

A Thousand Dollars and Home Again?: Romanian Women's Influence on the Immigrant Experience in South St. Paul, Minnesota, 1900 - 1925

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Introduction

Most early Romanian immigrants came to the Midwest to find jobs as unskilled laborers in the meat packing industry. South St. Paul, Minnesota was one of the largest markets around 1900. Local histories say that most were men who arrived without women, with a mission of "a thousand dollars and home again," meaning that they intended to stay in the United States just long enough to earn money to return home to purchase small acreage there. In existing accounts of Romanian migration to the United States, as is the case with most American immigration stories, men are the central focus. They are usually treated as pioneers of sorts; they left their homeland for America with a few dollars in their pockets and either earned enough money to go back or to send for their women and families to join them. There is generally no mention of Romanian women, what they thought and how they acted, and how they influenced the resulting immigration experiences of the Romanian community. Over half of the immigrants did return home, but many remained in South St. Paul, while others subsequently migrated across the United States and Canada. The reasons behind the decisions to migrate varied and complex, but women played a stronger role than has been traditionally recognized.

Interestingly, women are practically ignored in discussions of immigration, and this is also true of accounts of the South St. Paul Romanians. The experiences of male immigrants dominate the extant research. The lack of representation of women's roles in the process of emigration and acculturation has left us with less than a full picture of the American immigrant working class experience. While records indicate that the vast majority of early Romanians who

made the decision to settle in South St. Paul were men, certainly women contributed to those decisions. The women could have been wives, mothers, or significant other females in their lives, whose influences continued throughout subsequent decisive moments of men's lives. The study of women's immigration experiences and their influences on the resulting development of a permanent Romanian presence is important in order to fully appreciate our nation's so-called "melting pot" history and our collective American culture. Current scholarship generally portrays Romanian immigrant women as passive followers of their male counterparts. But in reality, Romanian women were active participants in the immigration experience. By analyzing documents that record information about Romanian immigrant women, we may begin to comprehend how women influenced family decisions, including whether to emigrate from Romania, how the families adjusted to their new lives, and whether to remain in the United States. Romanian women's influence on emigration and their eventual presence in America contributed to the permanency of Romanian culture and traditions in the United States.

For reasons that remain unclear, Romanians came to South St. Paul somewhat later than other Eastern European ethnic groups. Because male immigrants originally sought a goal of "a thousand dollars and home again" so that they could improve their lives in Europe, during the early emigration period in the early 1900s, most Romanian wives stayed behind in the "old country" to care for children and families. However, it proved more difficult than expected for men to earn the requisite thousand dollars, and after a year or more of waiting for husbands to return, Romanian women began making the journey to America to assist with the enterprise. As more women joined the South St. Paul community and children were born there, family connections were solidified and extended kinship networks followed. Many Romanian families

shifted their sights from “a thousand dollars and home again” to establishing permanent residence in the United States.

Historical Background

By 1920 approximately 85,000 Romanians had immigrated to the United States. It is difficult to quantify the exact number since the majority of the post-1895 emigrants left the territories of Transylvania or the Banat, areas that were not part of the Romanian Kingdom but were under Austro-Hungarian or Hungarian rule until 1918. Therefore the country of origin as listed on various migration documents may not have reflected an emigrant’s true nationality or ethnic background. Living conditions and dissatisfaction with Hungarian rule led to massive emigration. One historian estimates that between 1901 and 1914 alone, about 210,000 Transylvanians or ten percent of its population, migrated internally to territories governed by the Kingdom of Romania or departed for the United States.¹ These migrants were primarily ethnic Romanians.

To understand why so many emigrated specifically from Transylvania and the Banat, it is helpful to know something about the history of those areas, which today make up approximately the northwest quarter of the country of Romania. Both Transylvania and the Banat consist of fertile agricultural lands among the Carpathian Mountains that were historically under control of noble Austrian and Hungarian landlords. Transylvanian serfs were emancipated in 1854 but as peasants, in reality their condition changed very little.² For example, in 1875 in the village of Bințiți, over a third of the peasantry remained dependent on landlords, to whom they paid three

¹ Verdery, Katherine. *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 221-222.

² *Ibid.*, 181.

days of labor per week in exchange for use of the land. A couple may have supplemented their income by caring for the landlord's livestock, by selling eggs, or by the wife's taking in sewing jobs. Economic conditions worsened after a series of poor harvests and medical epidemics in the latter part of the nineteenth century.³ By 1895 half the peasants remained landless.⁴ Agricultural advances did not come to Transylvania until after World War I. Until then, peasant workers continued to use animals and antiquated tools to perform manual planting and harvesting of the land in the traditional ways of their ancestors.⁵ At the turn of the century, Romanian peasants saw little hope of improving their financial condition or that of future generations.

