meaning” (Douglas 1966, 5).

As I mentioned before, in October of 2001, the small Romanian mountain town of Piatra-Neamț suddenly became the focus of national and international media and human rights NGO reports. Two years back, Ion Rotaru, the mayor of Piatra-Neamț, had come up with what he thought would be the perfect plan to “extract” the Roma population from several neighborhoods and relocate them about six kilometers away in a renovated, formerly communist, chicken farm. “The place will be surrounded with barbed wire and watched by guardians and both local Roma community and street children will be moved there”, Mayor Ion Rotaru declared. The specifics of the material conditions are crucial in shaping ideology about the Roma within Piatra-Neamț community.

After all, to define something entails the conceptual construction or delimitations of its boundaries, “to surround it with a mental fence that separates it from everything else” (O’Brien 2010, 12) and exaggerates the distinctions between the thing and the non-thing. “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (Douglas 1966: 4). The recognition of boundaries and analysis of processes of “boundary work” have been central to studies of society, especially since the 1960s. Definitions of the sacred contrasted the profane (Durkheim 1965), differentiation between social classes emerged with conceptualizing the proletariat against its capitalist oppressor (Marx 1963), while ethnic and status groups were understood to emerge in opposition to one another (Weber 1978). What is salient about the concept of boundaries as “a thinking tool” for



social scientists, is its ability to capture relationality<sup>68</sup>, “a fundamental social process” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 167–169). Because Piatra-Neamț residents, both Roma and non-Roma, remembered a past where they all live and worked together in a factory, thinking about fences, both material and ideological, allows to understand when, how, and to what ends such boundaries are built or conceptualized.

The *Speranța* project was condemned nationally and internationally as an extremely nationalist attempt to segregate the ethnically Roma minority from the mainstream Romanian population. However, Ion Rotaru defended his project, financed through European Union funds, by claiming that the project was not rooted in preexisting prejudices against the Roma; on the contrary, the relocation project was meant to improve the lives of the Roma population, bringing them closer to European standards. The media covered the story for several weeks, presenting arguments from all sides, and for those familiar with Romanian mass media culture, jumping from subject to subject with no follow-up coverage, this was surely not a subject to be taken lightly.

Unlike the mothers who became accidental others as they stumbled into the transformations of Piatra-Neamț, the Roma have become historical others. That is to say that, in order to understand the process through which the Roma have been marginalized in post-communist Romania, one needs to consider the historical conditions that made the Roma a minority in Romania, as well as the social, material and cultural attributes of that era. That is not to say that “beneath the enduring hostility to Gypsies [today] lies an ancient envy of the nomadic life” as George Monbiot has argued, but perceptions and myths about the *țigăni*, created over time, assisted Romanian nationalists in their attempts

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<sup>68</sup> This can be linked to Jakobson and Halle’s articulation of distinct features that always exist in relation and opposition to one another. (A is not B and B is not A) (2002: 38)

to recreate the post-communist notion of “Romanian” (Monbiot 2003). Roger D. Petersen defines *ethnic hatred* as “an antagonism against a group as an object; the antagonism is focused on the purported innate characteristics of the opposing group.” However, anti-Roma sentiments cannot be explained as an inherent and continuous characteristic of Romanian society without wrongly assuming the lack of interruptions and/or transformations in the forms of prejudice.

The Romanian Communist Party was founded in 1921 and during its first 20 years it only gained the support of less than 1000 members, most of whom were essentially affiliated with minority groups (Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Jews, Hungarians, Russians, etc.) rather than being part of the dominant population. Emmanuelle Pons argued that, most post-war Roma were manufacturers rather than agriculturists, which automatically situated them in the communist realm of the proletariat and strong supporters of the new regime (Pons and Ciubuc 1999). However, it was the utopian vision of communism as a universal/inclusive vision which echoed positively among the Roma and any other excluded minorities and provided the context for such support.

Mihai Berindei claims that in the 1950s “Romanians were more anti-Semitic, anti-Gypsy, and anti-Hungarian than they were before the war” (Berindei 1980). This was explained by Emmanuelle Pons as an effect of the promotions that the minorities enjoyed after the Communist Party came to power. The socialist regime, in the search for utopian social equality, instituted a land reform that collectivized all the properties and land from those who owned them. These lands were later split in two kinds of farms: the collective farms (CAP) and the state farms (IAS). Conflicts and animosities between Romanian peasants and the Communist Party were informed by the way in which the land reforms

have been implemented; because of that, it was not long until the Roma were blamed for the peasants' loss of land. Such "scapegoatism" was often expressed in Romanian folk:

*Come, God, on Earth  
To see what Stalin has done.  
He turned horse into donkey  
And Roma into secretary!*

However, the situation of the Roma during Communism was far more complex than that. The Roma who were promoted by the Communist Party represented a very small percentage of the entire Roma population in Romania. Because Roma identity was associated with a culture of poverty and underdevelopment, communist politics of assimilation targeted the Roma as a social group rather than ethnic. Viorel Achim noted that one of the hardest periods to talk about the Roma in Romania is actually the time of the communist regime. The author claims that due to the Roma not being recognized as an ethnic minority as were the Hungarians and Germans, it is hard to point out the details of how much the Roma benefited or not, as a group, from the Communist era. Achim also explained that the benefits that the Roma gained during communism were not because they were lifted up by the communist regime as a group but rather because they happened to fit the social class that the socialists were trying to elevate: the poor. However, once the Communist Party gained enough support from the people (whether voluntary or by force), they dismissed the "uneducated" Roma from their political positions, replacing them with "more qualified personnel" (Achim 1998, 154).

No one could publicly explain the conflicts between Roma and Romanians as ethnic, because communist policies denied the Roma their ethnic identity. That is not to say that discrimination did not exist but it was seen as social or personal rather than based on ethnic motives. Also, during the 1960s the Ceausescu regime carried out a drastic

campaign in order to force all Roma who were still living a nomadic life (to some extent) to settle.

The results were not the ones expected. Even though they were given houses, Gypsies continued to live for a while in their tent, which was laid out in their courtyard, and used the house as shelter for their horses. During the summer they continued to travel through the country with their crafts or mobile commerce. (Achim 1998, 155)<sup>69</sup>

Without taking in consideration the dynamics between the Roma who were forced to settle and the already present mainstream society, one cannot paint a full picture of the situation of the Roma during the Communist era. It is also impossible to establish under what conditions, after resisting the politics of assimilation for more than a decade, the Roma finally *accepted* to settle at the end of 1970s and beginning of 1980s.

In my own observations in Piatra-Neamț many Roma and non-Roma, looked back at the Communist era, claiming that at least, during that period, they were offered job security, a roof above their heads, and did not worry about what they were going to put on the table. A Roma woman in Piatra-Neamț, Romania expressed her regret for the Communist regime: “We were better off when Ceausescu lived. Somehow, we had a job, a house. Now, with this democracy, we die of hunger and we die homeless.”

It is with this fragmented history in mind that Roma rights agencies function throughout Europe and approach projects such as the *Speranța* neighborhood in Piatra-Neamț. When prompted by media reports, human rights workers are aware of the potential for spectacle in such a story and are cautious in assessing the implications of

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<sup>69</sup> Although this account essentializes the Roma as unwilling to settle due to their “free spirits” and “love for travel,” Viorel Achim does mention at the beginning of his chapter that due to the lack of sociological studies and no access to the Communist archives, one can only count on oral history, which his study did not set to do.

their cases. Romani CRISS (The Roma Center for Social Intervention and Studies) closely followed the *Speranța* story and investigated whether or not the site of the Roma relocation could be considered a “ghetto.” They discovered two kinds of residences in the “District of Hope”—the former chicken farm warehouses to be fit for Roma families and new buildings under construction containing multi room flats and equipped with all the necessary amenities (see figures 17 and 18). The Romani CRISS report states:

According to the declarations of the 17 Roma families, the City Hall intended to move them in these halls to be partitioned in single rooms, each family, regardless how many people, being assigned just one room. There is a corridor along the building, separating the rooms on the two sides. Roma people living here declared that they will choose to stay in such social residences provided the minimum living standards are fulfilled. However, the conditions in the buildings under construction, as well as in the buildings on the left side of the district (to be given to young [non-Roma] families) are obviously superior to the conditions in the buildings behind the private property halls (to be given to Roma people) In terms of comfort, there are two categories of residences. The first buildings have furnished or unfurnished apartments, single flats with kitchen and bathroom, while the halls located further have just some partitioned rooms along a corridor.

Following the extensive media attention and the numerous reports filed by human rights NGOs with the European Roma Rights Council (ERRC) the project was significantly altered: the barbed wire fence was never finished (although a fence still stands separating the new and old buildings), a school and church were built, and public transportation, although limited, became available. The inhabitants were not given IDs and no guard was hired to monitor the families living there, as it was previously intended.



Figure 17 - Renovated former chicken farm buildings in *Speranța*



Figure 18 - New apartment buildings in *Speranța*

In the initial stages of my research I was mostly blinded by my personal feelings towards the relocation project, angry that this was still possible and highly supported today, and outraged by how little power I believed the relocated families had in the battle

with officials. I had no idea how much authority individuals can embody and exercise through their mere existence, going about daily life, however transformed. Invisibility was not easily imposed even though it appeared so at first glance. My first attempt to research the subject, at the local archive, was shut down by an angry librarian: “We don’t hold materials about that subject here” she explained in a note I received in the archive small elevator where I was waiting for the newspaper articles I had selected from their own database. But the recorded files, the call numbers and unfriendly gatekeeper revealed a dynamic that later became obvious about the *Speranța* neighborhood as well: its construction, the targeted population for relocation and the silence around the project were not obstacles for my research.

I later found a more cooperative archive specialist who was kind enough to let me interview her. I asked her about the relocation project and she promptly dismissed the question: “There was really no relocation project. They tried to do that but they didn’t succeed...and it’s not just Roma living there...really, it’s just social housing.” After that she gave me a lengthy and well-rehearsed speech about the library, what they are trying to do for the community, the resources available and events that take place there. However, many of these events targeted the Roma population and in order to organize them, the library staff had to come up with goals, the library users’ needs and ways to properly inform them about human rights, education, drug use, diseases, etc. They even organized a summer library camp to be attended by children who couldn’t afford a “real” vacation during summer break and most of the times the majority of children were Roma and District of Hope inhabitants.

Through these library events and the staff of a human rights NGO I volunteered for, I met the town's family planning clinic doctor: a sweet and fashionable lady who was always eager to help me when she heard I was interested in "tigani." She even invited me to her clinic and offered to answer any questions I might have. She had regular daily interactions with the District of Hope residents but my numerous attempts to initiate conversations about the relocation project seemed to fail; instead she would extensively talk about her personal challenges in working with "those people." Occasionally, when I was visiting her clinic a Roma couple from *Speranța* would come in, usually accompanied by a Pentecostal Church<sup>70</sup> representative. The doctor would suddenly blurt out an embarrassing "Oh here you go, your people" as I was somehow "back in business" after a long break. And, indeed, I was! After the patients would leave and the highly awkward moment would pass for me, the most interesting conversations with the doctor followed: She would talk about the church or the school in the district of hope, the customs Roma have she could not quite comprehend, their reluctance to fully integrate, or work, and so forth

These were only a few examples of the way in which my informants made sense of the relocation project. Tackled directly, the subject seemed to instill sudden amnesia, and it was not simply because my interlocutors happened to represent public institutions. One could tell, in our conversations that information about the District of Hope was simply not stored in their memory in such a way to make sense of a story about a

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<sup>70</sup> Most Roma in *Speranța* are Orthodox Christian and belong to the *Speranța* Orthodox parish. However, unlike the Orthodox Church, the Piatra-Neamț Pentecostal Church has sponsored volunteer programs through which Church representatives can assist poor families in finding legal and medical help when needed. These representatives worked with the Mayor's office to identify individuals who did not have birth certificates, identity cards, or marriage licenses and helped them through the process of acquiring necessary documents.



relocation project. Instead, it was instances when “those people” became visible and recognized as out of place that everything seemed to make sense and weave stories about one’s proper place spatially, economically, ethnically; about human rights, social rights, and what it meant to become European, about tradition and backwardness. Nonetheless, all these stories included vast information about the District of Hope itself: organization, administration, volunteer opportunities, daily life and so forth.; information I could not gather by simply asking about the place.

Mirela, the director of the Center for European information remembered the *Speranța* event more vividly but she explained:

At that time it was somehow misunderstood. *Speranța* is not a neighborhood in which people of a specific ethnic background live. They are people identifying with various nationalities, I don’t think...it was never discussed...they are building a church for them, a school, clinics...offering an alternative way of life but not only for a specific ethnicity. Those houses are open to everyone living in our county and who have equal rights.<sup>71</sup>

She continued to speak in the present tense as if the relocation had not happened, reassuring me that something like this would never occur now and/or in the future. She never mentioned the word Roma, always referring to them as “a specific ethnic group.” She never qualified what she meant by an alternative way of life, and now I wonder what it means to alter the way one lives: is it always in the benefit of the individual, is it done for the benefit of a larger society that needs to conform to a series of norms? If so, the Roma now living in *Speranța* were portrayed again as exceptional and in urgent need to change their ways. When Romani CRISS, reported on *Speranța* in 2001 after interviewing seventeen Roma families who had been notified of the process. They claimed that:

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<sup>71</sup> Recorded Interview

the City Hall intended to move them in these halls to be partitioned in single rooms, each family, regardless how many people, being assigned just one room. There is a corridor along the building, separating the rooms on the two sides.<sup>72</sup>

Mirela remembered that housing was available for anyone in *Speranța*, but she did not go into specifics. For her, there was no difference between the renovated chicken farms and the newly constructed apartment buildings for young families. That meant, in essence, that the Roma community was not segregated from mainstream society but shared the alterations and extensions of the city with Romanians alike.

In a sense, the relocation project completely failed even though hundreds of Roma people live there today. When officials uprooted families from their old neighborhoods, they gravely disrupted and remapped daily life, social networks, common routes between “the piece of bread and the table where the family shares it” as one Roma woman explained to me. In the beginning there was no market in the neighborhood, no school and church and people began to return to town daily to fulfill the most basic daily tasks. In time it became a new habit to do old things: socialize at the market, go to church, buy groceries and household items, and so forth. However, because of the long distance between the neighborhood and the town, people’s visits were longer and varied spatially depending on their daily tasks. When errands overlapped they often traveled in small groups. Some non-Roma residents claimed that the Roma became more visible in town, and they were louder and present more often than they ever were before they were relocated. Occasionally non-Roma commented on the Roma presence in town and myths about *Speranța* surfaced and circulated: “I heard they put a fence between the new

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<sup>72</sup> Romani CRISS – Roma Center for Social Intervention and Studies Piatra-Neamț Case- documenting report 2001

buildings and where they live because they robbed the [new] places as soon as they opened.”

Some Romanians are very intentional in “shocking” non-Roma with their behavior and breaking stereotypes; that is to say, they address prejudices directly and perform a role non-Roma do not expect. In the summer of 2010, one of my contacts in town told me she was going to volunteer as a teacher at the *Speranța* summer school. The school was sponsored by the local Piatra-Neamt government and was meant to help children in *Speranța* achieve standards expected in their grades level by the time fall semester began. Participation in the program was voluntary and parents received a small monetary incentive to enroll their children. As the summer progressed some of the children distinguished themselves in the eyes of the non-Roma teachers who pointed out to me students who had never missed a class, students who were more intelligent than they had expected, students who were clean and neatly dressed.

