

ETNOLOGIE

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ROMANIAN EMIGRATION TO AMERICA AS REFLECTED
IN TRANSYLVANIAN PERIODICALS

Rezumat

Emigrația românească în America reflectată în periodice transilvănene

Migrația românilor în America a fost un fenomen social care s-a încadrat în cel european, fiind determinat în principal de cauze socio-economice precum sărăcia și lipsa terenurilor agricole, cauze care au influențat în mod decisiv plecarea de cealaltă parte a oceanului. „Mirajul american” vehiculat în epocă are importanța sa, de asemenea economia americană în creștere fiind asimilată cu un nou Eldorado pentru locuitorii majorității țărilor europene. Fie pentru o perioadă determinată, fie pentru una definitivă, fenomenul migraționist a afectat întreaga populație a României, atât pe cei care au emigrat, cât și familiile rămase în țară, cu toate consecințele sociale, economice, demografice, dar mai ales cu schimbările la nivelul mentalului individual și colectiv.

Cuvinte-cheie: America, emigrare, economie rurală, sărăcie, îmbogățire.

Резюме

Румынская эмиграция, отраженная в трансильванских периодических изданиях

Румынская миграция в США рассматривается как социальный феномен и как составная часть европейского процесса, спровоцированного социально-экономическими причинами, такими как бедность и отсутствие пахотных земель, которые побудили людей пересечь океан. Большое значение в то время имели «американская мечта» и возрастающая американская экономика, воспринимаемая как новый Эльдorado для жителей большинства европейских стран. Миграционный процесс повлиял на все население Румынии, в том числе на тех, кто эмигрировал, и на их оставшиеся в стране семьи, спровоцировав на определенный срок социальные, экономические, демографические последствия, но особое влияние этот феномен оказал на общественное и индивидуальное сознание.

Ключевые слова: Америка, эмиграция, сельское хозяйство, бедность, обогащение.

Summary

Romanian emigration to America as reflected in transylvanian periodicals

The migration of Romanians to America is looked upon as a social phenomenon and as an integral part of the European process, triggered by socio-economic reasons such as poverty and lack of arable land, which influenced decisively their departure across the ocean. “The American mirage”, a widespread notion at the time, was

also important, as was the growing American economy perceived as a new Eldorado by the inhabitants of most European countries. Whether for a limited or an indefinite period, the migration affected the entire population of Romania, both the emigrants and their families left behind, provoking social, economic, and demographic consequences, but especially this phenomenon influenced the individual and collective mentality.

Key words: America, emigration, rural economy, poverty, enrichment.

From a societal standpoint, the profound economic transformations that characterized the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century were reflected across a very broad range. The full manifestation of capitalism in the whole society led to an evolution characterized by many local and regional particularities, all of which were circumscribed to a general European development. As part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Transylvania, known as a poorer region of the Empire, alongside Galicia, Slovakia and Bucovina, was included in this capitalist carousel, albeit at a slower pace [5, p. 529]. Under these conditions of economic development at the end of the 19th century, there was a demographic increase due to a larger number of marriages and births, as well as to a reduction in mortality thanks to a better sanitary organization in Transylvania, mainly through new health legislation. Thus, the Sanitary Law of 1876 favored the organization of rural sanitary districts and introduced the obligation for each community to have a physician who would provide curative and preventive care as well as forensic expertise in exchange for a statutory fee, the poor being exempt from any payment. Moreover, for every 800 inhabitants, the law stipulated the requirement for an official midwife, and at the communal level, the requirement to set up a health committee consisting of a veterinarian, a pharmacist, a priest, a notary, a teacher from each school and three other citizens chaired by a doctor [3, p. 1].