Further, ethnic Romanians were tired of being subjected to laws that they felt demeaned their language and eroded their culture. Leading up to World War I, ethnic rivalries and yearning for political autonomy led to strife and conflict among Eastern European peoples. The ruling Magyars (Hungarians) promoted Hungarian nationalism, and their attempts to "denationalize" Romanians in Transylvania and the Banat remained strong.⁶ For example, during the nineteenth century, the Hungarian government's Magyarization reforms sought to mandate use of Hungarian instead of Romanian names, Catholic instead of Orthodox church schools, and to prevent land ownership by ethnic Romanians. These repressive efforts contributed to an outbreak of harvest strikes by the Romanian peasantry in the years between 1903 and 1907.⁷

Romanians in Transylvania and the Banat lived alongside Lutheran Germans, Catholic Magyars, and other ethnic groups, but they remained somewhat socially isolated due to cultural and religious differences. Most social gatherings occurred around religious festivities, and since

³ Verdery, 196.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁷ Pascu, Stefan. *A History of Transylvania*. Translated by D. Robert Ladd. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 249-251.

the Orthodox calendar differed from those of the other local faiths, their events were celebrated separately.⁸ Historian Katherine Verdery claims that Romanians maintained work and family connections with neighbors who were kin, and that they engaged in labor exchanges or “work parties” rather than hiring help as the Germans might have done.⁹ This seems logical since the Romanians were poorer and lacked money for hired help, but it also illustrates the tenacious determination and self-reliance of the Romanian people. Through these practices of community self-sufficiency and interdependency upon kin and family, rural Romanian peasants resisted assimilation and preserved their traditional customs and folk beliefs over generations, a fact which would influence the patterns of settlement and acculturation of the Romanians who eventually immigrated to the United States. Women were the primary transmitters of cultural traditions from one generation to the next.

A Woman’s Life in Transylvania and Banat

Both by necessity for survival and tradition, a Romanian peasant woman’s life revolved around her family and work that contributed to the family’s livelihood. A couple rose around 5 a.m. and worked as late as 9 or 10 p.m. A woman’s daily tasks usually consisted of feeding the animals, milking cows, making butter and cheese, cooking meals for her family, and caring for children. Often women and older children worked alongside men in the fields. Activities like baking bread, washing clothes, and spinning flax to be made into clothing were accomplished with other women and girls in the community, affording females the opportunity to socialize while sharing knowledge with younger women. Romanians believed that a young woman must learn how to perform household tasks and preserve cultural traditions in order to make herself

⁸ Verdery, 243.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

valuable to a potential Romanian husband. These beliefs about the roles of women and the importance of Romanian heritage were transported by the Romanian immigrants who came to South St. Paul around the turn of the century.

Cultural expectations for women included marriage and child-bearing. Romanian peasant women lived in constant fear of becoming pregnant because of the economic toll it would take on their families. Most Romanian households at the turn of the century in Transylvania and the Banat had at least four living children. Had it not been for that fact that around 1900, about forty-five percent of all children died before age fifteen, families would have been almost twice as large.¹⁰ It is easy to imagine the difficulty and desperation of having to feed so many mouths. After giving birth, out of financial necessity women returned to work in the fields within a few weeks. To limit the number of children she might have, “old wives” remedies – some potentially fatal - were often employed by Romanian women. Immigration historian Elizabeth Ewen wrote, “It was incredible what fantastic methods despair could invent: jumping off tables, rolling on the floor, massaging the stomach, drinking nauseating concoctions, and using blunt instruments.”¹¹ Because of Romanians’ devout Orthodox religious beliefs, none of these techniques were legally, morally or socially acceptable, so expectant women probably did not confer with anyone but the midwife and perhaps with her own husband. Women were emotionally torn between societal and religious expectations to bear large numbers of God-given children and the realities of feeding and caring for so many children. Therefore, women most likely acted alone when deciding whether and how to terminate pregnancies.

A girl’s goal in life was simply to become a wife and family caretaker. In Romanian culture of the twentieth century, as in most other European cultures, married persons were

¹⁰ Verdery, 300-301.

¹¹ Elizabeth Ewen. *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), 133, quoting from the autobiography of Emma Goldman (1869-1940).

considered more valuable members of society than single persons. For purposes of social status and financial security, women needed to marry or else find self-supporting work; the latter was in limited supply in Transylvania and the Banat near the turn of the century. Since a woman's value to society was linked to her marital status, matrimony was a priority.¹² As she expanded her homemaking skills, knowledge and influence, a woman gradually attained some degree of power or authority through her transition from daughter to wife to mother.¹³ The cultural importance of preserving the family unit was one factor that lent importance to a wife's opinion in domestic decisions, including the decision to emigrate. It was expected that a married man who departed for America would return to his wife and family.

Marriage options were based more upon societal expectations and less on women's love interests. In Transylvania, a Romanian woman was expected to marry a Romanian man, someone unrelated and preferably who lived in the same village. It was even more important for the sons to remain close by so that they would inherit any land the family might own.¹⁴ Romanian parents had strong influence but not absolute authority over a marriage choice, so while it was most common for them to arrange marriages, it is possible that some cases of romantic love existed. When a marriage was planned, the bride's and groom's families made arrangements for a dowry, which usually consisted of livestock or agricultural produce. If the bride's parents weren't pleased with the choice of groom, they might show their displeasure by reducing the dowry size.¹⁵ Thus, most girls accepted their limited decision-making ability in matters of marriage.

Legally, Romanian women were subservient to their husbands; however they still had influence over decisions affecting the family and finances. Women made crucial contributions to

¹² Harzig, Christiane, *Peasant Maids - City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*, edited by Christiane Harzig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 16-17.

¹³ Ewen, 35.

¹⁴ Verdery, 247.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

creating and sustaining the family unit. She gave birth, fed and cared for the children, managed the household, made clothing, worked alongside her husband in the fields, and may have worked side jobs such as raising chickens and selling eggs to supplement the family's income. The level of women's influence in family decisions is often overlooked when we consider the status of immigrant women. In her study of Chicago immigrants, Christiane Harzig argued that in marriages where no property was owned, a woman may have exercised even more authority since her husband would have depended on her skills to earn money.¹⁶ A consideration of this perspective shows that landless peasant wives had some degree of power or authority that could be exercised in decisions facing families. While social constricts did not permit wives to exercise dominance or autonomy, they did have influence. When a man decided to emigrate, he certainly consulted his wife. The husband was the more likely candidate for emigration when financial gain was the goal, since the wife was expected to care for the children and maintain the family household until his return.