Ionel, a bright and cheerful Roma boy who never missed class, became the star of the summer cohort. The teachers commented regularly on the way he was dressed and urged me to pay attention to his mother when she arrived. They explained that even though she wore a long skirt, she was always dressed completely in white and they could not believe how clean she was. Indeed, when I met Gloria for the first time, she wore a long white skirt and a white elegant blouse and her hair was neatly braided. She wore the same clothes every time I saw her at the school. When I asked to interview her about her experience in *Speranța* she invited me to their home: a two-room apartment in one of the renovated chicken farm buildings. She lived there with her husband and their three children. She asked me to wait while she changed and smiling she said: “I have to keep

these clean to shock them again tomorrow.” Upon her return I asked her to explain what she meant:

The teachers, of course. They come here every summer pitying us and acting superior. They even get diplomas from the mayor’s office for sacrificing their summer for our children ...and some kind of credits for their teaching requirements. Wearing white started as a joke... a way to entertain ourselves...some friends from the neighborhood... we were laughing once and I decided to try it. When I saw their shocked faces...that is all I wear now when I go to pick up Ionel. I do not go to the town much anymore, the boys do, but I know that the teachers take me with them; they tell stories. I guess that is my way of returning to town.

While Gloria talked about her metaphorical presence in town she also pointed out how intentional she was about shocking the non-Roma teachers. However, making *Speranța* part of Piatra-Neamț was rarely done deliberately and Romanies did not talk about their journeys to the town as a mode to resist their relocation. At times, I heard Roma gathered back in the neighborhood after a long day in town exchanging stories about their experiences. Often they laughed at the ignorance of city residents who seemed surprised by their presence in town or their ability to purchase goods that are regarded as luxuries, particularly electronics. Nonetheless, when I asked Roma to talk about the relocation process they insisted on talking about the non-Roma they are close to in town and the places they return to because of the social relations they and their parents had built before the relocation. Many of them talked about Săvinești even though they seemed too young to have worked there themselves. Several Roma residents explained that with the factory closing down “life was hard for all of us” Roma and non-Roma alike.

**The communist: “the factory worker,” “the recycler,” “the hoarder.”**

Efforts to align Piatra-Neamț with Europe have also created, not surprisingly, what I call generational others. These are the former factory workers who, through their everyday habits, relationship to time, and different objects in their lives, as well as in the way they interact with the shifting materiality of the city, have been othered by the younger generation. They represent a past that many have argued Piatra-Neamț needs to escape, with all its constraining practices. However, they also represent the majority of the voting population, a group that political actors have been able to manipulate together because of their shared struggles before and after 1989. As such, younger generations have held the elderly responsible for Romania’s political failures over the last twenty-five years.<sup>73</sup>

During my interviews with former factory workers, I met Tibi, who was born in 1928 to an ethnically Hungarian family around sixty kilometers away from Piatra-Neamț. I used to accompany Tibi to the farmers market three days a week. It had been part of his morning routine since he retired from the Săvinești textile factory in the early 1990s. I met him at his apartment, beautifully located in the center of Piatra-Neamț, where I had my first morning coffee while he slowly sipped his third. He had been up since five, working through countless crossword puzzles and smoking cheap cigarettes in the kitchen. He would rise suddenly and say: “I’m ready to go!” As always, I felt quite underdressed for going to the market with Tibi. He wore a shirt and tie again and nicely pressed grey suit pants while his white hair was perfectly combed back; every wave was in its proper place. He put on his multi pocketed cargo vest he got as a gift from his son

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<sup>73</sup> See also the work of Jessica Robbins (2013; 2013; 2015) on the elderly in Poland.

in law, who now lived in North Dakota, and grabbed his large wallet. As we walked out of the apartment he grabbed three small garbage bags. As he locked the door, I grabbed the garbage bags and asked where to dispose of them. Tibi responded as he pointed towards a door, secured by a giant padlock, “We can’t drop them down the chute anymore, we have to sort them downstairs.”

Tibi lived on the eighth floor of a ten-floor apartment building. Most socialist designed apartment buildings taller than four floors, were equipped with a garbage chute. In between floors people could enter a little room where a huge vertical slide came through the ceiling and into the floor. About waist level you could open a door into the slide where you could dump your garbage container (figure 19). People did not use garbage bags. As such, as the waste landed on the ground floor, in the garbage room, it piled for exactly a week, when the waste collectors would come and shovel everything onto the garbage truck.



Figure 19 - Waste disposal chute



Figure 20 – Waste containers in residential areas, Piatra-Neamț

The chutes and garbage rooms were judged unsanitary in the late 1990s, waste management was privatized and a new way of waste disposal was implemented: colorful sorting containers were placed outside each building (Figure 20).

Tibi walked slowly towards the bins and opened each bag, containing already sorted waste. The waste bins were locked in a cage and were designed with particular access openings depending on the waste they intended to contain: a round one for bottles, a narrow longer one for paper, while the top of the third one completely opened for organic waste. While sorting, Tibi told me how problematic this new system was for him and his neighbors, most of them fellow former Săvinești workers. The small apartments did not allow for waste storage for longer periods of time, which meant that residents had to dispose of their garbage daily. Often, the elevator did not work and the stairs were a physical challenge for the increasingly aging population. Moreover, Tibi could not help

noticing that the new system increased pollution rather than eliminating it. Some neighbors left their garbage outside their apartment doors for days, until a family member would visit and dispose of it. This made the entire hallway smell as waste decomposed. Younger couples complained about older neighbors not being able to change their ways not taking into account the difficulty older residents experienced in the simple task of disposing of waste.

Tibi also pointed out that the waste bins were dysfunctional, not allowing for any kind of flexibility in the materials being recycled. The paper dispenser required you to break boxes down and take them apart into little pieces. The bottle dispenser would often get too full before waste was collected. Tibi said smiling,

Getting rid of your garbage is a difficult task and requires time and physical effort. Many of us have arthritis and can barely open the garbage bags after we tie them, let alone break down boxes into small pieces.

When I asked him why, he smiled, he responded with a question and continued, “Don’t YOU think this is ridiculous? I am amused by the way they [politicians/city administrators] treat us. We built this city for them, for our children and now ... these changes are so good, we can’t even take our garbage out.” Tibi also pointed out that people gave up on sorting and dump all their waste next to the containers, testimony to a crucial contradiction: in an effort to become more environmentally friendly, to recycle in a proper European way, people stopped recycling all together.

For Tibi and many of his generation the attempt to make socialist spaces into European ones, have made these spaces dysfunctional. On other occasions, younger Piatra-Neamt residents claimed that the elderly prevented the transformation of spaces altogether and this was usually done in discourses about hoarding and the improper use of



private spaces. I invited Corina and Diana, two sisters in their mid and late thirties, for coffee. They had recently returned from Italy and opened a clothing store in downtown Piatra-Neamt. As they talked about the problems they had remodeling the commercial space they complained about the lack of imagination and the local backwardness in altering spaces. The conversation quickly shifted to them fantasizing about the ways in which they would alter their grandparents' apartment after they will have passed away. They talked about their grandmother collecting and reusing every coffee tin, jar, and food container and about the space these occupied in the small apartment. They seemed annoyed at the grandfather who had taken up the entire balcony with self-made mismatched cabinets and shelves which stored countless containers of fishing hooks and rusted nails and screws, bits of wire, electric tape, and useless pieces of scrap wood. They talked about these objects as out of place and expressed their frustration with their grandparents' failure to adapt. Corina explained:

Over twenty years have passed. I know times were tough and grandpa built those cabinets but come on! They are taking so much space and grandma keeps all those empty jars...no purpose... she barely ever makes preserves now and they could be recycled. And the furniture... they threw away some of the old stuff and bought the most uncomfortable armchairs that take up even more space. It's like they are stuck in "no imagination" land.

Diana approved with short nods sipping her coffee as Corina complained. As they described the apartment I imagined an American reality show about hoarders. In reality, these apartments were not as cluttered as younger people like Corina and Diana described them. For these women, the older generation was not just stuck in a different time but was perceived as foreign, from another land, one completely void of imagination.

Shopping bags were also a big subject of debate. A business owner told me that after 1989, businesses that offered free bags to their customers were seen as putting their

customers' needs before their own profits. Those who tried to keep the habit of taking their own bag to the market, like Tibi, became subjects of jokes and were ridiculed for their backwardness. However, in the past few years, as environmental concerns have become central to European policies, citizens were urged to become responsible in saving the planet, starting with taking their own grocery bag to the store. Sudden shifts in rhetoric, like this one, have confused many Romanians who have tried to make sense of the transformation. For Tibi, not everything needed to change, as everyday life under socialism also encompassed innovative practices that could align with the new system. However, for the younger generation, the story of shopping bags was more complex: during socialism, you had to carry a bag with you, now you had a choice to display your environmentally friendly bag or purchase a couple disposable ones at the store. This was a stark difference in context and individual motivation, which continued to position the elderly of Piatra-Neamț, not only in a past that needed to be forgotten, but also as different, in practice, physicality, and ideology from the younger generation.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter has presented three groups of people who have talked about their experience of transition as a marginalizing one. "People of transition" find themselves in an ambiguous state, "liminal" to use Van Gennep's word ((1960) 2011), in which Romanians no longer belong to the past communist state but are also not yet part of democratic Europe. While everyone in Piatra-Neamț seems to be in a continuous process of defining themselves against different other groups, they do so, increasingly, through the ways in which transformations have caused them to struggle and to get stuck

in a new materiality. This chapter has contrasted and connected processes of making and situating different kinds of others: accidental, historical, generational, racial, and related these processes to Roma experience. In essence, I have argued that non-Roma fail to see Roma relocations as different from their own struggles. In this view, the community as a whole has been altered, and merely had to recalibrate, with Roma as just a part of it. "Life is difficult for all of us in transition." When and how does it matter, and to whom, when we ignore the differences that differences make?

The situation becomes increasingly complicated in the case of the Roma minority in Romania: the way these translations alter their everyday life, especially since one of the conditions E.U. imposed on the Romanian government before membership was the integration of the Roma minority in Romanian society. Nonetheless, their condition is understood as another consequence the community endures as a whole, in the process of transition to a normative *communitas*, namely becoming European.

### **PART III – STRETCHING THE LOCAL: SOCIALITY CROSSING BORDERS**

In the last part I explore instances in which local space and sociality seem to transcend regional and national borders. As former RIFIL factory workers imagined their social bonds extending to Italy through the cross-border movement of truck drivers, stretching the local has become a necessity. As such, the following two chapters represent an inquiry into the material historical evidence for European belonging and the paradoxes in the lives of those who sought temporary labor abroad. Chapter five exposes local restoration projects and museum renovations as they are made into historical evidence of a newly established meaningful history—a shared European past. Moreover, the renovations are meant to also signal a recognizable, modern, and European shared museal consciousness. The difficulty then, for various museum actors, is to negotiate their memories of the local with that which cannot yet be displayed, at least not in a positive way. The last chapter deals with the consequences of closing down the Săvinești textile complex and the mass labor migration to Western Europe as local families learn to function “out of place” and in a constant state of waiting for the temporary and brief return of their loved ones. Sociality becomes mediated through various forms of consumption and technologies while those abroad sacrifice their economic development for the fulfillment of those they left behind, always waiting for the moment when things would change, when they could return home: a home they, paradoxically, can no longer recognize or navigate.

## CHAPTER 5 – RENOVATIONS OF THE PAST: SITES OF MEMORY AND EVIDENCE FOR HISTORY

*History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by, the presence of the now.*

-Walter Benjamin

### Introduction

In the summer of 2009 I began a self-designed internship with the Neamt Museum Complex (NMC) in partial fulfillment of the Museum Studies Graduate Certificate I was pursuing at the time. My plan, communicated in great detail to the museum's administration, was to make myself useful and put my newly acquired museum studies skills in practice while learning about the particularities of museum work in Piatra-Neamt, the field site of my research.<sup>74</sup> As such, I paid attention to areas where I could contribute, proposing and creating a digital database for the museum's library, while expecting opportunities to observe museum efforts in action. During this time I continued my preliminary research for my dissertation, collecting archival materials and stories from contacts I had made the previous year. As I shuffled between offices and institutions, one of my NGO contacts, completely removed from the museum context, asked me how the restoration project at the Neamt Fortress was going. Puzzled by the

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<sup>74</sup> My larger goal was to learn about the museum itself; however the legacy of the communist past and the fear of secret police documenting practices, still make it difficult to gain research access at many Romanian institutions. Entering the space as a volunteer, offering your skill set while being honest about your research expectations is often an effective way to build rapport with members of a museum, NGO, or government agency (Verdery 1996).

question, I asked for clarification. Her excitement was evident as she realized she was the one to inform me that the institution I was interning at was undergoing a massive fortress restoration project right under my nose. Moreover, the new site was meant to “explain history” and “attract tourists to our region from all over the world,” she said. “Finally, we’re doing something right!” Considering my interest in the city’s transformation I was surprised nobody had told me this at the museum.

This is a tale about history and the mechanisms through which the past is carved, selected, made visible and institutionalized in Neamt museums. It is a story about where history ends and the present begins and about the relationship between mnemonic evidence and museum practice in contemporary Romania. As I have shown in previous sections, daily life in Piatra-Neamț has been conditioned by people’s memories; by their ability to recognize a particular stitch on a skirt, the regular seat of a fellow commuter, remember previous encounters, their uses in or constraints on their lives. People called on memory to build relationships and networks by formulating feelings of trust, love, friendship, skepticism, belonging, or not. As we have seen in the previous chapter various members of the community also relied on memory to assess the successes and failures of the material transformations around them and to “manage”: mothers remapped the city, relocated Romanians returned regularly in town, and the elderly pointed to the contradictions of unnecessary change. As human beings, the coherence of our very own selves depends on our capacity to remember and forget; who we are is, at all times, a work of memory and imagination. At the community level, much of this identity work is negotiated in museums. But how does memory play into museum work in times of social, political, and economic transformation? How do Piatra-Neamț history museum actors

materialize, collect and preserve recollections and what kinds of memories affect the exhibit design process? What is, after all the relationship between memory and history in Piatra-Neamț and whose memory/history is being restored and transformed?

In this chapter I explore the way in which local museums in Piatra-Neamț have reconfigured their spaces to “clarify” history: to extend the local and legitimize Romania’s place in Europe while explaining the current economic and political instability through evidence of continuous historical chaos. I follow the reconfiguration of history in local museums, particularly in two institutions of the Neamt Museum Complex (NMC), paying specific attention to the role of memory in the process of (re)constructing history through muzeification. In doing so, I reflect on the extent to which local sociality has had an influence on how Piatra-Neamț museum actors (curators, administrators, archivists, volunteers, and so forth) perceive history in its institutionalized form. In this sense, their story becomes one of memory, of pasts that survive through and because the urgencies of the present. Thus, I argue that memory is not only salient as historical evidence drawn from local testimonies, or as being triggered by visitor interaction via objects, but shapes the way in which the exhibit is conceptualized through museum makers’ personal memories, imagined shared recollections, and existing relationships with translocal persons and objects. As such, mnemonic explorations can define for these particular museum actors the potential for success and failure in museums.

### **Local keepers of history and memory: The Neamt Museum Complex**

The Neamt Museum Complex was founded in 1978 and is constituted of sixteen museums located in four Neamt County urban locations: Piatra-Neamț, Roman, Targul

Neamt, and Bicaz. The largest of these museums and the administrative center of the complex is the History and Archaeology Museum of Piatra-Neamț (HAMPN) where I began my internship in 2009. Upon my arrival, I met with Lucian, a charismatic gentleman, who seemed to coordinate everything around the museum. In different interviews and conversations with his acquaintances, they identified him as a museologist, historian, tour guide, and museum librarian. Personally, I also observed him as exhibit designer and curator as well as the manager of various teams. When I arrived at the museum's library, where his office was located, he was dressed in jogging shorts and a wrinkled t-shirt looking ready to undergo a remodeling project. He offered to take me on a personal tour of the HAMPN and we proceeded to the first floor of the museum. The large exhibit rooms completely void of visitors on a sunny summer day, coupled with Lucian's excitement and demeanor about the recently remodeled spaces,<sup>75</sup> gave me the feeling I was visiting a friend's new house. When I asked what was changed in the exhibit space and why, he explained that the museum "needed to change and to become more modern."