The demographic growth, coupled with the negative economic phenomena of the eighth decade of the 19th century, such as the dissolution of the guilds, the consequences of the customs war between Austro-Hungary and Romania, the economic depression, as well as the insufficiency of the cultivated

land plots and hence the excess of agricultural labor force, contributed to the emergence and steady increase in migratory flows. Initially, the Transylvanian Romanians headed for Romania. Although there had always been a certain population mobility on both sides of the Carpathians, beginning with the eighth decade of the 19th century, this became a worrying phenomenon for Austro-Hungarian authorities, all the more so as the migrant population was not only Romanian. The statistical data show that only between 1881 and 1891, 50.513 people from eight counties emigrated definitively from Transylvania to Romania, as follows: 3.358 from Alba de Jos, 6.443 from Brașov, 4.931 from Făgăraș, 6.491 from Sibiu, 9,211 from Târnava Mare, 6.615 from Ciuc, 6.236 from Odorhei and 7.228 from Trei Scaune [1, p. 489]. Added to this were the increasingly aggressive activity of emigration agents, who recruited future clients from the rural and urban population who were increasingly poor and dissatisfied with the situation in the country, as well as the demographic policy of consolidating the Hungarian ethnic group led by Hungary [1, p. 490]. Another cause was the national political oppression, which, however, “could not be a powerful enough incentive to determine someone to leave their ancestors’ home to seek freedom in another country. Perhaps our peasantry feels the yoke of economic misery harder, because they will have to endure the whip strokes of national oppression – but what urges them to leave their country is poverty: they would endure the whip strokes if they had what to eat! On the other hand, the perfect freedom enjoyed by immigrants in America awakens national consciousness and strengthens national sentiment” [4, p. 296].

A proof of the seriousness of the emigration phenomenon is a law of 1881 by which the Hungarian Parliament obliged the emigration agents, who were the only ones blamed for the departure of the population, to launch their propaganda campaigns only based on authorizations issued by the Ministry of the Interior, which they usually refused [1, p. 490]. Despite all the obstacles raised by the authorities, the emigration agents continued their recruitment. A case reported by *Bunul econom* newspaper tells about a man named Hamburgsky, a former state teacher in the commune of Buduș in Bistrița County, who left for America after he had been fired from the school and later returned as an emigration agent, recommending himself as a Reformed bishop, with the purpose of taking with him 20 priests across the ocean, and who described America and the life there in the most vivid colors [2, p. 4]. Also in order to deter emigration, in 1903, the Hungarian Interior Min-

ister informed the population that a new immigration law had come into force in the US according to which all travelers were obliged to pay \$2 on landing, the sick, those having a criminal record or the anarchists being denied entry, while those who promoted emigration to America were fined between \$1 and \$5,000 [8, p. 354].

The emigration of the Romanians to America was considered the safest way to solve financial problems, pay off debts, buy land, raise the standard of living of the family and, why not, get rich. The propaganda by the emigration agents, as well as the letters of some Romanians from across the ocean encouraged other Romanians to leave their country in search of the prosperity offered by the American states. If they were initially thinking of coming back home after gaining enough money, most of the emigrants settled in the American states, where they built a new life for themselves [Ohio, Montana, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and so on].

Ion Iosif Șchiopul, who signed several articles in *Lucafărul* magazine of 1913, tells us about the first Romanian emigrants. He believed that, given the fact that the first migrants came from the more culturally developed countries, it was natural that the first Romanian migrants should come from the more developed regions such as Mărginimea or Poiana Sibiului, as they were “Widely-travelled, literate people who loved independence more”, who had found out sooner about the “New World” [4, p. 293]. Even though there had been Romanian migrants before 1900, they were too few to be noticed. Perhaps we will never know who was the first Romanian to go to America, but Ion Iosif Șchiopul gives us information about Gheorghe Pomuțiu from Giula and about Irimie Proca [Louis Hugo] from Râșnov. According to him, the former might have fought in the 1848 Revolution with Kossuth, fleeing the country after the capitulation of the Komárom fortress. In 1850, he settled in the state of Iowa, where he tried unsuccessfully to establish a Hungarian “New-Buda” colony, but the author of the article does not have a good opinion of him, stating that he possessed some documents that did not put Pomuțiu in a favorable light and that he could not publish them [4, p. 293-294]. About the latter, a harsh, reserved, and vindictive person who lived a tumultuous life and was married twice, the author tells us that he emigrated to America from Dobrudja in 1869 or 1870, accompanied by two or three men (Nicolae Plaivas? and Simion Bârza), and that among his belongings, two pistols decorated with brass nails were found [4, p. 294].

The most significant Romanian migration began in 1900, in the aftermath of the Spanish-American

War, and the Romanian organized life began in 1902, when the first Romanian organization in America was established, namely the "Carpatina" Society from Cleveland [4, p. 293].