Reasons for Emigration

Romanians were motivated to emigrate by political and economic conditions at home as well as advertisements and letters that promised America as a land of opportunity. Ninety-seven percent of Romanian immigrants to the United States between 1895 and 1920 were unskilled laborers and many were semi-literate. Between 1900 and 1905, about 12,000 Transylvanians left for the United States; between 1905 and 1909 that number exploded to over 70,000.¹⁷ The majority of South St. Paul Romanians were poor peasants from a handful of villages in Timis-

¹⁶ Matovic, Margareta "Maids in Motion: Swedish Women in Dalsland," in *Peasant Maids – City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*, ed. Christiane Harzig (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 125.

¹⁷ Pascu, 228-233.

Torontal County in Transylvania, as well as some areas of the Banat.¹⁸ As noted previously, during this period their mantra was *mia și drumul* or “a thousand dollars and home again.” Since few Romanian women lived in the United States at that time, and because most emigrants were male, the social expectation was for men to return home to marry. If the emigrant was already married, the expectation was even stronger, since the family would have been waiting for him at home.

Many men obtained enough money to return to Romania to pay debts and buy land, not to escape from agriculture but to improve their positions. Indeed, over two-thirds of those who arrived in the United States between 1900 and 1925 returned to Romania, especially after World War I and the Romanian land reforms of 1921 which allowed them to own property.¹⁹ The South St. Paul Romanians appear to have followed this rule. These facts demonstrate the powerful hold that traditional beliefs and societal expectations had over the Romanian people. They did pursue the commercialized “American Dream,” but were instead determined to do whatever necessary to earn enough money to return home to their agricultural lifestyles. Even some of the Romanian minority who remained in the United States eventually migrated to rural areas where they resumed farming, which is what they knew best.

Romanians immigrated to South St. Paul later than other European groups, drawn by abundant manual jobs in the stockyards and meat packing plants like Swift and Company and Armour’s.²⁰ Positions in the livestock industry required little to no training, and Romanian men used to agricultural lifestyles were no strangers to animal slaughter and blood. In 1904 there were only twelve Romanians in the city; by 1906 there were thirty-two, all of them men

¹⁸ Stefan, John, "The Romanians in South St. Paul, Minnesota." *The New Pioneer* (January 1945), 49.

¹⁹ Thernstrom, Stephan, et al. *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1980), 880.

²⁰ deGryse, Louis M., and Anne R. Kaplan. "The Romanians." Chap. 23 in *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, by June Drenning Holmquist (St. Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 440.

employed as general laborers and meat-cutters by Swift and Company.²¹ By 1909 the Romanian population of South St. Paul had surged into the hundreds, and by 1920 the population had grown to around seven hundred. In 1920, the vast majority of those working outside the home, men as well as women, continued to be employed as laborers in the meat packing plants.²² This fact demonstrates that Romanians remained intent upon their quest to earn money to meet their goal of saving enough money to return to their homeland.

Life in the United States

Due to their small numbers, Romanian women in South St. Paul developed a close network that supported their transition to a new country, language and environment. The peak period of Eastern European immigrant arrivals in South St. Paul, once the hub of the Midwestern livestock industry, occurred between 1900 and 1925. The 1920 federal population census shows that forty-three women who claimed Romanian as their native language were living in South St. Paul, among about 29,000 residents. At the same time, there were about seven hundred Romanian-speaking men.²³ A 1921 newspaper article demonstrated that the Romanians were running behind other ethnic groups that had already begun out-migration from South St. Paul, while Romanian immigration continued to rise. The article showed that the city's foreign-born

²¹ Stefan, 42-43.

²² South St. Paul Daily Reporter, 29 November 1921.

²³ South St. Paul Daily Reporter, 28 Aug 1916 (excerpt): "...There are more Rumanians in South St. Paul, it was said, than any other foreign nationalities. It is estimated by Auriel Papiu, one of their leaders, that there are over 700 men of that country earning their living here. The majority of Rumanians here, it was pointed out, come from Austria-Hungary from the Transylvania district in the southeast section of the latter country. This particular district, it was pointed out, will be one of the sections which Rumania will endeavor to annex in the present struggle. None of the Rumanians here was particularly anxious to talk on the situation today. This was explained by S. Secarea, who said that they are afraid to be quoted because of the strict attention which the consuls in the various cities pay to utterances of their countrymen. Those who have property holdings in the old country more frequently are under the Austrian sovereign but at the same time their sympathies are with Rumania and to give expression to their feelings undoubtedly would jeopardize their holdings."

population had decreased from 6,236 in 1910 to 5,760 in 1920, noting, “The drop in number in ten years indicates an exodus to some other part of the country or a return to their native lands. In the past few years, especially after the close of the World War, as soon as travel could be arranged many foreigners returned to their native lands from this city. Women have gained the right to vote since the previous census but they are considerably in the minority as far as numbers go in this county. The male population is listed as 15,788 while the female population is given as 13,179. This gives the girls all the best of it in playing the matrimonial game.”²⁴ The imbalance for Romanians – forty-three women to seven hundred men – was remarkable. This fact reflects that Romanian women had just begun to immigrate to South St. Paul, while the number of Romanian male immigrants had peaked around 1910.