Space reconfiguration in museums is not unusual; exhibits rotate, change, expand and evolve. However, in the case of HAMPN something else was true. While exhibit tools and techniques had been clearly changed and "modernized," every room seemed to have kept its initial purpose, housing the same artifacts but in a different way. In an effort to draw larger audiences, like many other institutions in Eastern Europe, the museum renovated their space by imitating "western" practice. The "modernization" of the exhibits consisted of new interactive components and creating a continuous flow through the exhibit logic that visitors were meant to recognize or relate to. These efforts revealed

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<sup>75</sup> The remodeled permanent exhibits opened on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008



a shared “museal consciousness” that understood not only the salience of collecting, ordering, representing, and preserving information, but also displaying it in a way that museums did (Crane 2000, 2) in other locales. Visitors, particularly international tourists, were meant to recognize the institution not only as a museum, but a European museum.

The practice of space reconfiguration for the purpose of an imagined ideological alignment is not unique to the museum. In the last two decades it has shaped everyday life in post-socialist Europe as the ability to renovate your home to resemble "occidental" styles was linked to ideas and displays of success (Fehérváry 2002). It only seems fit then for museum makers to assume that local and international visitors would also be attracted to a new and modern HAMPN. The museum exhibits were chronological: beginning with a representation of local prehistory and concluding with the triumphant story of Stefan the Great, one of Moldova’s most successful medieval rulers, portrayed as the guardian of Christian Europe against the Ottoman empire. The museum was also the proud owner of thousands of artifacts from the local Cucuteni-Trypillian culture—presented as the “oldest known signs of an European civilization”—dated c. 4800-3000 B.C., which have brought international interest and funding opportunities for the institution.

Constantin Mătasă, the founder of HAMPN, has written extensively about regional archeological sites and their role in local history (1929; 1946). However, because HAMPN has invested mostly in “old history,” it did not receive much interest from the local community; aside from participating in school trips, most Piatra-Neamț residents have never entered the museum building. In fact, when I asked people in the community about the museum, most mentioned the notary and movie rental services

available on the first floor of the museum<sup>76</sup> rather than the exhibit. The MNC, the center of which HAMPN occupies, is dedicated to preserving and displaying various local Neamt stories and to position these in larger national and trans-national narratives. In other words, the museum monumentalizes the past, and encapsulates it in various objects, practices, and art forms to carve out a historical space for Romanian Moldova<sup>77</sup> (Herzfeld 1991) in Romania and Europe. Grand narratives of the past, removed both temporally and ideologically from peoples' everyday concerns, have continued to distance local audiences. The MNC had not engaged with particular historical periods that were central to resident experience and the city's development: particularly WWII and communist periods. It was also true that, unlike other places in the former eastern bloc, Romania had been highly reluctant to addressing "difficult heritage" in the museum (Macdonald 2010).

MNC museum staff seemed to have difficulties negotiating the role local memories should play in the museums and the history they found acceptable to showcase. In February of 1996, Holland Cotter wrote an art review for the *New York Times*. The exhibit under review was displayed at the Museum for African Arts, New York, and was titled "Memory: Luba and the Making of History." Before the detailed explanation of how the Luba record history by constructing "memory boards"—called lukasa—the author contemplates on the often-perceived difference between history and memory.

Cotter writes:

Is there a difference between history and memory? Simplistically, perhaps, one tends to think of memory as personal, selective, amorphous and emotionally charged; and of history as memory made to some degree objective, sorted out, verified, supplied with missing events, dates and causes (Cotter 1996).

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<sup>76</sup> Renting out these spaces was initially a way to address the museum's financial concerns but was also seen as an alternative way of getting people into the museum building.

<sup>77</sup> I am talking here of the Moldova region located in north east Romania, where Piatra-Neamt is located, and not the Republic of Moldova across the border

As Cotter suggests, history cannot exist without some kind of claim about memory or of remembering, which already alerts us to the relationship of mutual validity between the two ideas. However, many scholars have argued that there is an inherent tension between the two concepts even when they have been understood to coexist: either history is needed to collect what memory cannot, or the mere invention of history has endangered the capacity for memory. Other scholars have found it challenging to differentiate between history and memory in their attempts to make sense of people's relationships with their past(s). The proliferation of heritage conservation projects around the world, especially because they follow specific and uniform international strategies of preservation, has often collapsed memory into history and vice versa. Moreover, the long held tradition in Western academy of locating history in written accounts and evidence, has placed "oral history" in an ambiguous space vis-à-vis history and memory—or, at times, has relegated it to the realm of memory.<sup>78</sup>

By the end of my fieldwork in 2012, the HAMPN administration's attempt to embrace more recent history had only been addressed in the installation of one temporary exhibit, "185 Years of Pharmaceutical Industry at Piatra-Neamț" which opened in June 2010.<sup>79</sup> The exhibit was a clear attempt to engage with the city's industrial past although a display about life at Săvinești might have reached a wider local audience. But museum actors saw talking about the communist history, especially as an industrial triumph, as taboo, particularly in a state financed institution like HAMPN. If anything, the exhibits were to mark a clear break with that past and build political and economic ties with

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<sup>78</sup> For a comprehensive study of history and memory see Ricoeur's work (2004)

<sup>79</sup> There were many other temporary exhibits showcasing literature, art, and coin collections, none of which engaged with Piatra-Neamț in such a specific way.

Europe by showcasing shared or intertwined histories: fighting the Ottoman Empire, alliances during the world wars, and appreciation for industrial innovation and progress. By celebrating 185 years of pharmaceutical industry at Piatra-Neamț, the museum selected a meaningful past that did not align with historiographies and temporal boundaries of the Cold War.

Following the writings of Maurice Halbwachs, some scholars have argued that individuals exist in societies and the process of recollection can only occur within the particular social conceptualization of what can and should be remembered; thus, the individual having limited control over his/her own past, memory should be attributed to the collective as a whole (Lavenne, Renard, and Tollet 2005). However, Paul C. Johnson has argued that it would be a mistake to regard Halbwachs's conceptualization of collective memory as "utterly dismissive of individual memory" but rather one should look at individual and collective memory as mutually constitutive and "inseparably related" (P. C. Johnson 2007, 259).

Between 2012 and 2016, many other temporary exhibits focused on the recent local and national history through various themes: "The urban evolution of Piatra-Neamț" (2013), "Securitatea: A dictatorship instrument" (2014), "Frenchmen and Romanians during WWI" (2014), "Testimonies from the Communist Years" (2015). While there is a new interest in telling stories about communism, these are never, and could not possibly be conceived, in positive terms. Temporary exhibits at the HAMPN allow us to see the institutional and personal struggles within museum practice and its local actors while temporariness becomes a coping mechanism in the face of shifting politics. In the

following section, I engage with an attempt to collect and showcase local experience of the factory and the socialist years.

**Failure to launch: “Voices of the Living”**

*History’s claim to support, correct, critique, even to include memory  
can only refer to the forms of collective memory.*  
(Ricoeur 2004, 120)

In 2011, I was invited to join a group of local historians and researchers motivated by an effort to conceptualize a new kind of exhibit for HAMPN; one that was meant to link modern technology, testimonials of local actors, and various art forms to discover and present the town’s most recent past. In other words, this was meant to be an exhibit about the town’s industrial development, the lives of factory workers, and the contemporary ruins of that era. Our team operated under the assumption that HAMPN was working with limited funds and that our collective expertise could provide the institution with the support needed to create this exhibit. However, for us it was also an exercise in pushing the existing boundaries of the museum. It was meant to understand more directly the kinds of constraints the museum would face as well as the kinds of topics that we could tackle for the museum outside its walls. In other words, we also engaged with our own work from a meta level.

The exhibit, provisionally titled “Voices of the living,” was intended to be unique in the following ways: it was meant to represent the first direct collaboration with the local community, living subjects would have been the main source for weaving the story of the past at HAMPN for the first time, while constituting the first exhibit to engage “difficult heritage” and its local manifestations. As part of the research team, I had the

opportunity to observe firsthand the way in which historical resources were sorted and the way in which stories of the past were decided upon by contemporary local actors.

As this dissertation has shown, Piatra-Neamț, in the form it exists today, is the result of the 1950s industrial economic boom. During that period, one of the largest textile factory complexes in Romania opened in Săvinești—ten kilometers away from the city—and productivity demanded a large workforce. Almost everyone in Piatra-Neamț was directly involved with Săvinești: if they did not work there, they provided services for workers and their families or depended on production at the factory to carry their own activities. This is the local oral history that still circulated in Piatra-Neamț—if only barely.<sup>80</sup> If living testimonials were to be collected, this project presented a sense of urgency as the first generation of worker migrants to Piatra-Neamț were gradually passing away. Their memories included stories of WWI and WWII, communism and the 1989 revolution and because they were born and raised in many different parts of Romania, they brought a diverse group of opinions and perspectives about the transformation of Piatra-Neamț. However, this also meant that much of their recollection was not about the local history of Piatra-Neamț but about their journeys getting there.

To approach the local archives and maintain some coherence, the research team had to settle on themes where people's life stories intersected. Monographs written after the 1950s were concerned with the Săvinești factory and local development, proper forms of citizenship through work, or a romantic exposé of local natural resources (Botez et al. 1975). Those written after the 2000s have a similar style but were geographically concerned with villages adjacent to the town: Piatra Soimului, Săvinești, and others, or

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<sup>80</sup> Sadly, many of our interviewees have passed away since we recorded their life stories.

with the role of the church and education in the community<sup>81</sup> (Asavinei 2007; Țăbârnac 2009) There are also a series of biographies and memoirs that present life in Piatra-Neamț at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (C. Hogas 1984; Hogeia 1936; S. Hogas 1940). The surviving media can only provide perspectives from the communist regime and its aftermath and should be read keeping in mind the political environment that surrounded their production. The factory was at the forefront of every local newspaper, as they touched on everyday worker life, conventions, partnerships, production quotas. And after the fall of communism in 1989 newspapers began covering the gradual auctioning of each warehouse and piece of machinery (Kirileanu District Library Archive: accessed 2010-2012).

Most pre-1989 newspaper articles featured photographs of women at work; wearing their starched uniforms and attending to the heavy factory machinery, they smiled. Gender dynamics and transformation during the socialist regime, and particularly because of industrialization, has been given much scholarly attention over the past few decades (Funk and Mueller 1993; McLafferty 1997; England 1991; Verdery 1994; Kideckel 2006). The museum research team believed that displaying gender dynamics in the exhibit was also crucial, and, as I discuss below, it seemed to be continuously present in the interviews as well.

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<sup>81</sup> Because the communist regime did not encourage religious practice, many accounts published before 1989 did not touch on the role of the church in a community. Many writers, especially in the rural areas, have tried to rectify that after the regime's collapse.



Figure 21 – Săvinești workers featured in local media

The team of volunteers set out to collect as many life stories as possible before they had a clear vision of what the exhibit would look like. We received the names and contact information of our sources from the museum administrators, made appointments and met with interviewees at their homes. Although we had a list of prepared questions they were considered highly malleable guidelines. Instead, we wanted the conversation to be controlled by the storyteller, aside from a few clarifying inquiries on our part.

The interview location in the home of the storyteller was salient because the material environment provided the triggers for remembering. Often as we conducted our interviews the storyteller would pause as they turned and gazed at a specific object or picture and felt suddenly inspired. Many times, the speaker's narratives were interrupted as ingrained forms of hospitality or perceptions of our place in the local society—age, gender, class, marital status—triggered side conversations about us, the interviewers. Most often, these were the most intriguing and genuine moments in our interviews; our local “grandparents” would begin to teach us through their stories about love, manners,



cooking, work, parenting, leisure, and, many times, methods through which to escape the gaze of the secret police, as they understood it a still much needed skill.

Museums have long been criticized for the ways they materialize (or fail to materialize) cultural and historical difference. Scholars have been concerned with whose vision of history is portrayed as the “official” one and whose are being marginalized (Mason 2005). In doing so, scholars have distinguished between poetics—“the practice of producing meaning through the internal ordering and conjugation of the separate but related components of an exhibition”—and politics—“the role of exhibition/museum in the production of social knowledge” (Mason 2005, 20) only to conclude that the poetics of display is always already political: “different cultures make different judgments about appropriate methods of display and interpretation”.

In the case of the HAMPN exhibit, designers planned to use audio and video recordings to allow the interviews to speak to visitors directly. Because the life stories collected are numerous and lengthy, fragments will be selected to ensure that nobody is silenced in the exhibit. However, what will be selected to become part of the display will depend on the final story the museum wants to tell as well as the way in which interview fragments complement the objects selected for display as evidence. As mentioned above, gender dynamics surfaced as a key component in the archives as well as interviews. In some instances, women recalled being empowered by their job in the factory, their position among other women and their own feelings about being productive in society, aside from being a mother and wife. One woman remembered proudly about the time she had to flirt and have dinner with a member of the secret police when she and, her husband and colleagues were visiting Russia to purchase cheaper goods on the black market. In

another instance, I interviewed a couple together, because they believed their stories would be too similar to require separate interviews. In the middle of the interview, they began arguing about their individual experiences; in order to provide for her family after the factory closed down, the wife took a job in Italy, as a full-time caregiver. Years after she had returned to Piatra-Neamț, her husband still considers the subject taboo. I had to continue the interviews separately.

The collected life stories were remarkable in revealing mechanisms through which memory occurs with and around objects. They also illustrated the ways in which individuals project their personal history onto larger narratives, including those of the national industrialization movement and personal migration, international mobility and personal ability to provide for one's family, state surveillance and possibilities to reconsider the boundaries of marriage and family.

All the stories mentioned above, and many others, were triggered during our interactions. Some were the result of interviewees reacting to me as a researcher, woman, mother, who was locally born but living in the U.S. Others were typical daily conversations between family members. However, many of the stories we learned were triggered by objects around the house: pictures, trinkets, souvenirs, silverware, and many times we only had to ask about particular objects in order to inspire more story telling. Thus, along with hundreds of interviews, the research team had gathered numerous objects that individuals had collected over the years: spools of thread from the local textile factory (figure 22), hand-drawn maps, wedding and baptism guest lists, factory workshop notebooks (figure 23), brochures, work uniforms, plastic bags, repurposed coffee cans, coins, photographs, old toys, milk bottles, stamps, and so forth. In some

cases, owners were not willing to permanently part with their objects, and agreed to loan them for the purpose of the exhibit, while some interviewees were more than happy to donate them to such an “important cause.”



Figure 22 – Synthetic thread produced at Săvinești

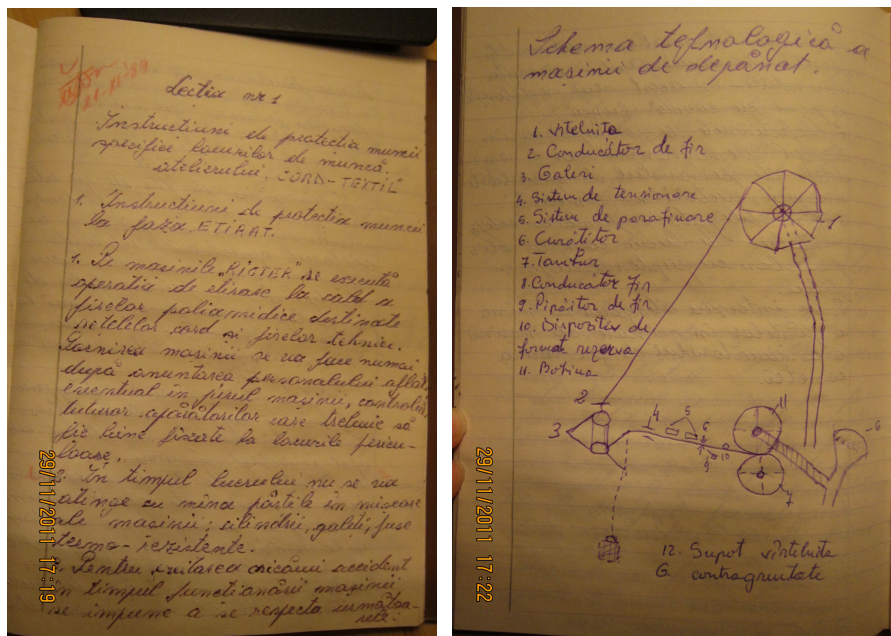


Figure 23 – Pages from a technical workshop notebook from Săvinești

These individual choices brought up numerous conversations about why people collect more generally, why certain objects in particular, and the meaning certain objects acquire before and at the moment they are requested to be part of a museum exhibit. Some items, such as stamps and coins, were kept with the act of collecting in mind, while others acquired new meaning when museum interviewers showed an interest in them. Spools of string, plastic bags, and repurposed tin cans are “left-overs” from a communist past defined by scarcity. What was valued most about these items at the time of their acquisition was their functionality. String and cellophane were used to cover jars with winter preserves; tin cans and milk bottles were kept to store anything from needles and buttons to fishing hooks and bait. Generally people were unable explain why they still kept such items, especially when some of them took a lot of much needed storage space. But the people we spoke with do recognize their value in triggering particular memories; as one individual said to us: “they prevent one to forget”.

