Approaching the Other in the Zipser Community
Identity Issues and Methodological Insights into Geographical Cross-Cultural Research

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"How can somebody like you, from outside our culture, understand what tradition and customs mean for us, which are the relationships with the others, which were our feelings during key moments in our history?"

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Introduction

Our study may be included in the field of Qualitative and Cultural Geography. We used the research conducted and completed by one of the authors of this paper (the first author) and we asked certain questions to help us discuss the methodology of her Ph.D. thesis, seeking to present the challenges of qualitative and cross-cultural research in the field of Geography. Because the Ph.D. research was completed successfully, its methodology could be considered a good path to follow, especially for the same investigated community. This was reason enough to reflect on it and to present it thoroughly, considering the scientific endeavor translated into this paper an example for geographers who also want to approach similar topics.

Therefore, the present article explores aspects of the research methodology in the context of ethnic diversity and of the history of the Zipser community, a German-speaking ethnic group.

We underline that the aim of this study is not to present the research results of the Ph.D. thesis about the Zipser community, so we offered only general information about them in order to create the context for discussing both *identity issues* and *research methodology*. Thus, focusing on their case study, this paper seeks to investigate diverse ways of approaching geographical cross-cultural research respondents, and especially the Other in the Zipser community.

The respondents are Zipsers and their presence is a relatively small, regional one in Europe, with representatives in Romania (Maramureş, Bukovina, and Banat), in Ukraine (Transcarpathia) and in Germany (near big industrial cities such as Ingolstadt, Nuremberg, Oldenburg, and Singen), with negative demographic increase and high rates of ageing.

To sum up, the aim of this study is to present the researchers' experience in geographical cross-cultural research and to offer suggestions about planning field research under similar circumstances, but especially for the Zipser community.

Theoretical Substantiation

In the field of geographical cross-cultural studies, scientists widely discuss the challenges of cross-cultural research,[1] underlining that the context is essential, no matter what interpretation paradigm the authors choose. For instance, in the 1970s, some geographers were very critical about approaching Geography as a positivist science. It meant that Geography would consider people completely rational and that "objective" scientific methods had to be used and were used to study these people's behavior. The reaction to this appeared under the name of "the qualitative turn," also known as "the qualitative revolution," when geographers in the field of Human Geography stood up in favor of the subjective, complex, irrational and sometimes contradictory human behavior. They also gave arguments about the necessity of creating, developing and using research methods that allowed for the study of people's emotions, values and intentions in order to understand their behavior. Moreover, through the study of the meanings these people gave to their actions and space, researchers were able to reveal their multiple subjectivities.[2]

The main qualitative methods are the semi-structured interview, the focus group, the participatory observation, the interpretation of visual imagery, the participatory research projects, the journals, and the cross-cultural research.[3] They do not result in a discovery of the "truth," but are a way to partially unveil people's reasons for acting in a certain way.[4] That is why qualitative methods

are especially useful for studying cultural identity. N. Clifford, S. French and G. Valentine[5] place these methods under the title of *intensive research*, also calling them *intensive methods*, focused on case studies.

At present, most geographers[6] admit that quantitative and qualitative methods are different ontological and epistemological approaches to knowledge and information. They are complementary as they can offer solutions to complex problems, because they start from different assumptions, so they ask and answer different questions, in different ways.

Cross-cultural research supposes a very rigorous methodological system including qualitative methods that could be used while researchers are both sensitive and reflexive in their relationship with the members of the researched community. It requires observing rules that researchers learn through exercise, while another culture reveals itself to them.

Fiona Smith[7] defines cross-cultural research as the process of researching another culture, using another language. That requires researchers to study the culture of a community at a long distance or even nearby, but they have to travel in the field for their research. The same author[8] considers cross-cultural research complex because researchers have to develop a perceptiveness that could ease their work and because of the diversity of topics for study: cultural similarities and differences, unequal power relations (and thus the need to leave out ethnocentrism), the ethics of field research, co-operating with people from another culture (including participatory research), the care for presenting or representing research results (to avoid issues of unequal power relationships and stereotypes), the dynamics of cultures, hybrid cultures, language differences and issues, the researchers' role and impact, etc.