While some were single, many of the earliest Romanian immigrants to South St. Paul were married men who left their wives and children behind. Some were never reunited. We do not know what conversations occurred around the family dinner tables, but surely their wives contributed their opinions and weighed in on the men’s emotionally wrenching decisions to leave. The men may have borrowed money for passage from relatives or friends, money that would need to be repaid by the men or their families. Arrangements would have been made for care of their children and wives during their absences. It is impossible to know how many of the men who left for America intended to return to their homeland and what ultimately led to their decisions to remain or return, or whether and when their wives or prospective brides would join them. We can be fairly certain that women’s opinions weighed heavily in these decisions.

In 1918 at the onset of World War I, the Minnesota Department of Public Safety conducted interviews of all non-naturalized citizens or “resident aliens” to determine the extent of their security threats to the safety of the country in wartime. Immigrants were asked a series of

²⁴ South St. Paul Daily Reporter Newspaper, 1921.

questions, including where they were born and when they immigrated, what possessions they owned in the United States and abroad, whether they had relatives fighting in enemy armies, and whether they had filed citizenship papers here. Over half of the Romanian immigrants (men as well as women), even those with small children, indicated that they planned to go back to the old country.²⁵ And in fact, many did. One estimate is that sixty-six percent of all Romanians who were admitted to the United States between 1899 and 1924 returned to their native country.²⁶ That this rate of remigration is higher than almost any other ethnic group is verified in official U.S. government analysis of migration between the United States and Europe between 1908 and 1923.²⁷ Further analysis is warranted to evaluate the reasons why the Romanian remigration rate was higher than that of almost any other ethnic group. However, we know that those who remained in South St. Paul had established families and extended family connections within the community, as evidenced by census records that identify family members and their relationships.²⁸ The influence of women and kinship ties were likely paramount in a family's decision whether to remain in the United States or to remigrate.

Just as European men were persuaded to believe exaggerated stories that America was a land of untold opportunities and streets paved with gold, women were enticed to emigrate under sometimes false pretenses. In *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, Elizabeth Ewen wrote, "For women, the (American) myth contained a transformation to a non-patriarchal, classless world where millionaires married poor girls, and men took care of children and helped with housework."²⁹ Not surprisingly, the reality was quite different. Although Romanian women

²⁵ Minnesota Commission of Public Safety, 1918 Alien Registration Records of South St. Paul, Dakota County, Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society Archives.

²⁶ deGryse and Kaplan, 441.

²⁷ Eleventh Annual Report on Immigration to U.S. Congress, U.S. Department of Labor, 1923.

²⁸ 1920 U.S. Federal Population Census.

²⁹ Ewen, 56.

immigrants found a degree of greater freedom and new opportunities in South St. Paul, their cultural and religious values dictated adherence to historical traditions, where women had their say, but ultimate decisions were deferred to men.

There is no one reason that led Romanian women to emigrate. Christiane Harzig theorized that European women emigrated to improve their social status; to “escape gender constraints;” to find marriage partners; to maintain kinship ties; to find work, whether to improve economic status or to fund a dowry; and to “escape exploitive working conditions.”³⁰ Some women came to the United States only long enough to earn money to increase the size of their dowries in order to improve their marriage options and social status in their home countries.³¹ While all of the named reasons could have contributed in some ways to the South St. Paul Romanian women’s decisions to emigrate, the strongest motivators appear to have been marriage and maintenance of family or kinship ties. This is reflected in the listings of steamship passengers and alien registration records prepared in the early 1900s. These records show that women traveled in companionship with male relatives, or in those rare situations when they traveled alone, that their destinations were residences of their husbands or fathers. Thus, Romanian women remained committed to the wellbeing and maintenance of the family.

Romanian Women and the Immigration Experience

The decisions of Romanian women to emigrate to join men in South St. Paul marked a turning point for two reasons. One, we have already discussed the fact that marriage outside of the ethnic group was taboo within Romanian culture of the era. The vast majority of men who

³⁰ Harzig, 4.

³¹ Knothe, Maria Anna. "Land and Loyalties: Contours of Polish Women's Lives." In *Peasant Maids - City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*, edited by Christiane Harzig (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 337, citing the example of some Polish women from Zaborowia. However, these women were in the minority since custom frowned upon women traveling unchaperoned.

emigrated to South St. Paul intended to make money and return home again; most were not planning a permanent migration, and very few married non-Romanian women. However, once marriageable women arrived, the Romanian men were less likely to leave the improved working conditions, especially after they had settled down and children were born to a couple. Second, the presence of Romanian women and establishment of families encouraged additional permanent or “chain” migrations from common areas of Transylvania and the Banat.

None of the Romanian women who were living in South St. Paul in 1920 came alone to a non-relative, as many of the early job-seeking male immigrants had. In almost all cases, the South St. Paul women for whom passenger arrival records can be found were emigrating to join husbands in the United States. For example, one of these women was Veta Ardelean, who stated that she arrived at the port of Philadelphia in 1913.³² In South St. Paul she joined her husband Vasilie, who had emigrated in 1911 with their daughter Mailka who came to meet her husband, Stefan Farka, in America.³³ This is an example of the beginning of the chain migration from a few village communities that led to establishment of a permanent Romanian-American community once women started arriving in larger numbers in South St. Paul.