The main cause of emigration was poverty due to a lack of income, jobs, land and agricultural machinery, poor harvests, or bank debt. Other causes were "the letters of those who were in America, then the agents of the shipping companies and, to a great extent, the Jews of America"; the actions of the American Jews were described by the priest Ion Podea in *Telegraful Român* and were also published in *Luceafărul*: "As soon as some Romanian peasants gather together in a small town, there appears, as if out of thin air, the Jew with side locks, or the modern Jew, with his shop, his bank, his work placement office, his ship ticket agency, and especially, with his dirty tavern, which he keeps open round the clock from the friendship and love he has for the Romanians. And in order to be able to say that the tavern is Romanian, he chooses his servants from among some of the most prominent Romanians who have the most friends, whom he pays handsomely. But in exchange for that payment, the servants have to bring as many clients to their master as they can to drink heavily and leave all their money there. And when the Jew is no longer content with the gain he is making off the Romanians who are forever hanging about his tavern and his shop, he writes in his native village and urges people to go there, with the promise to give them work and handsome payment. That is why, in some towns, there are Romanians by the thousands just to be exploited by the same Jews who exploited them a few years ago in their home village. In Canton (Ohio) for example, there are four brothers living off the backs of more than a thousand people from Oltenia Region. These brothers used to be innkeepers and eggs gatherers in the county of Făgăraș, but today, they are owners, bankers, agents, merchants and butchers whose hands are grabbing the last Romanian coins... eight years ago, a Jew from Hubbard (Ohio State) brought the first man from Apolzan (commune of Sibiu) to the iron smelter there; ten years ago, he brought the first Arpășan man (commune of Făgăraș) to Lorain (Ohio); in Letonia (Ohio), the first Cornățeni and Arpășeni men; in Martinsferry (Ohio), the first Vișeni men; in New Castle (the State of Pennsylvania), the first men from Târnaveni; in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), the first men from Banat Region..." [4, p. 294-295].

If the first waves of emigrants came from developed countries, the following waves brought people with a low level of culture and education from less developed, poorer countries. A report by the Head

of the Washington Central Immigration Office to the Foreign Trade Minister on the immigrants of 1911 says, among other things, "Many of them have very low expectations, they have bad habits, and they are unbelievably ignorant... Unlike the former immigrants, many of the new immigrants are simple laborers who do not know any trade. More than three out of five settle in five eastern states (Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, W. Virginia)... The new immigrants often take jobs to the detriment of former immigrants who are thus losing them. Many employers prefer these new immigrants to the former immigrants, who are better workers and enough in numbers, because the new immigrants are willing to work longer hours and for a lower pay, and perhaps because they are also willing to pay the supervisors [who hire them] a tip..." [4, p. 295]. This report reveals the unprincipled means used by the newcomers, who, by their attitude towards the payment for their labor, not only left those who had arrived earlier without jobs, but deregulated the labor market, lowering the value of the labor force.

The Romanian emigrants were of both sexes and came from different social categories. However, most were peasants. The jobs they did were not those they used to have in their country of origin. With the exception of the shepherds, most of them from Sibiu and settled in the state of Montana, the majority of the Romanians were workers in the iron and steel factories, foundries and smelters, metal sheet factories, brick factories, rail and canal construction, coal mines, machine factories or other industrial branches where the wages were high due to the hard work [4, p. 258; 8, p. 378; 2, p. 2]. The Romanians, like other emigrants, had the handicap of not knowing the English language and the practice of crafts in the way that it was done by the Americans, which forced them to accept any kind of work, generally hard physical work. The lucky ones found work in agriculture, on American capitalist farms where work was mostly outdoors, and they managed to save more money than those working in industry because there were no temptations such as pubs [saloons] or shops, and the rents were smaller or even inexistent. Also, the work on these farms was not as hard as that in factories because it was mechanized and very well organized. The American's principle was "to save time and power", so he "is a man of wit and wisdom, and his hand, which he knows how to spare, is also skillful at writing" [2, p. 1-2].