Memory, in general terms has been regarded as mortal because “it is linked to the brain and the body that bears it” (Crane 2000, 1). It is for this reason that we continuously search for techniques to preserve it and in doing so, “memory can appear static [...] solidified” (ibid) especially in the museum. What is particularly interesting about this collection of objects is the fact that they are not meant to necessarily trigger memories for visitors (unless they are familiar with them); instead, they join the exhibit to complement the recorded stories, to maximize the authentic experience of a local life. The indexical role of objects becomes particularly salient in the context of an exhibit that memorializes the material culture of a regime defined by scarcity. The testimonial role of objects is paramount. Not only do they lend authenticity to stories of everyday life under socialism,

but they also record experience—in the creases of their use and the countless modifications introduced by constraint repurposing). In this sense, objects are complex bundles of historical knowledge, experience and memory.

Some objects we collected, like the knives in the next photograph, were crafted in the engineering workshop at Săvinești by a gentleman I interviewed. I recorded his life story in his kitchen because that was where he felt most comfortable; it was the space he did his crossword puzzles in the morning and the only place his wife allowed him to smoke. As we began talking about Săvinești and his experience working there, he pulled out two knives from the stand next to him. “This is what I did when I had nothing to do,” he said. His apartment is full of things that he made or fixed in very innovative ways. He even replicated his Săvinești workshop in one of his balconies. He was afraid that when the factory closed, he would have to retire not only from his job, but from his hobby as well. Twenty years later, he still makes and fixes things in his home workshop, and he still uses the knives he made at Săvinești.



Figure 24 – Knives made in Săvinești workshops for personal use

Some objects that are directly linked to the factory experience are not as functional, however. Yet they still survive in tidy small Piatra-Neamț apartments. After scheduling an interview with a former Săvinești worker, she appeared highly hesitant upon my arrival. She thought that it would be best if I talked to her former superiors as she had been a simple worker and might not be able to contribute much. I assured her that what we were looking for were exactly everyday life stories like hers; she brought me some pine syrup, sat down next to me and began her story. As her life timeline approached the Săvinești years she stopped, went to another room and shortly returned with a notebook containing a few advertising materials about different sections of the Săvinești factory complex (shown below). I smiled thinking about the moment when she had told me she would not be able to contribute much to the story. It was not uncommon for interviewees to suddenly remember they still kept various objects and materials. However, what was really intriguing about this woman was her enthusiasm; she was so excited that she could “really” contribute now. As she was offering to give me the objects, her facial expression changed. She seemed worried now. She changed her mind and offered to lend them to HAMPN, but insisted that she wanted them returned. My interest in the objects increased their value to her as well; the useless things she had kept for so long were becoming museum artifacts.

Among the museum staff, initial conversations about object display led to the idea that objects would be exhibited in context and together with recorded stories: they were to be considered the material evidence of the individual memories already on display. Each object and photograph allowed for various methods of display, but their fate, their presence in or absence from the exhibit, was to be determined by the story fragments

from the taped interviews that were chosen for display. Moreover, the process of source selection for the final exhibit did not yet involve any community members, leaving the power of history writing in the hands of museum curators.

Similar to archives, museums have been regarded as repositories for memories. In addition, through display, labeling, and space configuration techniques, museums also create new memories for visitors; they facilitate “memory experiences” where personal and collective memory is built and revised. Memory has also been understood as “thinking of things in their absence:” objects and artifacts preserved and represented as archival resources and evidential triggers for particular recollections of the past (Crane 2000, 5), though not the subjects of memories themselves. However, in the case of the HAMPN exhibit, objects, recorded memories, and visitor experience have the potential to weave together history: the stories are meant to be the central pieces of the exhibit, while objects would be displayed all around the room waiting for the visitor to recognize it and contribute existing and new meanings. Visitors might even experience a familiar object before deciding what story to listen to and re-conceptualize what is evidence for what: i.e., because of my personal experience with that object, I now can relate to the story. Thus, the primary audience for the exhibit was the local community, and individuals old enough to have memories of the Communist (pre-1989) past.

In HAMPN’s previous exhibits, authenticity was approached at the level of visitor experience. Objects and resources were included in the exhibits in a way that museum staff believed met the visitors’ expectations of what their experience should be in a museum (expectations based on prior museum experiences). Generally, these presentations were linear, authoritative, and told a single story. They limited the visitor’s

imagination about competing or plural versions of the past, suggesting that “true” history lies in the hands of authorities who are able to collect, display, and teach communities about the past: i.e. the museum (Aenasoaie 2012). In an effort to break with this tradition, the museum curators had hoped that the new exhibit would achieve “authenticity” through the research methodology employed, the sources and artifacts collected and by offering this space in which many objects, stories, and visitor experiences can converse. The final exhibit and overarching histories will be constructed by the curatorial team, following the interviewees’ life threads and their intersections. It would be naïve to assume that some kind of total and pure authenticity could be achieved by allowing interviews to speak for themselves; especially at the cost of coherence. So what becomes crucial then, in this case, is the memory of the museum administrator and the local exhibit designer who have the power to “visit” the materials in raw form and envision myriad possibilities for interpretation.

In January 2012, while the HAMPN research team was sorting through resources and beginning to conceptualize exhibiting possibilities, riots and protest broke out in Bucharest and various other major cities in Romania. Protesters opposed a new health reform legislation seeking to privatize part of the emergency response system. Small groups with varied political agendas began joining the protests and voicing their dissatisfaction with the current administration. The vice-president resigned in an effort to stop the conflicts and much of the media began covering the protests around the clock. During this time, the national channel TVR1 began broadcasting videos from the 1989 revolution without any commentary or explanation; it showed the immediate chaos following Ceausescu’s capture and the hopeless revolutionaries’ attempts to have a



coherent public conversation in the University Square in Bucharest, surrounded by thousands of people crushing each other against the small stage. People began remembering and protests began to result in less and less casualties but they did not stop.

In Piatra-Neamț, a group of two hundred or so retirees began protesting in front of the mayor's office, the PDL local headquarters, and marched every evening through the downtown area, stopping at every major location, HAMPN being one of them. As Susan Crane points out:

The institutions most obviously connected to a specific form of memory, the historical museum and the heritage museum, have expanded tremendously in the modern era, and scholars have focused on the ways in which the past has been and is interpreted for the present, particularly for national audiences (2000: 4).

It is this particular link between memory, history, museum, politics, and nationalist feelings that has motivated museum administrators at HAMPN to postpone the grand opening of the exhibit. As Genevieve Zubrzycki has argued in the case of the “Crosses at Auschwitz”, any past moment has the potential to be transformed, elevated to the status of event, nationalized, and utilized as evidence for various present political agendas (Zubrzycki 2009). While this decision allows for more, much needed, time to sort through interviews and artifacts, one cannot ignore the previous direct relationship between the stories HAMPN exhibits tell and the social, political, and economic presents into which such exhibits were born. In other words, considering the current political uncertainty in Romania, history (re)writing needs to be prudent; one cannot risk writing a story that will not fit in the future political environment, especially in a completely state-funded institution.

Although the idea behind the exhibit suggests a more direct involvement with the local community, allowing for the story to stem from various intersections between

interviews and artifacts, there is still a long way to go until one can claim a museum-community collaboration around a past that politically cannot show a human face. But the museum is successful in appealing to the community in other ways; the following section engages with a project that worked: the restoration of the Neamt Fortress.

### **Exhibits that work: “Let the Walls of History Speak”**

*How many stories would these ruins tell if they could speak? If you think there was once so much life here... hearts that loved, eyes that cried, brave men that spilled their blood on these walls...*

Alexandru Vlahuta, 1901

Inscribed on a plaque at the entrance of the newly renovated Neamt Fortress, the literary excerpt above fully captures the mission of the exhibit designers and restoration team: “to let the walls of history speak.”

“History” Sharon Macdonald claims “is the area of conflict between interpretation and manipulation” and museums and heritage sites represent only few of the spaces where this conflict takes shape (Macdonald 2008, 8). In the field of Museum Studies, various scholars have investigated the role museums play in shaping a group’s history and the implications of this process: What is left out when history is told? How do contemporary politics shape past histories selected today? What kinds of symbols call on a community’s imagined homogeneity? Will the “walls of history speak” to everyone? Will they tell the same story to every visitor and would the visitors listen to everything the walls have to say? Will they be silenced sometimes by symbolic misrepresentations or will their story be incomplete by limiting audience imagination?

In this section I explore the various implications of “preserving heritage” through restoration projects.<sup>82</sup> By drawing on the restoration of the Neamt Fortress, Romania, completed in the summer of 2009, the paper traces some of the key theoretical approaches to the concept of heritage and its limitations as a tool for exploring and investing meaning in the past. For the purposes of this exploration I address practices of community building through the investigation of four central themes: (1) the role of objects in “heritage preservation” exhibits, (2) locating “authenticity” in the exhibit-audience interaction, (3) the way in which the public is envisaged and addressed through exhibit design, and (4) the implications of present politics in establishing proper stories of the past. In doing so, I argue that tensions emerging out of the problematic nature of the concept of “heritage” can be partially addressed through transparency and complete disclosure of the political, social, and economic goals of those directly involved.

Located in Targul Neamt, Romania (North-East Romania), the Neamt Fortress was built during Petru I Musat’s reign (1375-1391) but it is remembered in Romanian history for its days of glory during the reign of Stefan the Great (1457-1504) who expanded and fortified the citadel to defend Moldova from the Ottoman Empire.

The works carried out here during his reign consisted in upraising the old walls, building the four bastions of the exterior court and the arch-shaped access bridge sustained upon eleven stone pillars. Thus reinforced, in 1476 the fortress withstood the siege of Mohamed II after the battle from Valea Alba-Razboieni.<sup>83</sup>

Recognized as a Saint by the Christian Orthodox Church, Stefan the Great’s history, as Moldova’s most successful medieval ruler, cannot be divorced from how the Neamt Fortress is remembered in contemporary Romania.

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<sup>82</sup> For more on the link between heritage and politics in post-socialist Romania see Emanuela Grama’s work (2010)

<sup>83</sup> “Brief History” plaque at the Neamt Fortress exhibit entrance.

Praised in Romanian literature by Costache Negruzzi, the Neamt Fortress is also remembered via the middle school short story of Sobieski, the Polish ruler impressed by the bravery of the hand-full of Romanian soldiers who, in 1691, resisted the Polish army and defended the citadel for a couple of days (Negruzzi 2008). For decades, Negruzzi's text was on the reading lists for the exams students had to pass in order to enter high school.<sup>84</sup>

Today, the Neamt Fortress is the property of the Neamt County Council (*Consiliul Judetean Neamt*) and part of the Neamt Museum Complex dedicated to preserving and displaying the local history of the Neamt County. Over a period of three years, the Museum complex, in partnership with the Neamt County Council, the Targul Neamt Mayor's Office and with funding received from the European Union<sup>85</sup> was engaged in an ambitious restoration project that transformed the Neamt Fortress as a historical monument. During my internship with HAMPN in the summer of 2009, the institution became a central part of my overall research project because of the way exhibit designers—local actors themselves—approached and presented the relationships between local, national, and trans-national history in the Neamt Fortress restoration project.

For the exhibit designers at the History and Archaeology Museum of Piatra-Neamț (HAMPN), Romania, heritage and feelings of national and trans-national belonging (especially as part of the European Union) were, until recently, grounded in stories of ancient and medieval Europe as well as violent episodes between the Christian west and pagan east. Museum makers believed that heritage offered an international language to talk about the past in post socialist Romania, as well as the tools to legitimize

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<sup>84</sup> In 1999 the educational system was redesigned and students do not take the same exam but Negruzzi's text continues to be on the middle-school reading lists.

<sup>85</sup> PHARE 2004 in preparation for EU accession in 2007

the nation's European belonging through a shared and continuous past; imagining a European community.<sup>86</sup>

Until 2006, when the HAMPN received over €2.5 millions from the European Union to undergo the restoration project, visitors at the Neamt Fortress could only imagine what the few walls in ruins used to represent for 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Moldovans. However, it is exactly the citadel's former potential to call on one's own imagination that led some visitors to claim that the fortress was now “way too restored.”<sup>87</sup> Considered a historical artifact itself, the fortress was not a proper environment to display any other objects: there were no closed rooms and the interior court walls were almost completely destroyed. The Neamt Fortress reopened on July 3, 2009 completely restored and is now home to 21 exhibit rooms that guide the visitor through what is understood to have been medieval everyday life (see figure 25).



Figure 25 – left: before restoration; right: after restoration

Because all the rooms were rebuilt from scratch the exhibit designers had the opportunity to decide the spatial configurations of the exhibit. As Mason notes “awareness of the way

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<sup>86</sup> For more on the ways in which heritage legitimized political claims and ideas of belonging see Anderson (1983); Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge (2005); Macdonald (2008; 2009); Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005); Shryock (1997); Mason (2005); Aenasoaie (2012)

<sup>87</sup> Visitor log at the Neamt Fortress August 8, 2009

people will move around a physical space or the amount of text they can be expected to digest, can be used to draw visitors attention to specific intended messages.” (Mason 2000: 202-203) In the case of the Neamt Fortress, exhibit designers wanted to preserve the historical spatial movement and give the visitors an opportunity to “walk the road of the past.” Thus, while many of the rooms connect, as they would have in medieval times, the contemporary visitor is forced to return through the same rooms in continuing his/her exploration of the fortress.

Before the restoration, story telling was the primary instrument tour guides used to give meaning to visitors’ experience and although hundreds of objects are now on display, the approach does not seem to have changed. Similarly to the Arab-American National Museum in Dearborn, U.S.A., the Neamt Fortress was reshaped into a “repository for stories;” that is to say the exhibits were created to assist the “walls in speaking” while helping the visitor visualize the material state of heritage (Silverman 2006, 821).

Although a coincidence, the Neamt Fortress exhibit reopened twenty years after the fall of the communist regime in Romania and since 1989 Romanians have struggled to make sense of their identity, have reconfigured national history, and have strived to “catch the train back to Europe” economically and politically. Romania’s accession to Europe in 2007 was contingent on such political, social, and economic transformations imposed by the E.U. While many Romanians experienced everyday life as it was drastically reconfigured, many state and cultural institutions had found a way of grounding a shared Romanian heritage through E.U. funded preservation and restoration projects such as the Neamt Fortress. Heritage proved to be the “primary instrument in the

‘discovery’ or creation and subsequent nurturing of a national identity.” (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005, 27) Exploiting newly identified heritage sites also proved economically necessary when thousands of state owned factories closed and collective farms were returned to private owners. As Hoelscher states:

One of the defining elements of contemporary world, heritage is a mode of understanding and utilizing the past that is, at its very core, deeply partisan and intensely felt. It is the source of vital economic revenue, and a foundation of personal and collective identity. (Hoelscher 2006, 200)

Thus, the design of the Neamt Fortress exhibit represented one of many attempts in responding to the “urgent need to anchor [...] stories somewhere in a usable past” (Crew and Sims 1991, 161), a process that will historically explain and legitimize the contemporary political, social, and economic instability of the Romanian state.