Only a small number of Romanian women immigrated to South St. Paul before 1920, when the census enumerates forty-three adult women residents whose native language was Romanian. It should be noted, however, that the number is likely inaccurate, since the Romanians were highly mobile, frequently moving back and forth between South St. Paul, St. Paul, Chicago, and other major urban Midwestern cities. At any rate, there were far fewer Romanian-speaking women than men in South St. Paul by 1920. All of the women listed in the 1920 South St. Paul census lived in households headed by Romanian men.

³² 1918 Alien Registration Records, Veta Ardelean.

³³ U.S. Passenger Arrival Records, Vasilie Ardelean, 11 Mar 1911 from Hamburg on SS Kaiserin Augusta Victoria, list 28, line 9

In the very early 1900s, the few female Romanian immigrants to South St. Paul were married and accompanied their husbands, probably so that they could maximize the family's income and thereby speed their return to Europe. The large number of single men who worked long hours at the packing plants required inexpensive places to live and places to socialize with their fellow countrymen. One way that Romanian woman could help earn income was by cooking and doing laundry for unmarried Romanian men. A few Romanian couples established boarding houses along Concord Street, at that time the main artery through the town, consisting of taverns and stores in proximity to the meat packing plants. Romanian women's roles were mostly confined to domestic activities.

When minor children were involved with emigration, mothers almost always accompanied their children. No cases have been found where a married Romanian man traveled without his spouse but accompanied by their children. That is not surprising since never did a wife precede her husband while leaving the family behind in the old country. Women therefore experienced more hardships involving children and travel. One example is that of Jelicza Kosor, who became known as Alice Cosor in South St. Paul. Jelicza's husband Vasilie emigrated in 1909 and was working in South St. Paul by 1911 when Jelicza and their two sons, 10-year-old Valery and 3-year-old Joan (John) attempted to join him there. Jelicza was thirty years old and left her brother and other family members behind in Europe. She and the children joined a group of several Romanian families on the long trip from Sannicolau Mare to various urban destinations in the United States. From Sannicolau Mare (now in western Romania), the group traveled by unknown means – perhaps by railroad – to the port of Hamburg, where they departed for New York City. Travel by steamship took about three weeks at that time. Upon reaching Ellis Island, however, little Joan had was ill and had to be hospitalized. This resulted in all three –

mother and two sons – being deported. It took another year for Jelicza to save enough money to make the second attempt at emigration, this time successful.³⁴ Piecing together the records of Romanian women's immigration experiences reveals the complexity of the process of moving from one part of the globe to another. Rather than a direct voyage from port to port, women often experienced even more complicated pathways to America than men. This was because as caretakers they often bore the responsibility of traveling to meet their husbands alone with small children who were more prone to sickness. In addition, the women themselves could have been pregnant, which would have complicated the three-week passage in a ship's steerage class. And finally, women traveling without husbands were frequently subjected to questioning by authorities charged with preventing prostitutes and other undesirables from entering the United States.

By about 1910, records reflect that unaccompanied Romanian women were traveling alone from their home countries to South St. Paul and elsewhere in the United States. In virtually all cases, she was going to meet a male family member. Upon arrival in the United States, immigrant women depended upon relatives, friends, and other women to help them learn the ways of their new country. Those without kinship ties in the new land found it difficult to cope with the vast changes they faced, from technology to language to customs. Seemingly simple things like where to shop and how to wash clothes in an urban industrial city became major learning opportunities for a Romanian peasant woman from a rural agricultural village.

³⁴ U.S. Passenger Arrival Records at New York, 11 Mar 1911 from Hamburg, SS Kaiserin Augusta Victoria, list 28. Housewife, age 30. She and her two sons, Valery (10) and Joan (3), were deported, probably because Joan was hospitalized and discharged. She left behind her brother George Barban (see also Barbu) in Nagy szent miklos, her birthplace and last place of residence, and was going to her husband, Vasilie Cosor in SSP. She was 5'4" and had brown hair and eyes; her children had blonde hair and blue eyes. Traveling with Aleksa, Farka, Ristor, and others.

Women contributed in many ways to strengthening the family, not just economically but culturally, to make it successful. In America, Romanian women limited their family sizes, probably in order to achieve a better financial standing so that families could become upwardly mobile. Census takers recorded that most Romanian women did not work outside the home, listing their occupations in 1910 and 1920 census records as “housewives.” Of the forty-three women Romanian in the 1920 South St. Paul census, seven said they were employed as laborers in a meat packing house; they ranged in age from 17 to 58. An additional five women were married to men who owned small businesses (two were garage owners, two owned drink parlors or restaurants, and one owned a bakery), so it can be assumed that the women helped work in family businesses. We can’t assume the rest never worked outside the home; one 42-year-old woman claimed in 1920 that she was unemployed, but 1918 alien registration records showed she had been working for a railroad company in St. Paul. Three of the forty-seven women appeared to reside at addresses where multiple Romanians lived, so it is probable that they ran boarding houses or otherwise cared for renters.³⁵ Additionally, most of the women had small children living at home. Women therefore actively contributed to the overall welfare of their families in diverse ways.

The Transition to American Lifestyles

Some immigration historians theorize that women found more freedom in urban America than they had experienced in their rural villages.³⁶ Reasons include greater anonymity in a larger city, more time spent away from a spouse who was at work, and opportunities to socialize with neighbors of different ethnic groups, some of whom had been exposed to American customs and culture for longer periods of time. These experiences expanded women’s knowledge and gave

³⁵ 1920 Federal Census, South St. Paul, Dakota County, Minnesota.