The work in factories was carried out in three shifts of 8 or 12 hours daily, one-week day shift, one-week night shift, including Saturdays and Sundays, the payment ranging between 20 and 40 cents per

hour, which is between 2 and 4 dollars per day [4, p. 258]. The working conditions were very difficult, not to mention the Romanians' lack of skills and the tiredness due to sleepless nights, which often led to accidents or even deaths. The hard work in the factory is described, among many others, by George Huludeț from the commune of Lisaura (Bucovina) in the letter in verse that he sent to his wife, which sounds like this: "Here is my dear wife,/ What I want today to write:/ How the people live here,/ And how they work in factories./ I wanted to know clearly,/ – And I have found out./ Here, everyone comes,/ There are very many factories,/ Tears by the thousands and hundreds./ I work all day and night,/ Side by side with death./ The work in factories is hard,/ And the pay is bad enough./ Whoever hears me does not believe me,/ God is up there and sees./ But from now on,/ I will say to you,/ I will write to you,/ The truth in words:/ What work I have,/ Is hard, hard work,/ It squeezes the marrow out of my bones./ When I go to the factory,/ Always shuddering with fear,/ I go to work in the morning,/ But I'm not sure (!) about my life./ I do not know if in the evening,/ I'll come home again,/ Healthy as I went/ or they will carry me home .../ Why do you want to know?/ Here it is for those who read:/ There are many furnaces,/ All of them filled with iron./ In great fire the iron melts,/ And like gold it shines./ Then it flows like grease,/ We carry it in a bucket,/ We carry it where it is poured,/ Oh, our shoulders hurt badly from the weight,/ Two of us carry a bucket,/ Its content spills over the sides,/ And it is hot and it burns you,/ You need water to extinguish yourself,/ There's fire everywhere./ The sparks sprinkle around,/ Like the rain on the ground./ Smoke is all over the factory,/ I can't see anything./ Carrying the iron to pour it,/ We are hindering each other./ And then the hardest thing,/ The dust is worse,/ For it's going to get into your chest,/ Like the soot in the chimney./ I work in the dust and in the heat,/ And I'm sweating too much,/ When I come back from the factory,/ I do not recognize myself./ I'm black of smoke and dust,/ I think I'm like a raven chick./ That's how I earn my money,/ If I'm sweating, if I'm hot./ For a dollar and fifty cents,/ I'm lifting up a lot of cold iron./ For two and a half dollars,/ I'm lifting up a lot of warm iron,/ Until I make my money,/ I'm squeezing a lot of sweat,/ Everybody says indeed,/ It is not hard for us here,/ We are sending money at home,/ From the wealthy America,/ Who does not believe me,/ He can also come here,/ And see for himself./ What happens to the one who comes." [9, p. 794].

The pay was made every other week. The smallest monthly earnings amounted to 50 dollars, the

hardest-working and most skilled workers earning even 100–120 dollars a month, out of which they paid for their living expenses (living quarters, food and laundry) as well as for their the saloon debts; the living expenses were often smaller because 4–5 people shared a room [4, p. 260].

Those who were thrifter and knew how to manage their money could make substantial savings that they usually sent to their families left in the country. In 1913, Romanian emigrants from America sent over 30 million crowns, an average of 1,000 crowns a year, often even more, up to 2–3,000 crowns annually; in 1912, the shepherds from Sibiu, who had settled in Montana, sent nearly one million crowns, or more than 3 million Romanian money [4, p. 261]. The money was sent either through American banks or agencies, or in registered letters. The agencies were the most unreliable means because they did not have the necessary capital and they used the money of the new customers to send the money of the old customers, which led to very long delays; or, more often than not, the agencies would disappear with the money, move to another state, change their names and start the same business with the same scams or new ones; among them were Romanians, along with Hungarians, Jews and many others [4, p. 262].

Many emigrants were able to send enough money to pay off all their debts in their country of origin and save important sums to return home and try to use them to improve the wellbeing of their families or start a business. Others stayed in America, where they started a new life and adapted to a completely new world. Despite all the hardships inherent in the life of an emigrant, many succeeded and came out stronger from the adventure of their lives. Some lost their lives in this hard struggle. Some returned home disappointed and as poor as when they had left. Some chose to live a life of adventure, full of excitement and unexpected events. Regardless of the reasons for leaving, returning or staying, the first waves of Romanian emigrants opened a new page both in our national history and in the American history, which is another testimony to the passage of man through time and space.

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