To do so, the exhibit designers at the Neamt Fortress had to envision a clear story, supported by various cultural symbols understood as collectively shared, and extremely difficult to contest. The configuration of the 21 exhibit rooms is supported by archeological research as “historically accurate” and closely depicting medieval everyday life. As visitors enter the interior court, their imagination is called upon by the plaques above each door entering various exhibit rooms: Advising Chamber, Throne Chamber, Arms Room, St. Nicholas Chapel, Living Space, Soldiers’ Chambers, Kitchen, Prison, etc. Thus, to ensure consistency in the story consumed by the audience, the fortress’ capacity to stimulate imagination is now controlled by various elements of the exhibit, and restricts alternative interactions with the space.

While the restoration project structurally and visually transformed the Neamt Fortress conservators argued that the materials used to (re)build it and the local climate

still make it difficult to display historical objects and conserve them properly. Thus, all the objects on display are either identical copies of artifacts preserved at the HAMPN central location or objects created to resemble their representations in documents and drawings from 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The problematic nature of investing heritage value in “inauthentic” artifacts was anticipated by some of the exhibit designers familiar with critiques of heritage. Hoelscher argues that critics summarize heritage as “bogus history” which commodifies the past, distorts the “real history” that is more accurately presented in written form, and shamelessly caters to the whims of tourists” (Hoelscher 2006, 208).

However, most local visitors do not seem to be bothered by this seemingly lack of authenticity but rather engage with the historical scenes in a symbolic celebration of what they understand as their local, national, and transnational heritage. The exhibit designers claim that their main goal was exactly that: to create a space where visitors can step outside the present and celebrate the glorious past the fortress represents.

However, “authenticity is unattainable, all heritage being created in and by the present” (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005, 28) expressing and legitimizing contemporary social ideals and political views.

Objects enter exhibits as “props for telling stories” (Silverman 2006, 822) and in the case of the Neamt Fortress, imagined heritage artifacts underpin the idea of a continuity by calling on everyday practices that visitors can recognize as historical and contemporary as well. Pots and pans in the kitchen, jars and bags of flower and grains in the supply room, the altar and patron chairs in the Christian Orthodox Chapel, punishing the guilty in the Jail, stimulate visitors in identifying with the space as their own and



fulfill the need to connect present and past in an unbroken trajectory (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005, 30)



Figure 26 – Advising Chamber

Moreover, the Advising Chamber was designed to display the past while serving present educational purposes (see figure 26). Initially, exhibit designers wanted the room to be a “touch free” exhibit but after a series of discussions with the mayor of Targul Neamt, Decebal Arnautu and the president of the Neamt County Council, Vasile Pruteanu they decided to create a fully functional environment where student groups could gather and experience history as they learn about it. The large table, as the central artifact of the Advising Chamber exhibit is a “culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories” (Kopytoff 1986, 68).

However, objects gain new meanings as well shaped by the visitor’s experience and the connections they are allowed to draw between objects and their individual present lives. Thus, authenticity can be located in the museum-visitor encounter filtered through

the designer's intent and the visitor's willingness to consume a specific story. Crew and Sims argue that in a museum:

objects have no authority; people do. It is people on the exhibition team who must make a judgement about how to tell about the past. Authenticity—authority—enforces the social contract between the audience and the museum, a socially agreed-upon reality that exists only as long as confidence in the voice of the exhibition holds. (Crew and Sims 1991, 163)

The debate around the Advising Chamber exhibit exemplifies the level at which the local community was involved in the restoration project. While the County Council and Mayor's office were active participants in the process they represent the Romanian state before the needs of the community. Compared to projects such as the Zibwiing Cultural Center concerned with the preservation of Native American history, there was no committee established to represent the Neamt community in designing the Neamt Fortress exhibit. Thus, the objects selected for the exhibit symbolize what the HAMPN administration and the County Council understood to be a Moldovan shared culture. In this process, visitor imagination was restricted and heritage was entrusted in the hands of a specific group, while excluding others.

Indeed, awarding possession to some, while excluding others, gives heritage its primary function. Heritage, therefore, is a faith, and like all faiths it originates in the deeply rooted human need to give meaning to temporary chaos, to secure group boundaries, and to provide a symbolic sense of continuity and certainty that is often lacking in everyday life. (Hoelscher 2006, 216)

In the case of the Neamt Fortress, various objects were fabricated to select a particular past that serves larger contemporary purposes: to call upon existing shared values in the local community, to create a coherent story for the newly revived tourist economy, and to generate opportunities where excluded audiences can join the community by experiencing themselves the objects on display. The value of these artifacts rests upon

their ability to accomplish these socio-political goals when placed in a specific space, calling on a particular time, and allowing for a variety of visitor experiences where meanings of culture and power are defined. (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2005, 29–30)

As mentioned above, the restoration of the Neamt Fortress came at a time when Romanianness was being continuously renegotiated away from a communist past towards a long delayed European belonging. Constructing and preserving heritage offers the opportunity to locate Romania in a continuous set of events and erase moments of historical rupture. Contrary to common belief, the concept of heritage is a modern construct and connotes a specific identity and sense of belonging. Hoelscher claims that:

heritage might look old—after all, the language of heritage focuses on preservation, revitalization, and restoration—but closer inspection usually reveals contemporary concerns. Lurking just below the surface of the reclamation of a heritage are the needs, the interests, and affairs of a present generation. (Hoelscher 2006, 206)

Romanian politicians presented the accession to the European Union as a natural stage in national history that had been long delayed by the tyranny of the communist regime. This rhetoric served a dual function: to distance the Romanian people from communist ideologies and legitimize the nation's place in Europe. Thus, heritage preservation projects such as the Neamt Fortress exhibit were endowed with the responsibility to display an identity that is not only local and national but also transnational. Portraying the Neamt Fortress as the refuge for brave men who have sacrificed themselves to defend Europe from the Ottoman Empire opened up endless possibilities of claiming a shared history with the members of the European Union. Stefan the Great's days of glory against the pagan Turks are often associated with his relationship to the Christian faith: it is said

that Stefan built over forty monasteries (one for each victory against the Turks) many of which still stand in Neamt and Suceava Counties. Victimized by its geographic location and imperial expansionist ambitions, Romania enters history as the gatekeeper of Europe (Constantinoiu 2002). The artifacts in the Neamt Fortress exhibit facilitate the creation of visual and experiential history reinforcing textual accounts of the past. Sharon Macdonald argues that:

trying to create historical accounts that eschew national or ethnic narratives as well as causal or progressive trajectories is undoubtedly a difficult task; and one that needs to be tackled through aesthetic strategies [...] as well as through content. (2003: 10)

However, that is not to say the Neamt Fortress exhibit is not concerned with local identity and history since the spatial presence of the citadel impacts understandings of everyday life in Targul Neamt. Similarly to the exhibitions in the Transcultural Galleries, exhibit designers at Neamt “employ the idea of *locality* not so much to ‘museumise’ a clear-cut identity as to highlight the plural nature of the locality and to explore the theme from multiple perspectives.” (Macdonald 2003: 8) In other words, exploiting historical constructions of local identity—that of men who, faced with foreign/pagan invasion resisted the attacks and defended their lands with their lives—offers the opportunity to further legitimize belonging first, to the Romanian State, second, to Europe and third, to the Christian international community.

As expected, visitors’ reactions to the Neamt Fortress exhibit varied widely: some considered the Fortress was not transformed enough, others believed the restoration stripped the citadel of its “true meaning,” but most visitors were impressed with the new image of the historical monument. The latter represent the ideal audience who interacted with the artifacts as expected by the exhibit designers and for whom the symbols worked.

However, exhibit rooms did not have an equal impact on visitor's experiences: older audiences were particularly impressed with the Christian Orthodox Chapel while teenage visitors were intrigued by the Arms Room and Jail. These individual interactions with the space were born out of visitors' initial expectations and intensified by the artifacts on display. The emergence and contribution of social history were salient in reshaping the way history has been written in museums and heritage sites. Shifting the focus from historical grand narratives to daily social practices, museums have managed to attract a wider audience that relates to the symbolic meanings invested in displaying objects in a new context. Thus, what is "representative of the current thinking in history museums about the meaning of things" is that objects have no inherent value outside the exhibit. (Crew and Sims 1991, 162–164)

St. Nicholas Chapel exhibit (figure 27) is a fully functioning spiritual space where Mass is held by a local priest on Sundays and religious holidays. For the older audience, the chapel captures the continuity of the Christian Orthodox faith in Romanian history and connects to their present spiritual belonging. One can enter the Chapel as a detached visitor and witness its aesthetic specificity but for the majority of visitors I have observed the Chapel exhibit is recognized as a place of worship just as any other Church: people enter silently and many times perform ritualistic actions identified with the Orthodox Christian faith (i.e. making the sign of the cross, always facing the altar, lighting candles).



Figure 27 – St. Nicholas Chapel (left – before the restoration; right – the altar in the Chapel after Restoration)

For many visitors, the Neamt Fortress represents one of the many “commemorative and redemptive acts, pilgrimages to sites of deep historical significance and ancestral suffering” through which people make sense of and actively engage with their past. (Benson and McCaskie 2004, 94) For the younger audience, the Jail (dungeon) and the Arms Room present them with a symbolic connection to a heroic past, transposed through fairytales and stories into the morality of the present: “we can grow up to be as great as these men [who defended the fortress] even if it is by different means.”

Central to the designers’ vision is the educational function of the exhibit. The Neamt Fortress was not meant to be experienced individually but rather be the site of collective discussion and exchanges. Thus, the individual members of the audience were not envisaged as “empty vessels” where information about the past can be collected and stored. Similar to what Clifford calls “contact zone,” (Clifford 1997) the exhibit facilitates communication, interaction, and discussion between members of the audience as well as between people and things. (Mason 2000:201-202) Furthermore this is not limited by temporality as visitors can engage in conversation with past and future audiences through the visitor log at the exhibit exit.

However, the heritage rhetoric employed around the Neamt Fortress restoration suggests that exhibit designers have not come to terms with the idea that museum audiences are always engaged in “free-choice learning.” That is to say, individuals carefully select the information they are willing to appropriate during their museum experience, according to personal interests, ideas about belonging to a class, nation, culture, etc. Tensions between competing audience needs could be partially addressed by their acknowledgement and inclusion in the exhibit, as well as recognizing the problematic nature of assuming “one true history.”

Museums need to embrace the fact that they are in the business of supporting individuals in their quest for knowledge and understanding—not the knowledge and understanding we might deem that an individual needs, but rather the knowledge and understanding that an individual decides that they need. (Falk, Dierking, and Adams 2006, 336)

Unfortunately, the potential of the Neamt Fortress exhibit to address competing and parallel histories was not recognized simply because grounding one coherent story of the past was identified as a more urgent need by the political parties involved.

As “single real histories” begin to materialize in museum exhibits, unfit objects are left out; historical texts are hidden in the back of dusty shelves, and ambiguities are erased. The employment of the concept of heritage proved productive in creating this state of “selective amnesia.” In defining the nation and its relationship to others, heritage is “making explicit” the cultural/social/political symbols that tie and/or divide.

Macdonald argues that museums were “capable of articulating two temporal narratives: one, a distinctive national trajectory and, two, the nation as final triumphant stage of successive progression.” (2003: 3) The Neamt Fortress exhibit is no exception: the religious symbols draw on a shared continuous spiritual history with Europe while the

victimization of the region and interpretation of sacrifice legitimizes the formation of the nation-state. How do multiple stories disappear in the process of remembering the past?

Hoelscher explains that:

heritage displays rely on artifacts, including buildings and landscapes, costumes and cuisine, to impart its messages of the past. Open-air museums, historical reenactments, theme parks, and conservation districts emphasize the visual, rather than the purely textual, making it difficult to present contradictory and ambiguous material. (Hoelscher 2006, 204)

The designers of the Neamt exhibit seem to have managed to write a “single story” by calling upon multiple types of evidence: aesthetic, textual, and an exploitation of familiarity, of what the visitor was understood to relate to and actively engage with.

However, evidence was carefully selected to fit the national story rather than investigate it to discover competing versions of the past and what is missing from the exhibit is the transparent recognition of this choice.

How is the story transformed if we take in consideration that Stefan the Great was infamous for his mass executions of boyars who did not share his political views and for violent outbursts while under the influence of alcohol during various celebrations?

(Constantinoiu 2002) How would we justify that the Orthodox Church recognized him as a Saint when he committed what are now accepted as the gravest of mortal sins?

Moreover, Stefan was a strong supporter of slavery and endowed the forty-some monasteries he built with thousands of Gypsy Slaves captured during the campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. (Hancock 1987) In a sense, these accounts are “new memories” brought about by the contribution of social-historians and because they are new, the repercussions of their integration in “history” have to be fully assessed.

Macdonald argues that:



[n]ew memories do not necessarily just jostle alongside existing ones, like new products on a supermarket shelf, but may expose previous silences, raising questions about their motives or the power dynamics of which they were part. [...] Memory inflation, then, may not only challenge specific existing memories but may also unsettle the traditional view of heritage itself, making it more likely to be regarded as contestable and contingent. (Macdonald 2009, 93)

Moreover, if heritage is “making explicit” particular historical events based on present socio-political needs, such memories can never come into conflict with one another.

Some have explained Stefan’s hostile behavior towards the boyars as resistance against peasant exploitation and a medieval form of acknowledging universal equality. By doing so, there was an attempt to directly tie contemporary “modern” ideologies to the actions of the past. However, the tension in “modern” ideology between resisting against class exploitation while supporting the slavery system turns these “new memories” into “difficult heritage” which

is concerned with histories and pasts that do not easily fit with positive self-identities of the groups of whose pasts or histories they are part. Instead of affirming positive self-images, they potentially disrupt them or may threaten to open up social differences and conflicts. Difficult heritage deals in unsettling histories rather than the kinds of heroic or progressive histories with which museums and heritage sites have more traditionally been associated – histories that perhaps sometimes veered too close to manipulation rather than interpretation.” (Macdonald 2008:9)

Including the story of Gypsy slavery in Romanian history draws additional ties to present social and economic conditions of the Roma minority in Romania. Identified by the European Union as one of the main “problems” Romania should address, the Roma minority is completely invisible in Romanian history. Allowing for their visibility would not only explain various political and social economic tensions in Romania and Europe today but would create possibilities for disruption of and resistance against the national story.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, my research occurred at an important moment in the history of the NMC, where all of these factors came into play, and where, for at least the time being, the goal of creating new exhibitions addressing the recent communist and post-communist past, proved to be impossible.

As mentioned above, the concept of “heritage” offers a variety of possibilities for creating identity and ideas of belonging and continues to shape discourses about preserving history. Heritage is culturally created, and reshaped in the context of museums and historic sites, to serve the urgent need of grounding a community in a specific continuous past. Artifacts achieve value only in the exhibit context as symbolic tools that tell the story intended story and their symbolic nature is understood to be shared by the envisaged audience. Thus, authenticity is not located in the objects themselves but rather in the public’s experience of the objects as invested with specific cultural meanings. Recognizing the visitor as an active participant in reading and writing history is crucial in creating a successful exhibit while transparency can relieve the tensions emerged out of the problematic nature of the concept of “heritage.” Exhibitions of the past are shaped by the political agendas of the present and are thus used as tools for achieving historical continuity and erasing disruptive fissures that can jeopardize the stability of contemporary political rhetoric.