³⁶ Harzig, 15.

them greater confidence with which to assert their authority and to make decisions affecting their families. Despite greater freedoms in some areas, immigrant women including Romanians were subjected to Anglo-American values and pressures to conform. Romanian women were often criticized by established Americans for what were considered backward styles of dress, housekeeping, and ways of raising children. American social workers of the 1920s promoted “scientific motherhood,” which discouraged traditional Romanian baby care practices such as the use of swaddling clothes, pacifiers, and nursing on demand. These methods of child-rearing were considered “irregular and indulgent” and led to a “cultural collision.”³⁷ Even food was an area of disagreement between immigrant women and American society. Immigrant women were encouraged to save time by preparing meals using canned and ready-made foods, and to replace dark breads with supposedly more wholesome white bread. American social workers of the 1920s wrote despairingly of their Italian clients, for example, “Not yet Americanized, still eating Italian food.”³⁸ Rural Transylvanian peasant women were not accustomed to the concept of shopping at a market for small quantities of food on a daily basis. In the old world they were used to harvesting and storing quantities of vegetables; in boarding houses and tenement buildings in the urban United States they had very little space for storage. When they were able to improve their financial condition enough to rent or buy houses, Romanians often kept small garden plots, stored vegetables in root cellars in their basements, and kept cows, chickens and other livestock in their yards. This of course attracted the attention of the Anglo-American establishment and led to conflicts, court cases, and even occasional violence.³⁹ Romanian

³⁷ Ewen, 136.

³⁸ Ewen, 175.

³⁹ “South St. Paul Daily Reporter,” 7 September 1922: “Cow in Tenth Avenue Corn Patch Leads To Municipal Court Case. It is bad enough to have a neighbor's cow making free and easy in one's corn patch but when the owner is told of the cow's trespass and retaliates by kicking the neighbor and starting a fracas, it seems a little like rubbing it in. This was the way Mrs. George Paladi, Tenth avenue north, felt about the matter, and she had her neighbor, Mike Dalich, arrested on a charge of assault...” When Mrs. Paladi

women struggled to understand and reconcile with societal norms in their new country, adapting as much as they were able within the confines of their traditional value systems.

From a consumerist point of view, the daily lives of Romanian women were eventually turned around by the immigration experience. Where in the old country women had been the producers of household goods such as soap, candles, and cloth with which to make clothing, over time in America the women became purchasers of those items. Women typically controlled the household finances, did the shopping to feed and clothe the family, and made purchasing decisions, unless they were very major ones. Elizabeth Ewen argued that immigrant women who came from agricultural communities were forced to change “from bartering to a monetary-based system.”⁴⁰ This transition caused immigrant women like those from Romania to become more skilled in conducting financial transactions and resulted in greater contact with other ethnic groups and cultural traditions than they had experienced in their homelands. Their expanding knowledge gave gradual, added authority to these women.

Romanians carried deeply ingrained traditions when they settled in North America. Folk culture, tradition and religion were the threads that held together the fabric of Romanian immigrant society. The Orthodox Church was usually the center of the community, its “heart and soul.”⁴¹ Since early Romanian-American immigrants were almost all peasants who had not previously traveled farther than their neighboring villages, their community in the United States was a tight one. Their arrival in America brought most of the new immigrants a powerful culture shock. The social mores and traditions that had controlled all of their past behavior were often at

confronted Dalich “in a nice way,” he struck and kicked the elder Mrs. Paladi, and another man thought to be Dalich’s brother swung a left into Mr. Paladi’s jaw as he came to the protection of his wife. In court, Dalich denied he had a brother and pleaded not guilty, was released until the hearing on \$25 bail.

⁴⁰ Ewen, 23, quoting home economist Ellen Richardson.

⁴¹ Hanganu-Bresch, Cristina, From Living to Symbolic Practice: The Romanian Community of St. Mary’s Orthodox Church, St. Paul, Minnesota (unpublished manuscript, University of Minnesota, 2002).

odds with what they found in the new country. Gradually, they modified some of their long-held traditions.

The Extent of Romanian Women's Authority

Historian Christine Galitzi was one of the earliest to document the twentieth century Romanian immigrant experience. Her 1929 doctoral dissertation contains the story of one immigrant's reluctance to wear a hat in America because she believed her social status prohibited it. Traditional Romanian peasant women wore scarves on their heads to show their married status, and often the style of headwear also indicated their social position.⁴² In Galitzi's work, a daughter of a Romanian immigrant recalled her mother's adamant belief that a peasant woman could not wear a hat in public:

"My mother arrived in New York from Romania wearing her dark, voluminous peasant clothes and on her head a black babushka-style "marama," as it was custom for older women in her hometown of Radna, in Western Transylvania. As gently as I could, I suggested to her that now that she is in America, she must start wearing the kind of dresses other women wear, and that she will also have to wear a ladies' hat. 'But how can I wear a hat? After all, I am just a peasant woman and peasant women in Radna do not wear hats. Only ladies do,' my mother said. If you could have known the traditions in Radna, you would have understood the reluctance of my mother in acquiring a ladies' hat. In Radna it was simply inconceivable for a peasant woman to wear a hat... I repeatedly told her that in America every woman is a lady; therefore she can wear a hat. 'If every woman is a lady,' my other asked, 'then who does the work?'"⁴³

In the old country, Romanians continued to wear their peasant dress – homespun white linen shirts and breeches for men, long, full dresses and scarves for the women - in some regions as late as the 1920s.⁴⁴ The light-colored clothing was quickly abandoned in the United States as men took on dirty laboring jobs in factories and meat packing plants. Probably the most well-known Romanian folk art tradition is the highly embroidered folk costume. An early twentieth

⁴² Hategan, Rev. Fr. Vasile, "Romanian Culture in America," Part III, from *Information Bulletin* of the Romanian-American Heritage Center, Jackson, Michigan, reprinted from the book, Romanian Culture in America by the Rev. Fr. Vasile Hategan, 1988.

⁴³ Galitzi, Christiane Avghi, A Study of Assimilation Among the Roumanians in the United States: AMS Press, York, 1968. Reprinted from the edition of 1929, NY with the permission of Columbia University Press, pp. 135-136.

⁴⁴ Verdery, 260

century Romanian emigrant bound for North America almost always left wearing her traditional costume, or at least carrying it with her. Nearly every American family of Romanian origin holds a studio photograph of their ancestors wearing their Romanian national costume. The Romanian costume was commonly worn with pride by North American immigrant families at holidays and special occasions during the first part of the twentieth century.^{45 46} Women were traditionally the keepers of tradition, instilling in their children a respect for and understanding of the decorated Romanian folk costumes, carefully preserving and handing them down from one generation to the next. The weaving and embroidery of textiles was another predominantly women's craft that was handed down through the generations. Weaving and spinning have traditionally been considered women's work since at least the middle ages. A woman who possessed domestic talents such as embroidery and sewing was highly prized as a potential wife and considered by the community to be "favored by God;" therefore virtually all females were required to attain these skills.⁴⁷ Whether intentional or accidental, each woman provided personalized variations to the traditional patterns she created. This ritualistic behavior was preserved by Romanian women immigrants in the United States as late as the 1950s.⁴⁸

In Șezătoarea or sewing circles, Romanian women found a sense of community. They gossiped and socialized with relatives and neighbors and shared techniques and designs of embroidery and design. From these gatherings, young girls learned the values and traditions of their ancestors and developed their own adaptations of their mothers' styles, keeping the heritage

⁴⁵ Bock, p. 38.

⁴⁶ Smărăndescu, Helen Filimon, "Romanian-American Yesterday," from *Information Bulletin* of the Romanian-American Heritage Center, Jackson, Michigan, reprinted from *Solia*, January, 1957. Describes traditions that Romanian American immigrants kept alive, including costume and music.

⁴⁷ Bock, p. 27.

⁴⁸ Valerie Young interview.

of Romanian folk art alive.⁴⁹ Some Romanian Americans recall that in the early days after immigration, whether at boarding houses or in private homes, the neighborhood women would still gather in the evenings to crochet and sew, and tell stories about the “old country.” These gatherings must have given the women bittersweet recollections of the *șezătoare* they enjoyed before leaving Romania. In fact, many cultural organizations that formed in America called themselves “*șezătoarea*.”

Superstitions are another ancient tradition that was transported to America. These long-held beliefs or “old wives’ tales” are thought to have originated in pre-Christian times and passed through the ages by storytelling. Often the elder women warned of what would happen to a person who did not do something in the proper way, as a means of enforcing traditions; other times, they were seemingly meaningless admonitions. For example, in many villages of Banat women believed that a child should not have his face covered because when he grows old he will become bashful. Another tale warned that the clothes of lads or maidens must never be washed when they are buttoned for the youth shall never marry. One man recalled a superstition his great-grandmother held about the process of dyeing wool; she believed that bark and flowers had to be gathered on certain days, under specific conditions of the moon.⁵⁰ These examples reflect the tenaciousness with which Romanians held to their long-standing beliefs. Typically, women were responsible for maintaining cultural traditions and holding others, especially children, to those rules.

Challenges to Tradition

The immigration experience affected parent-child relationships. Parents strove to maintain authority and control over their children, especially girls, and to preserve their

⁴⁹ Bock, 183.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 181.

traditional Romanian values. However the children's ability to learn English faster than their parents made for a sort of role reversal as they interpreted for their parents. For the most part, Romanians were very supportive of education for their children, regardless of gender, but only to a point. Like many other European immigrant groups, Romanians believed that since girls were supposed to become housewives, education beyond high school was unnecessary. A first-generation immigrant daughter, Valerie Moisescu Young, recalled in 1989,

“Girls didn't get to run (freely outside the home) like boys did. I had to stay home to learn to crochet, to sew... I graduated high school the same year (1924) as my brother Bela, when he was 17 and I was 16. He got to go to university, but I was a girl, so it was good enough for me to go to work.”⁵¹

Valerie turned over her entire weekly paycheck, received from her job as a teller at a bank where she was valued for her multi-lingual abilities, to her mother. The family's income was largely devoted to paying her brother's tuition to the University of Minnesota.

Young women experimented in the new environment by rebelling against family and cultural traditions. In the 1920s, a time of swift changes in gender roles in the United States, some immigrant girls, including Valerie, challenged tradition and their parents' authority by “bobbing” or cutting their hair short. Valerie said that her father, who was a barber, believed that all men should wear moustaches and that respectable women must keep their hair long and tied up in a bun or knot under a kerchief or hat. Her father's dapper moustache was long and waxed, turned up in curls at the ends. He could not fathom why a man would shave his moustache, the very essence of manhood, nor why a woman would bob her hair to look like a boy. Girls who cut their hair, or who married non-Romanian boys, were considered by the older Romanian community to be “bad girls.” To clash with one's cultural heritage was previously unthinkable.