## CHAPTER 6 – OUR PARENTS ABROAD: FAMILY OUT OF PLACE

*Piatra-Neamț population doubles in August... the Italians are coming!*

-Marius 2010

### **Introduction**

For a stranger to the particularities of this story the statement above might suggest the economic triumph of Piatra-Neamț as a tourist attraction: a successful transformation from textile industry to tourist economy, a brief and possibly regular season of prosperity. But while this sudden influx of people might bring some temporary economic gain to local businesses, this assumption could not be further from the truth as this is the result of local dezindustrialization and economic misfortune, and these “*Italians*”, are only the town’s own progeny coming home.

Every year, in August, the Italian language becomes unofficially the primary language in Piatra-Neamț; it all begins somewhere during the middle of July when people jokingly begin using common Italian phrases and recalling interactions with various individuals returning home from Italy. It has become a kind of preparation ritual for welcoming, often reluctantly, the thousands of local labor migrants who return every August to Piatra-Neamț. Every family I have interacted with during my stay in Romania, had relatives working abroad, who contribute to the financial stability and social development of the entire family. In fact, Piatra-Neamț is the second most depopulated city in Romania due to dezindustrialization and labor migration losing over 26% of the

population between 2002 and 2012 (Cojocar 2012) and the figures are most certainly higher if we take into account those who left in the 1990s.

Post socialist industrial collapse, rapid inflation and the opening of borders towards Western Europe gave way to waves of labor migration from Romania. This chapter engages this moment of sudden mobility as a direct consequence of Piatra-Neamț dezindustrialization and unpacks the elements of social life that emerged, were displaced, transformed or maintained as individuals began to grasp the transformations around them. In talking to former factory workers and their family members, I realized that a crucial part of their local social life transcended national borders. I interviewed some workers after they had returned home from a long stay in Italy or Spain. Others I met while they were temporarily visiting their families and were getting ready to leave for another year of work abroad. Others stayed at home to take care of their grandchildren, while their own children worked abroad. In my explorations, I was particularly interested in the process through which individuals left the country and the networks through which they discovered employment opportunities abroad as well as the lives of those who were left behind (their children, their spouses, their parents) and the consequences of this mass familial rupture.

As more and more parents left their children in the care of grandparents and friends for extended periods of time, they all waited for the moment when things would settle, when jobs would become available, when Romania would transform. My ethnographic research among these families as well as previous studies have shown that labor migration was meant as a temporary solution to their economic struggles and it did not involve plans for permanent migration to Western Europe (Morokvasic 1999, Black,

Richard, Engbersen, Godfried, and Okólski, Marek 2014). Thus, processes of waiting had become central ways through which people made sense of their temporary states.

Focusing on acts and periods of waiting allows us to not only reconsider action and inaction (Hage ed. 2009), power relations and time construction (Verdery 1996) but also to assess transformations that are made possible and take place while one waits.

### **Patterns of emigration, technology and cross-border socialization**

As soon as rumors started to circulate that the Săvinești factory was to be partitioned and closed down, people began looking for work opportunities abroad. For many Romanians, moving abroad had been a dream for decades, attempting to cross the borders many times during the socialist regime in search for a particular imaginary west. Those who succeeded requested political asylum in the United States or United Kingdom and most never thought of moving back. They built their lives following the rules and cultures of their host countries, married and had children who never learned Romanian or, at most, acquired the most basic linguistic skills. However, this chapter is concerned with the people who left Romania much later, due to economic constraints and for whom returning home was not just an option; it was seen as the definite outcome. In other words, the motivation for leaving was grounded in accumulating economic capital over a brief period of time, to provide for a child while in college, gain enough money to finish a house they began building before they lost their job, provide adequate care for a sick parent or child, etc. For these people, working abroad was always meant to be a temporary fix to the economic problems at home.

Many of those who left before Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, stayed abroad illegally; that is, they left as tourists and remained abroad in search of work opportunities. Passenger transportation services and tourism agencies flourished during this time as more and more people decided to leave and packages began to circulate between their home and host countries. By the mid 2000s, series of employment agencies began recruiting cheap labor for agricultural seasonal jobs in Spain, Portugal, and France. Italy was the key destination for women who became caregivers for Italian children or the elderly while men found jobs if they were willing to work long hours in construction. However, many Romanians did not trust such agencies as the media unearthed countless stories about immigration scams and human trafficking hiding among job listings and immigration opportunities that always seemed too good to be true. Thus, most Romanians left with the help of friends, extended family or trusted contacts, which offered them a temporary home abroad while they looked for employment. In Piatra-Neamț, the process seemed well contoured very early on, and that was mainly due to the sociality already set in place by the five decades of Săvinești factory activity (see chapter 1): women who worked for RIFIL left with the help of previous factory truck drivers, some workers promised to find employment for former colleagues if they would care for their children for a limited time, etc. Over the past few years it has become obvious that Romanian society has changed drastically due to this mass economic migration and Piatra-Neamț was one of the cities where this could be observed quite prominently.

People who left to work abroad in the late 1990s and early 2000s did so by using their local social network, most often people they had met or interacted with at Săvinești.

There were also obvious differences between people who became labor migrants in Western Europe and those who emigrated to the United States and Canada and this became obvious in their relations to things and their engagement with the “home” via virtual social networking. In interacting with hundreds of immigrants for research or personal experience, I have noticed that the simple task of packing to leave for the first time abroad, encompasses the deepest feelings about the past, present and future: memories encapsulated in objects, their mundane everyday needs and the tools to fulfill them, as well as the vision of a better future to materialize in various ways.

Sorin migrated to the United States in 1999 through the diversity visa program for which he did not even apply. His stepbrother<sup>88</sup>, who had been living in Canada for years, filled out the application for him and Sorin found himself packing to move, with his wife and daughter, to America. He sold his apartment and small business assets in Piatra-Neamț, he gave away his furniture, stored his book and record collections with his mother and packed everything else. He arrived with his wife and teenage daughter at the Detroit airport with six large suitcases and three carry-ons. “We brought our entire life here” Sorin told me while opening a kitchen drawer in their Whitmore Lake, Michigan home. I began smiling as he asked me “Do you know what this is?” and pointed at a little spoon with a very long handle. Not only did I know what it was, but Sorin’s story reminded me of my own father, who had my grandmother send us a similar spoon, months after we had immigrated to the United States. “You cannot find these around here, you know. How else are you supposed to make coffee?” Indeed, the spoon’s sole purpose for many Romanians is to stir the coffee while it boils in the *ibric* (coffee pot), a process very

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<sup>88</sup> They were both in their twenties when their parents met at Săvinești and married in 1982

similar to making Turkish coffee, and for Sorin, it was a crucial object in his family's daily routine.

However, the coffee spoon was not the only thing Sorin and his family brought to the United States. They packed all the photographs they could carry, dating back as far as possible, their most comfortable pillows, their traditional, custom made, incredibly heavy, quilted comforter, soup plates, because Sorin could not imagine eating soup from a bowl, some Romanian school text books to reference when his daughter enrolled in the American school system, music tapes. In essence: their entire life. Over time, things changed as they recalibrated their lives to the American society they lived in, mentalities about time management and the technologies readily available to them:

We bought a coffee maker because making coffee in the "ibric" was just not feasible anymore. Nobody has time for that here... our Sundays are no longer Holy because so many times we had to work on Sundays. My daughter never used those books, she had computers here to answer all her questions and the comforter?... oh the comforter we stored away because it did not fit in the washer or dryer and if we washed it by hand we did not have a place to hang it outside. Eh! Our lives changed... but we're not sorry for bringing all our things here. We sometimes laugh over dinner about how silly we were though. In a way, we brought the things we knew so well before we could learn what life was all about here. I think that is why we still keep everything. Some traditions are still very dear to us while others are just not compatible with our life anymore.

For Sorin, these objects did not serve as reminders of a distant home but rather made a new home in a new space. Having familiar objects around them gave them a sense of security that, with time, they found in other objects, practices, and technologies in the U.S. He talked about time passing differently in the U.S. because much of it is spent driving, shopping, working and time consuming practices like making small portions of Turkish coffee or washing their heavy comforter were not necessary when so many alternatives were available.



In contrast to Sorin, Angela took to Italy, at the end of 1999, a small bag of clothes and two photographs of her son. She did not sell anything and she did not give things away; she left the home in the care of her husband where she imagined she would return soon enough. Angela was born and raised in a village adjacent to Piatra-Neamț. Her parents worked in the Săvinești factory since it was first opened in the 1950s. It only seemed natural for her to follow in their footsteps, and as soon as she completed high school in 1978 she was offered a job in the textile factory. She married Marius and they had a son a year later. Marius also worked at Săvinești but in a different warehouse. They applied for a housing allocation in the city and received their one bedroom apartment two years later. They spent the next sixteen years in this small flat where they raised their only son. By the end of the 1990s, Angela had worked for over a decade at RIFIL, the Italian-Romanian owned factory at Săvinești. As you might remember from chapter one, RIFIL had a particular reputation among Săvinești workers; the working hours and standards seemed superior, almost from another world, a western world. Romanian and Italian drivers who transported the final products to Italy would smuggle products that were scarce on the Romanian market. Women learned basic phrases in Italian and seemed to have had access to some resources that workers did not enjoy in other parts of Săvinești.

By 1999, RIFIL had downsized multiple times and Angela heard of an opportunity of temporary employment in Italy. Their son had started college already and they were barely managing financially. One of her previous colleagues at RIFIL took care of the necessary papers for her to leave, in exchange for 500 US dollars—money she borrowed from friends and family. In the fall of 1999, she embarked on a charter bus in

Piatra-Neamț and joined a family of acquaintances in Turin, Italy, who had promised to help her find work. I interviewed Angela 12 years later in Italy:

I don't know how I found the strength to leave everything behind. It was really blind courage...or maybe stupidity. I thought to myself that if I didn't like it I would come back...what's the worse that could happen? But I didn't even have the money to come back. The first job I found was a full time babysitting job...I lived with a family and took care of their children. I remember that their mother would take us out to eat because she did not cook and I would refuse to eat at these fancy restaurants...and when she offered me fruit... all I could think of was my son, back home, who might not have the possibility of eating a banana... I was also afraid I would seem ungrateful and I barely spoke Italian to make my feelings understood... at that time I still had plenty of contact with Romanians [in Italy] and I talked on the phone with my son very often. I bought a cell phone for the first time... we did not need them back home...

Angela's son did not have a cellphone until his mother arrived in Italy. She sent him money to purchase a phone so they could keep in touch. The sudden separation between parents and their children helped construct crucial needs that were not previously articulated as such at the time. While parents left to provide the basic "decent" needs for their children, they contributed to the rapid expansion of the telecommunication market and the technologies it encompassed. Romanian children and youth became primary consumers of the latest phones and competed with one another in upgrading their gadgets as often as possible. This seemed to be the first step towards a Romanian society technologically connected and mapped onto half of Europe. Angela and many other parents living abroad were now speaking to their children more often than they would have if they had stayed at home, but only if their employment arrangements abroad permitted.

Differences between temporary labor migrants and permanent immigrants were also evidenced by what they consumed abroad, what they refrained from, and the goods they sent to their home country. In Romania, the meaning of consuming or displaying

certain material goods and particular brands shifted. Just as in the socialist era, social status was marked by the way in which someone acquired certain goods: if they paid full price at the store, waited for sales season in Romania, or had family abroad. Having relatives or close friends abroad was visible in the material goods that people displayed and consumed. The latest cellphone model shifted its meaning depending on who owned it and the means of its acquisition. While family members at home enjoyed and competed for these goods, their ability to purchase them was conditioned by the sacrifices made abroad by their relatives.<sup>89</sup>

In recent years, the media was flooded with stories of Romanian women sequestered by their Italian employers. In May 2008, the Italian authorities rescued a Romanian woman from the house of a seventy-five year old woman for whom she had been working for a year. The Italian woman sequestered her Romanian maid in her basement, refused to pay her, physically abused her, and only allowed her to shower once a month using cold water (*Ziare.com* 2008). While it is only briefly mentioned in the Romanian articles that have covered the story, the Italian media highlights the fact that the woman was held under continuous video surveillance and she was unaware that in 2007, with Romania's accession to the European Union, she had become a citizen of the European community with all the rights this new status encompassed. Constantly threatened with expulsion and unaware of her rights, she endured her employer's abuse until one of her daughters alerted the authorities (*Il Giorno* 2008). As more stories like this surfaced, video surveillance, the presence of guns—even when not used as direct threat—the necessity of a vehicle and the skills to drive it in order to escape from a

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<sup>89</sup> See also Krisztina Fehervary's work on consumption before and after the socialist collapse in Hungary.

remote location, etc. seemed to bring forth a technological aspect of these Romanian women's lives.

While their time in Italy (and elsewhere) was always meant to be limited and their employment temporary, many Romanian workers found themselves working abroad for over a decade. As the telecommunication market flourished at home, more products catering to the needs of the Romanian worker abroad were being developed. One of the first such products was a dish network that allowed Romanians who worked in Italy to purchase the equipment and contract in Romania and have access to their favorite Romanian channels in their host country. In time, customer service was extended to these countries so that Romanian subscribers could call a local number in Italy or Spain for any troubleshooting issues that might occur abroad. This helped Romanian migrants stay connected with local and national political discourses, they could follow presidential debates and go to vote, watch the same movies with family at home and discuss similar issues with them in their next phone conversation. Technology mediated sociality and facilitated the survival of community and provided the synchronicity needed to compress the distance from family members and friends.

However, the same technology that kept Romanian workers connected to their home prevented them from integrating into Italian society, especially since that might not have been one of their initial goals. Angela's husband, Marius decided to stay home and take care of the apartment, their parents and look after their son while he was in college. He also kept his job at Săvinești for as long as he could. One of his previous co-workers and his wife had also left to work in Italy a few years back. Their older son joined them leaving their two younger children at home where they had asked Marius to look after

them. In exchange they looked for work opportunities for Marius in Italy. When such an opportunity surfaced they sent their older son back to Romania to take care of his younger siblings (a sister who was 6 and a brother who was 12 at the time). Marius found work hundreds of kilometers away from Angela so it took years before they were reunited in Italy. He worked among Romanians in construction and watched Romanian television when he was at home. He did not go out much.

Angela was now living with and taking care of an elderly Italian couple who only allowed her to go outside once every few days, and only to go to the market. She remembered how free she felt, smoking her one cigarette a day and strolling towards the farmers' market. But she also remembered that she was barely able to speak to Marius or her son while working for that couple, even though she thought she owed it to them that she could now speak fluent Italian with barely any accent. As a result of his experience, Marius never really learned Italian; he knew basic phrases here and there "to get by" but he never thought he would really need it.

In 2007 Marius received a phone call from a former Săvinești colleague who had heard of a job opening at a slaughtering facility close to where Angela was working. After eight years, Angela and Marius were reunited at the same address. Angela found a job at a local home for the elderly and Marius, along with a large group of Romanians, worked at the slaughtering facility until 2012, when it closed down. Lacking the social and linguistic skills, he did not qualify for many of the jobs available locally so he decided to return to Romania and work on the house they always planned to build after their son graduated college. They both considered it would be best for Angela to keep her stable job and benefits in Italy until she could retire and return home. At times

empowered by the opportunity to communicate with family afar, or to keep themselves informed via internet and Romanian networks through satellite, many of these workers were also controlled and abused by the mere existence of other kinds of technologies unfamiliar to them. Technology mediated their sociality on various levels but most importantly, it enabled the creation of a new kind of family.

### **The birth of the virtual family**

Rapidly developing technologies made possible the creation of what I call the *virtual family* as many labor migrants could not return home for years, thus, having to educate and inspire their children through the phone, and later, online. Many labor migrants buried loved ones by planning every detail through delegates and requesting pictures or videos of funeral services. Various technological means had become the answer to the unexpected problems that emerged from a wave of labor migration. By looking at these technological advancements paradoxes of immigrant success are uncovered: the psychological consequences many children endured as a result of parental separation and the recent attempts to address them by using Skype and internet more generally. Moreover, certain consumer products and technologies have facilitated the mutual estrangement between those returning home and those who stayed, ideas of immigrant success and the potentiality of returning “home” for good.

Anuta’s story was very similar to Angela’s: she immigrated to Italy in the late 90s to help her son pay for his education. After a couple of years she was surprised to find out that her son, Catalin, had decided to get married. Catalin had been dating the same girl

for a while now, but in his phone conversations with his mother she never noticed it was that serious. Anuta talked about the way she felt after she was delivered the news:

I felt robbed ...not of my son...not in the sense that I wanted my son for myself and no woman should take my place... I felt cheated out of the opportunity to see their relationship develop, grow, to observe the signs and recognize when that crucial moment arrived in my son's life...I left my baby home only to talk on the phone one day to a stranger, a grown man, who has decided to drastically change his life in my absence... I don't know if she's good for him, I've never met her...I'm sure she is...I trust his judgment.

This was the moment when Anuta decided to purchase a laptop. She had heard stories about how “magical” it is to see your children, to look in their eyes and be able to read what they are not saying out loud. Her neighbor told her that she sometimes feels like hugging the screen: “That’s how close she feels to her daughter when they talk on the computer.”

She asked her neighbor’s husband for help, as he seemed to know a bit about computers. She purchased a laptop, she signed up for Internet through her mobile provider, her neighbor installed Yahoo messenger and Skype on her computer, and helped her create accounts. When I visited her in Italy in 2011, four years later, the only knowledge she had about how to use her computer revolved around Skype and Facebook. She told me that she only used Yahoo messenger in the beginning but it was not as easy as Skype. Next to the computer was an old and stained piece of paper. She called it her *copiuta* (cheat sheet) and it encompassed all the information necessary for Anuta to navigate the little use of her computer: her email address and password, her Facebook account information and step by step instructions in Romanian on how to get to Skype, email, and Facebook after she started her computer.

Countless similar stories were the inspiration for the 2008 short film “*Fata galbena care rade*” (The Yellow Smiley Face), (Popescu 2008). Written by Doru Lupeanu and directed by Constantin Popescu, the fifteen-minute film presents a short fragment from the lives of the Popescus, a middle age Romanian couple attempting to use their new computer for the first time and talk to their son who lives in America. Guided by a step-by-step instruction manual written by their son, they try to navigate the technical terms they do not understand substituting them with more familiar words. The comical dialogue resembles a puzzle as they try to put together what they see—a silver box with a blue button, various drawings on a screen, a yellow smiling dot, a thing with a cord and two buttons sitting next to the letters—with the information on a piece of paper—push the blue button without mentioning its location, double click with the mouse on the yellow smiley face, a window will open. When their initial efforts to open the Skype application failed, Mrs. Popescu begins thinking about the possibility of having to open the window of the room where the action takes place.

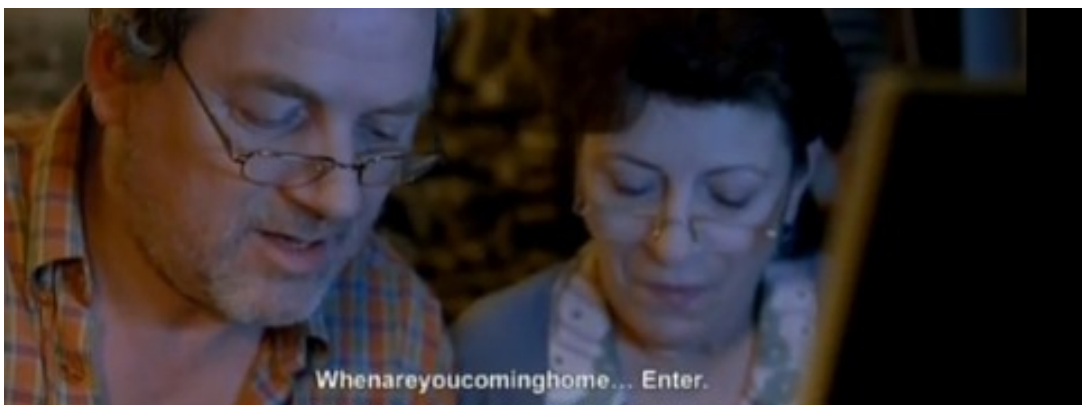


Figure 28 – Screenshot from the movie *Fata galbena care rade*

Like the Popescus, Anuta had a new computer and with the help of her “cheat sheet” she could now talk to her son and daughter in law, as well as spend time with their little daughter, who had recently started to walk. She had not been able to attend her son’s



wedding, or her granddaughter's birth or baptism but, "financially and in spirit," she was always there. In fact, her son could not have had a "proper" wedding or pay for a christening reception without his mother's help. Anuta's husband still lives in Romania and he never joined her abroad and waits for her return every month of August.

Because the month of August is a national holiday month in Italy, it is also when most Italian employers allow their Romanian employees to take an extended vacation. By this time most of them have also saved enough money to stay "home" for a month, see family, work on their houses or remodel their apartments, pay bills and debt that might have accumulated over the year, etc. This is when Anuta also manages to visit her family and friends in Piatra-Neamț. In our interview I asked her why she never returned home after her son graduated college. After a moment of silence she lifted her shoulders indicating that there was no clear reason, and said:

There was always something. When my father suddenly passed away, my family couldn't afford to pay for the funeral services. Catalin got married, I became a grandmother, they needed a place to live, new furniture, I helped as much as I could. I always thought of going back to be with them... but to do what? There was always something else. Every year we repainted the walls [of our apartment], my husband started fixing our parents' old house that was falling apart and so I stayed here to help... and when I'm home I feel like I bother them... like we're in each other's space... we're not used to each other anymore... at least not physically...

She continued to describe this feeling of uneasiness when she returned "home" as if she did not belong there anymore. The space had changed, there were cars everywhere, and people were rude to the returning workers who dare slip a few Italian words by mistake. Piatra-Neamț residents complain about the city getting crowded, about the fact that the "Italians" no longer know how to navigate the transformed city and cause traffic accidents. Moreover, they talk about labor migrants as "living with the false impression

they are better than those who stayed.” Other permanent residents talked about the ways migrants carry themselves, having no worry in the world. In many ways, these observations about migrant behaviors are valid, as migrants do not have a job and set daily routine while being in Piatra-Neamț. Also, many of them do not own cars in Italy but enjoy the convenience of having a rental when they return. As such, their driving skills are always under observation while staying in Piatra-Neamț. These dynamics, many labor migrants told me, have made them feel like “foreigners in their own home.” Anuta for example, said that while she cannot call Italy her home because she never invested in integrating herself in a life there, she feels most comfortable in her little rental apartment in northern Italy, in front of the screen that made her a part of the lives of those she left behind in Romania. Thus, online communications are important for anthropological inquiry, not only as new mediums through which sociality and family is reproduced but also because it created a kind of physical dissonance with what labor migrants still, very much, consider home.

During the summer of 2012, the Neamț district library G. T. Kirileanu joined into a project titled *Te iubeste mama!* (Momma loves you!), designed to support the Romanian women who immigrated to work in Italy and whose children still live in Romania. However, the project originated a year earlier in Milan, Italy. Silvia Dumitrache, a Romanian immigrant herself, initiated the project as she recognized the urgency to address the consequences of economic migration on Romanian children and their immigrant parents. The project allows for children to visit the library and regularly talk and see their mothers through Skype. In addition, the project’s website, was designed to offer resources and psychological support to children and parents “in situation of risk”

on the basis of familial separation {Citation}. On the first page of the website, Silvia recounts:

Everything began with an idea I had a year back. I said to myself: ‘I have to do something for the children of those Romanians who work abroad.’ I had been living in Italy for a series of years, I had been through the immigration terrors and struggles, I knew what happens in the soul of a mother who breaks away from her child and runs in the world to work so that she can provide her baby with a decent living. I knew all this, but seeing a documentary on the Italian channel RAI3 brought me to tears and I could not sleep for weeks. The documentary, directed by Ionut Carpatorea and produced by Sorin Manu, presents a few cases of Romanian children who have taken their lives because they could not endure the separation from their mothers, who left to work in Italy. The documentary “Home Alone—a Romanian Tragedy” was later aired by numerous other Italian networks and this is how Italians found out about the sacrifices made by the Romanian women who work for them. That’s when I realized I had to do something; that I could not sit this one out. I already had an association in Milano, Italy where I now live, fortunately, with my son.

When she first founded *Associazione delle Donne Romene in Italia*—A.D.R.I. (The Association of Romanian Women in Italy), Silvia envisioned it as a socio-cultural agency meant to support the integration of Romanian women, and the Romanian community more broadly, into Italian life while maintaining close ties with their country of origin. By partnering with the Romanian libraries who had acquired access to Internet through the National Program Biblionet, Silvia initiated the project “Te iubeste mama!” to facilitate the audio and video communication between immigrant parents and their children in Romania. The primary focus and purpose of the project has become to prevent and lower the number of suicide attempts among the children left at home. The Italians have labeled these children “orfani bianchi” (white orphans)<sup>90</sup>. The website offers a series

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<sup>90</sup> It is not clear that this is an ethnic reference considering that many Italians have long associated all Romanians with the Roma minority members who migrated from Romania. It might also have a religious connotation. In an article written for the cultural blog *Minima & Moralia*, Alessandro Leogrande gives a more romantic explanation to this label: “Bianchi come la neve in inverno o come il candore dei loro anni” (White as snow in winter or as the purity of their age).

of statistics, studies, and materials about the consequences of this sudden and in mass economic migration:

Our findings show that out of over a million Romanians employed in Italy, only in northern Italy there are currently over 130.000 women of an average age of 40 and who have left their children in Romania in the care of their spouse, their grandparents or other relatives. There are also cases in which the children were left alone to care for themselves and in these cases communication links with the mother is hard to establish and is done so rarely. The number of children left alone in Romania is as high as 400.000.

Silvia initiated her project through Facebook Causes and was circulated and advertised through personal networks, friends and family and their circles. Silvia's sister, who works for the Biblionet project in Romania, supported the idea from its inception and together they created the partnership between the two projects. Since then, many have joined to support the project in various ways. Narcis Iustin Ianau, one of the finalists of the televised show "Romanii au talent" (Romania has talent) has become one of the ambassadors for the project "Te iubeste mama!" During the show, the audience had a chance to hear his story: Iustin was one of the thousands of children left in the care of relatives in Romania. His mother had been working in Italy for twelve years during which she returned once a year for a month. Iustin had told the Romanian audience that he wanted to win so his mother would never have to leave his side again. At age sixteen he had spent only three years with his mother who left to work in Italy to provide for her family.

### **Waiting and the paradoxes of immigrant success**

At the end of August 2011, I paid a visit to a friend. As I entered the familiar home, still under construction after more than ten years, I ran into Mr. Gigi, my friend's

father who was enjoying a cigarette after a long day of work on the house. I asked Mr. Gigi how he was. He sighed and replied: “I’m waiting. I guess I’m always waiting. When I’m here I wait to go there, when I’m there I wait to come home. People like us always wait, don’t we? Don’t you feel the same?” His reply was not surprising; I was faced with this response countless times during my fieldwork, especially from Romanian migrant workers and their families, and even more so in the cases of those who knew that I had myself continued to navigate between my home in the United States, and my native town of Piatra-Neamț, which had become my fieldsite.

In this section I look at the ways in which the chronic waiting<sup>91</sup> of and for Romanian parents is articulated for and by the children “left behind”. In doing so, I examine the kinds of memories and evidence that are called upon to make sense of one’s parents’ long term, temporary absence while also paying attention to instances of transformation during this process of waiting. While “long term, temporary absence” might sound oxymoronic it is exactly this entailed paradox that I would like to underline. That is to draw attention to the qualities of a time based on indefinite deferral – a state of abeyance, so to speak. When and how does temporary become permanent? How are definitions of family reconfigured? What are the things that move through time and what is understood to passively remain still? What is expected to be recuperable and for how long? Exploring waiting in talk and action, as well as interactions between those returning and their “home” (when waiting is itself deferred) illuminates the kinds of futures they envision, personhoods constructed around familiar spaces that seem more foreign with every trip back home, and the shifts between familial roles and

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<sup>91</sup> "Wait" is what powerful people say to subordinate people. The writings of Barry Schwartz teach us that waiting reveals social structure, and his work is indispensable for all of the papers on this panel today (1974; 1975)

responsibility.

Waiting can be an active and effective weapon, as guerilla forces have shown global powers in recent decades. It is not only individuals who engage in temporal agency, or what Flaherty has called "time work." States and other organizations also attempt to control or modify temporal experience. In the past twenty-five years Romanians have been waiting to "return to Europe", for various infrastructures to be built, laws to be implemented, and for "change" but many claim that waiting is exactly what they thought would cease with the regime change in 1989. While the things people wait seem to no longer control their daily lives to the extent the communist state did, waiting continues to be normalized for contemporary Romanians in very paralyzing ways. This is particularly true in the lives of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers and their families. On November 2, 2014 social media feeds about Romanian presidential elections were taken over by stories about waiting at the voting polls in the diaspora. Hundreds of thousands of Romanians stood in long lines, in the cold, waiting to cast their vote from afar for the next Romanian president (see figure 29). As they expressed their frustrations online, they compared their voting experience with their memories of communism and claimed that voting for or against a certain candidate meant voting for their own return home.



Figure 29 – Romanians in the diaspora in line to cast their votes in the 2014 presidential elections

Long instances of waiting are by no means new to Romanian society. Daily queuing for food rations or to be allocated an apartment or a car, waiting in line at gas stations or for raw materials in factories, has shaped socialist life in Romania, particularly in the last decade before the regime’s collapse (Verdery 1996). In fact, as presidential candidate and, at the time, prime minister of Romania, Victor Ponta, was being held responsible for the long waits at the voting polls in the diaspora, the cover of the satirical magazine, *KamiKaze*, portrayed the politician in a propaganda style poster. His picture was altered digitally to make him resemble Nicolae Ceausescu, the last Romanian socialist president before the 1989 revolution. The poster was captioned: “Comrade Puie Monta-He did it! The president who reunited Romanians in lines” (Figure 30).



Figure 30 – “Comrade Puie Monta-He did it! The president who reunited Romanians in lines” (The cover of KamiKaze satirical magazine)

The constant talk about and around waiting has inspired some Romanian artists to link observations and scenes of everyday life in Romania with this particular discourse around elections. On November 3rd, photographer Stelian Bogza posted a snapshot of a young woman waiting in the train station besides her small suitcase. He titled it: “Waiting for the second run of elections-does she stay or leave the country?” (figure 31).

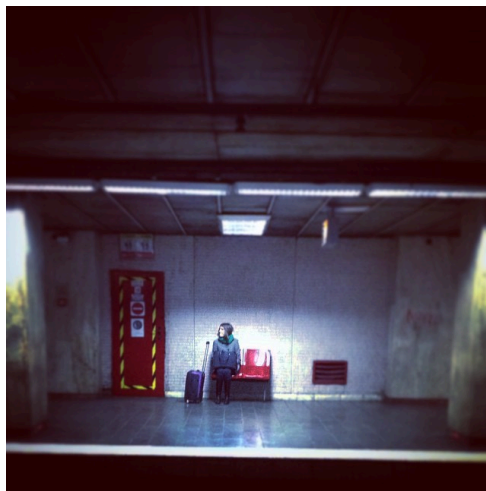


Figure 31 – Waiting for the secondary elections: Does she stay or leave the country? (Așteptând turul 2 de alegeri: pleacă sau nu din țară?) Photo credit: Stelian Bogza



In his book, *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina (2012)*, Javier Auyero brings careful ethnographic research to bear on the routine temporal experiences of people who seek help and social services from the State. In doing so, he shows us how the State constructs political dominance through the control of its citizens' time. By making the urban poor of Buenos Aires wait for whatever they need, the State creates subordination and political resignation. For the State, however, waiting is an intentional or strategic form of temporal agency. While waiting has acquired charged political meanings, particularly during the elections of 2014 when Romanians in the diaspora waited endless hours to vote abroad, I argue that in the case of Romanian migrant workers and their families, everyday life has been conditioned by constant acts of waiting, while temporary states of being have been normalized—temporariness has become seemingly permanent.