The limited power and authority that Romanian women possessed both before and after immigration came in subtle forms. Romanian women held unofficial standing and influence over

⁵¹ Valerie Young interview

family decision-making in their positions as family matriarchs. Married women are recognized as the keepers of family traditions and are usually responsible for maintaining kinship ties. In her analysis of Italian immigrant families, Elizabeth Ewen emphasized the power and capacity of a woman when she notes that “when a mother died, the family usually fell apart.”⁵² The immigrant community’s values and traditions dictated that female family members should step in to make decisions about how motherless children would be cared for and supported, about with whom the children would reside, based on family ties and financial ability.

Existing accounts of immigration experiences do not fully recognize the control and influence that a woman had over household financial matters. A wife typically held the family’s purse-strings and performed the budgeting and accounting functions. She usually did the shopping for groceries she needed to prepare meals. Through these household business encounters and influenced by changing expectations of women’s roles in 1920s America, Romanian women gradually assumed more official authority within the community, even while cultural traditions prevailed. This evolution occurred over several decades. Christiane Galitzi, writing in 1929, stated that peasant women in the “Old Country” lacked political and social standing. She recounted:

“In the United States (Romanian women) had a chance to improve their situation. Sharing with their husbands the responsibility of the support of the family and participation in the struggle of life, they have secured a better position in the new community. They have been allowed to become active members in the Beneficial and Cultural Societies, and to assume responsibility in the affairs of their ethnic group, despite the Old Country’s idea that a woman’s place is in the home. They have developed their own women’s associations, which are increasing in number since 1925, most of them being directly connected with the church...”⁵³

The preceding passage underscores the extent to which patriarchal values remained strong in the Romanian immigrant community in the United States and shows how gradually ideas about women changed over time. At the turn of the century, women’s authority did not extend into

⁵² Ewen, 35.

⁵³ Galitzi, 151.

certain male realms such as Romanian church and social organizations. Galitzi's use of the phrase, "they have been *allowed*," imparts a pre-women's rights acceptance of female subservience and is infused with a sort of wonder that Romanian society had permitted some changes to take place, if ever so slightly. Further evidence of Romanians' acceptance of strict gender roles in which women were second in importance is contained in articles written about South St. Paul Romanians by local Romanian historian, John Stefan. Stefan listed all of the members of a number of social organizations and church groups formed in South St. Paul in the 1920s, and all of the officers were male. When he named the charter members of the Romanian National Club, established in 1922, Stefan was cautious to include the name of every male member, but only named a few of the females, indicating that women's participation was less important."⁵⁴ Only in 1928 when a Women's Aid Society was formed do we see names of female officers. By 1934 and into the World War II years it was more common for Romanian women to hold officer positions in organizations, such as The Romanian Youth Club. The expanding role of Romanian women in ethnic organizations reflects the slowly growing acceptance of women in positions of greater, while still limited, official authority within the community.

Membership in the Romanian Orthodox Church, itself an obviously patriarchal organization, further enforced and preserved the strict separation of gender roles. First-generation immigrants recalled that women had to stand at the back of the church while men worshiped in front. There are clear distinctions between the roles of men and women in Romanian religious culture. Traditionally, men are responsible for church business and administration, while women are largely responsible for preserving the culture through music,

⁵⁴ Stefan, 45-46.

food, and costumes. Researcher Cristina Hanganu-Bresch recently noted the extent of patriarchy that remains within the nearby Saint Paul Romanian Orthodox Church hierarchy:

“The mere fact that there must be a ‘Ladies Auxiliary’ and that the (St. Mary’s) Church council even in 2002 is composed of all men except one... points to a very clear separation of men’s and women’s roles that carries over traditional Romanian values (to this day).”⁵⁵

It is clear from this example that present-day Romanian-American communities, where they still exist, purposefully intend to maintain the long-held traditions and gender role distinctions. The phenomenon of acculturation, in which established values and traditions were gradually molded to best suit conditions that existed in the American immigrant community, was summarized by Christiane Harzig, who said that immigrant women “kept from their former lives what had value and discarded what did not work as they learned to function in their new situation.”⁵⁶ Harzig’s position was that women were not passive participants in the immigration and acculturation experience. Women had a degree of control over what changes their social groups would permit to occur, and what traditions and gender roles would be preserved.

Conclusion

The Romanian immigration and working-class experience in South St. Paul, Minnesota is much more than a story of “a thousand dollars and home again.” In existing scholarship, when Romanian immigrant women are portrayed at all, they are generally shown to be submissive partners of males, when Romanian women actually had substantial influence and control over family decisions, including those involving immigration. The conclusion drawn in this study, that the presence of women in an ethnic community group influences the permanency of a settlement and its culture, suggests further avenues for research. Further accounting of Romanian

⁵⁵ Hanganu-Bresch

⁵⁶ Harzig, 2.

women's immigration and acculturation experiences is needed in order to more fully understand the development of a lasting Romanian presence and culture in places such as South St. Paul, Minnesota. As more women joined the South St. Paul community and children were born there, family connections were solidified and extended kinship networks followed. Many Romanian families shifted their sights from "a thousand dollars and home again" to establishing permanent residence in the United States. The influences of Romanian women on this process may help give a fuller picture of the development of the overall American "melting pot" working-class culture.

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