Mr. Gigi and his wife left Romania in 2000, leaving their two children, 16 and 17 years old at the time, in the care of their grandmother. Like thousands of other Romanians, they secured employment in Italy: he worked in construction and she became a caregiver in a home for the elderly. To save money they lived in a three bedroom apartment with six other Romanians and each month, after taking care of their expenses, they sent all their money to Romania. Every August, they returned home burdened by gifts for their family members. The initial plan was to save some money to put their children through college and return home. Similar to the Romanian migrant workers in Swanie Potot's study, "their objective was not to flee Romania in order to build a new life elsewhere but, rather, to temporarily compensate for the deficiencies of a faulty social and economic system" (2010: 250). As Gigi's children were graduating from college, his

mother fell ill and he decided to stay in Italy a few more years to cover medical bills for his mother. As years passed, their old house in Piatra-Neamț needed more and more repairs until they could no longer acquire an authorization to modify it. In essence, the local authorities told them they had to build a new house. However, because their children still lived in the house, Gigi's son had to be creative: he demolished and rebuilt half of the house, and subsequently demolished the second half of the old house (see Figure 32).



Figure 32 – Mr. Gigi's house 2004

To this day, construction continues on the house while Gigi and his wife, continue to live in Italy and invest in building materials. As I talked to their children, they told me that they have dedicated the last decade to this house and have no idea if they would ever want to live in it, or if their parents would ever return. Gigi's daughter has also claimed

that the days when her and her brother needed financial support from their parents were long gone but they insisted there was still a need for them to work in Italy. She explained:

I think many of these needs they say we have, have been influenced by their time abroad. They saw themselves there, they knew they had no jobs to come back to, so they said “Since we’re here anyways... at least we could... (*Daca tot suntem aici... macar sa...*)”

Angela first left Romania in 1999. She secured work as a live-in caregiver for an elderly couple in Turin, Italy. After a couple of years, her husband lost his job in Romania and found a construction job in a small town next to Rome, leaving their 18 year old son alone in Romania. While Angela and her husband now worked in the same country, they lived hundreds of kilometers apart. Similarly to Mr. Gigi, they wanted to help their son with college expenses but after graduation their son got married, had a baby, Angela’s mother passed away and expenses seemed to pile up back home. When I talked to her in Romania in 2012, she still believed they would return home one day but was not sure when that time would come. It is estimated that over two million Romanians have left to work abroad without the intention to settle. These migrants’ financial contributions to their families as well as their movement back and forth between home and work had become a source of both feelings of gratitude and resentment.

Their pendular movement between their relatively comfortable homes and the host countries, where they had no interest in integrating, has become a long lasting reality. The constant influx of money from abroad has created feelings of dependency back home and anxiety when thinking of the temporary nature of this arrangement. Scholars of migration have coined various terms in thinking about this new kind of human economic movement, especially in the context of European enlargement. Terms like “incomplete,” “liquid,” “temporary,” migration or mobility or “lasting

temporariness” (Okólski 2001a, 2001b, Engbersen, Snel and De Boom 2010, Grzymala-Kazłowska 2005, Wyman 1993) have tried to capture the complexities intrinsic to this phenomenon. However, more and more migrant workers see this as their everyday reality in a *permanent* state of waiting. Following, Harold Schweizer (2008) and Ghassan Hage’s (2009) intervention into the study of waiting and as more and more Romanian migrant workers define their state of being in a perpetual process of waiting I would like to explore the kind of waiting that happens in these patterns of labor movement. How do migrants wait, for how long, and when does waiting cease? In other words, I am looking at Romanian labor migration from the perspective of waiting for the return home.

In the cases I looked at, waiting took place from two directions: parent workers who move between their Romanian home and work abroad and the children whose mere existence motivate this economic movement to begin with. While both parents and children waited for their annual encounters in August and the subsequent separation when vacation ended, their lives were also conditioned by waiting for different things as well. While children’s lives revolved around waiting for their parents’ monthly financial contributions, parents waited for the opportunity to permanently return home—the moment when jobs would be available, when their families will be whole again. Because they experienced waiting in contrasting ways, members of these two groups positioned themselves differently in relation to the home, the state, and each other.

While the economic situation was the leading cause of mass labor migration from Romania, when Angela left Romania, it was her personal choice; at least more so than the experience of her son who was faced with the reality of his mother leaving the home. Fifteen years later she spoke about realizing that the conditions of her labor migration had

impacted her family, the way her son grew up and the kind of person he had become. “I never thought I would be gone for so long,” she said “it never really felt that long. You get caught up in the routine of making the money and sending it home and you realize you’ve forgotten to teach your son about love, relationships, life. Time passes.” As she told me this with her head bowed, Angela also smiled when she confessed that she never lost hope. She always knew that she would return home and some things could be “recuperable,” she would have the time to catch up. Because “waiting is not simply a passage of time to be traversed. Although time is supposed to function like a door or a hall through which we pass unawares, in waiting, the door jams and the hall is endless [...] Time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. In waiting, time is slow and thick” (Schweizer 2008: 2). Maybe that’s why people feel they have much more of it.

Of course most children also waited for their parents’ permanent return home, but many of them lost this hope after a couple of years. Mr. Gigi’s daughter, Marcela told me that she never quite understood why her parents would return home. “Nothing changed. Nothing ever changes in Romania so why would they come back?” Most parents did not explain their living conditions in Italy, and with the continuous visibility of money and the imagination of comfortable lives in the west, most of those who stayed at home do not quite understand that staying abroad was never really an option.

“Waiting is still assigned to the poor and powerless so as to ritualistically reinforce social and political demarcations” (Schweizer 2008:6). When migrants return home they are expected to wait in long lines to renew their identification cards or passports, to acquire necessary paperwork to bury their dead, etc. Those who remained

“home” navigate the local social networks so masterfully at times, that waiting is something they escape even when they do not really need to. It is not that the local government does not know by now that, during the month of August, thousands of migrant workers return home and attempt, in the limited time they have, to resolve various things where their presence is required. Logistically, this wait could be easily eliminated, but migrant workers deserve to wait--this process reminds them of their place in the society they try to return to. Waiting becomes bureaucratically weaponized.

Waiting together is not the same as waiting apart. There was plenty of waiting in Romania during the socialist years, but families were together. As a result of the post-socialist diaspora, it is splintered families who wait for modernization, wait to vote, and wait to be re-united with loved ones. Martin Frederiksen reports comparable conditions in his book, *Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia* (Temple, 2013).

In Romania, what was thought to be temporary has become permanent, yet the people in question do not accept this assessment, and they find this disjuncture quite stressful. As in the study by Chelcea [AAA 2014 paper], we see clever and cynical forms of online satire arise from this tension. "In waiting," asserts Schweizer, "time is slow and thick," but this assertion is only valid for the way we experience waiting in the present. When Angela recalls fifteen years of separation from her son, she reports that "it never really felt that long." Flaherty's research suggests that, prior to this recollection, the erosion of episodic memory and the routine complexity of immigrant life combine to make for temporal compression. The migrant workers wait to return home and then wait in long lines to renew identification cards or passports. Romanians are made to wait by a

regime that thinks they deserve to wait--a regime that seeks to make them patients of the State, as Auyero would put it.

In Romania, parental care becomes solely monetary, parents losing their right to police their children, feeling inadequate to offer life advice from afar... but because waiting is rendered quasi-permanent, it constantly requires justification. It has to be and have been worth it. Hence, needs that pile up and have to be filled also represent different kinds of investments in children's futures (piano and dancing lessons) a whole register of pedagogical actions by proxy that are meant to compensate for absence and to fill the waiting experienced by children. I began this section with Mr. Gigi's story because I believe his family's experience in renovating their house can be a metaphor for how labor migrants and their families experience life after the local/national industrial collapse: Living half a life in half a home!



Figure 33 – Mr. Gigi's house 2014

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, this chapter has engaged a period of mobility and labor migration that can be directly linked to the sudden deindustrialization in Piatra-Neamt. While labor migration was common across Romania and Eastern Europe more generally, industrial collapse positioned Piatra Neamt as one of the most depopulated cities in Romania. I have argued that in the case of Piatra-Neamt, labor migration has created the opportunity to extend the local community across geographical borders physically, rather than ideologically as in the case of museum workers presented in the previous chapter. Strong ties between the local community and its extension abroad have shaped a series of fruitful opportunities and unfortunate paradoxes. While the money migrants send home have ensured the economic stability of the community, the dependence on this income has stagnated the growth and professional explorations for many of those who stayed at home. While technology has allowed migrants to remain connected to their families and local events, it has created a false feeling of engagement and led to the reconfiguration of familial roles and the emergence of the virtual family.

Possibly the greatest effect can be observed in people's understanding of time and their relationship to periods of waiting. As decades-long labor abroad continues to be considered temporary, migrants have failed to invest in the societies they live in and can no longer see the certainty of a future at home. At the same time, their families fail to understand the experience abroad, the social and financial sacrifices necessary to secure the level of comfort relatives expect at home, where migrants are now received as foreigners. To survive these paradoxes, they wait together.



## CONCLUSION

Mostly this dissertation is about the contradictions and paradoxes of becoming European; about life in an industrial city with no factories (anymore) and a tourist city with no tourists (yet).

Although inspired by the relocation of the Roma minority to the *Speranța* neighborhood, this dissertation was not about this event; At least not in the way that I envisioned it initially. I expected to write a story about nationalism and the remaking of national identity in which stories of ethnic difference became criteria for belonging to a new European Romania. I expected to write about life in the *Speranța* neighborhood and the individual stories of relocation and coping with the reality of being uprooted. Instead, the event became a metaphor, an anchor that grounded more forcefully people and their histories, Roma and non-Roma as they were being shifted out of or tried to move through their transforming city. The moment when *Speranța* gained traction in the media and was internationally attacked was also the moment when Piatra Neamt residents began to think through and talk about their hopes, their challenges, and their moments of transformation in relation to Europe.

Thus, tracing the event through people's memories and institutions uncovered the multiple and entangled alterations of an entire city. Paradoxically, the Roma became more visible in the city through their relocation; accidental others emerged from transforming infrastructure meant to signal inclusion, while labor migrants, contributing

the most to the local economic stability, continuously stumbled in a place they still called home. Unlike many studies about Roma discrimination, this project has presented the minority in context. In doing so, it did not mean to diminish Roma experience but to illuminate the complexities of living together rather than apart, of acknowledging ruptures in an often-presented continuous historical thread of ancient hatred. The sociality forged at Săvinești and the constant shuffling between *Speranța* and Piatra-Neamț in search of those social bonds, offered one such rupture to think with. By denying to remember *Speranța* as discriminatory action, Piatra-Neamț community pointed to a matrix of other communal struggles and the intricate ways they have been coping together in the ever-shifting landscape.

Another contradiction emerged out of the intersection of Săvinești sociality, the role of history and memory in activating and reproducing sociality, and the materiality of the city. Some scholars and politicians have equated Romania's "return to Europe" with the country's "return to history," arguing that heritage and geography had become the foundations of this transformation. While this lens may, to a certain degree, elucidate the emergence and popularity of right-wing politics in contemporary Romania, my own explorations in Piatra-Neamț enabled us to understand how history is understood and practiced in everyday life. I showed that forging, maintaining, and activating social networks in a particular landscape cannot be done in the absence of history, and in the case of Piatra-Neamț especially, without acknowledging and engaging particular shared experiences from the socialist era.

While present social and political contexts regulated what evidence is relevant in the process of re-writing national history in the museums, "what happened" leaves

material traces so “that which is said to have happened” can be reconstituted. While artifacts can ground segments of the past in an imagined continuous chronology that legitimizes the current state of affairs (e.g. the nation-state), material evidence of the past can also limit the way in which one can write about history. This is particularly salient in understanding how Piatra-Neamț museum actors selected artifacts and exhibits for the writing of a new local history that is shared with and extended towards Europe and which breaks with socialist history.

However, the materiality of the city itself cannot be escaped by the people living there who look upon their past to make sense of current situations and struggles. The industrial ruins that welcome you to city and the socialist remnants repurposed into housing projects for the Roma compel the writing of a different history, one that museum actors struggle to negotiate in their roles as members of the local. In the endless recalibrations of the local materiality, stark distinctions emerge among those who have molded their lives and their children’s futures in relation to the factory. A new environment of transformation, that of the transition to Europe, is necessary in making sense of, and reproducing local sociality in Piatra-Neamț. Paradoxically, to prevent the complete collapse of the social structures, continually adopting and reifying the discourse of transition has become a necessary condition, which prevents the community from ever considering itself transformed. In this sense, this research has problematized the rupture between political and everyday life in Romania and has uncovered the complexities of ideological production in a particular (post)industrial setting.

Possibly the most surprising thing about this research was my own experience as a scholar, the multiple roles I played, and the networks I was incorporated in, many times

before I could make sense of them. I knew from the beginning that returning to my hometown to research the relocation of the Roma from the neighborhood I grew up in, required a certain amount of reflexivity. I struggled to understand how much of a native anthropologist I was returning there after a decade and having left a teenager, and what that meant for my work. During my first preliminary research trips I was received home by former neighbors although the home had shifted kilometers away, as a hybrid extension between a myth of America and local NGOs, and as a much too curious intern at institutions affiliated in some form or another with the state. Although hard to negotiate at times, I expected to be received in this way to some extent. However, I did not foresee to discover my own place in the social fabric I was trying to make sense of, rooted deeply in unfamiliar histories my grandparents had shared with people I had never met. It is an odd feeling to be “recognized” by strangers as they joke about duties you have ignored while being abroad. These feelings intensified as I became a mother in the field, as I chose godparents for my daughter and as various members of the community competed to replace, at least temporarily, my absent family. Every single one of these roles helped uncover layer upon layer of complexity in the local Piatra-Neamt reality but it also required a tremendous amount of effort to make sense of them as I became a scholar when I returned. I hope this work can contribute in some form to thinking about our roles as scholars and our identities, intentional and accidental, in the field and in our writing.

My training in anthropology and history has made interdisciplinarity foundational to both my research methodology as well as to the social theories I sought to best explain my observations in the field. I approached the archives as repositories of historical

evidence as well as anthropological subjects, constructed through particular cultural practices in continuous remaking. In so doing, interactions with archivists and librarians as well as the circulation and uses of particular documents, illuminated ideas of belonging and competencies that did not emerge elsewhere. Moreover, my ethnographic inquiries were informed by my interest in history, geography, as well as museum studies which helped me draw conclusions from recorded oral histories, interactions with spaces, official and vernacular maps, as well as my work as a volunteer for different institutions. At a theoretical level, engaging with materiality, sociality, and ideas of belonging allowed me to transcend not only disciplinary boundaries, as these fields of inquiry have themselves been shaped in interdisciplinary conversations, but have also offered the opportunity to cross spatial and historical boundaries. That is, to see the contrasts within Eastern European space as well as parallels with post-colonial and post-industrial spaces elsewhere while challenging the idea of post-socialist history – to question what is post or what is socialist in the history that people invoke in daily life and practices in Piatra-Neamt and elsewhere.

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In 2015 the Roma families who had been relocated to *Speranța* in the early 2000s, were, yet again, being moved, this time to Valeni. Newspaper articles circulated the same pictures of garbage-covered streets and crumbling grey apartment buildings as evidence for Roma backwardness. Valeni residents had already started to publicly display their dissatisfaction with this initiative. A local journalist produced a short film (*Underground Piatra Neamt*) about the living conditions in *Speranța* after the local government had

ceased waste collection and cut off the water supply. While the film was meant to shed light on the hypocrisy of the local government, it never mentions the Roma minority.

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