To understand how regions are culturally constructed and to reflect on our case study, we researched a diverse literature and we focused on studies in Cultural Geography. In the research context of Qualitative Geography and of Cultural Geography, we studied the diverse strategies that geographers usually employed to gather or to generate data, to represent and to interpret the geographical information about *identity*, *ethnic memory* (the sense of loss that is haunting people's fragmented remembrance of their past as individuals and as a community, narratives of multicultural living and spaces of belonging and familiarity[9]) and *landscape*. In this context, we focused on their methodology, while reflecting on the one used to research the Zipsers.

There is much recent research connected to the key concepts of our case study and to our methodological insights into geographical cross-cultural research, on issues like: "the process of (re)remembering and the importance of thinking in more depth about the presentness of the past";[10] "the significance

of different sites and spaces—and their memories—on ways of interpreting and making sense of the world in the present: 'Storying (past) lives and (past) places in such a way brings to the fore the narrative quality of memory, opening up alternative ways of thinking about how memories are produced and (re)told'";[11] exploring spatial memory and attachment, reading a place and understanding what it means to its inhabitants (i.e. people are not "thrown" into places, they make them, transforming them into their home place).[12]

Within the researched literature, we drew upon *a conceptual framework* including: *the concept of landscape*—"as the expressive-poetics of spacing in a way that makes possible a dynamic relationality between representations and practices both situated and mobile";[13] *landscape* as hosting physical points of reference to the Past making landscapes spatially bounded scenes that communicate in a visual way;[14] *heritage*, as physically symbolized landscape;[15] the histories of the landscape where landscapes are "visualized dimensions of space, produced in accordance with specific ideologies and material priorities";[16] the interdependence of practice and representation in *the production of landscape* as in "the discourses and practices of belonging that establish and maintain discursive and material boundaries"[17] that lead to a culturally specific space; *the (re)writing/(re)signifying of space*;[18] the role of *representations* in influencing spatial practice; *the local scale* as "a geographical, sociological and psychological space that is limited to face-to-face experiences, but is the manifestation of constantly changing relations of interdependence between social, political, economic and cultural processes operating on scales smaller and larger than the local";[19] *the changing meaning of places and redefining rural spaces* involving multiple actors and multiple variables, ranging from agriculture to tourism, forestry, nature conservation, landscape and heritage[20]—and *the concept of identity*—how identity was developed while Othering and Self-referencing;[21] identity and alterity;[22] discourses of cultural identity; the discursive mobilization of identity; ethnic solidarities and conflicts;[23] how one regional identity interacts with national identity, suggesting that relationships are "more complex than either simply changing scale or a hierarchical set of affiliations" (e.g. national belonging and local identification simultaneously);[24] local and regional identities;[25] "how national scale and local institutions work to create *senses of identity*" mobilizing "space and time through a particular configuration of history and tradition";[26] geographical arguments and historical, economic, religious, and linguistic ones as major identity markers.[27]

Material and Method

AS IMPORTANT as the topic of research is *how* we research. In geographical cross-cultural research, objective, impersonal, "cold" methods are not appropriate; they do not render quality results because they do not support the interaction between researchers and participants.[28] Thus, for qualitative information research circumstances are as important as in the case of quantitative methods.

We investigated how geographers can research the process of public memory including historical narratives, local memories and cultural productions that explain past and present cultural traits and we started this research from a conversation between the two authors of this paper about methodology and thus we produced this reflection text of Cultural Geography.[29]

Drawing upon *archival and interview research*, the Ph.D. thesis "The Ethnic Group of Romanian Zipsers: Historical Study on Representation Changes of the Identity Space in Vişeu de Sus, Maramureş" drawn up between 2009 and 2012 by Ioana Scridon, asked questions about the Zipser community (she researched this group from a geographical, historical, and cultural perspective during its evolution). She visited Zipser ethnic groups in Romania, Ukraine, and in Germany. *The research material* included individual narratives and oral history (based on discussions about individual lived experiences).

In most case studies on ethnic groups, the respondents answering researchers' questions are old people. In the case of the Zipsers in Vişeu, the community is a rather old one, and the topic of our research demanded that the respondents be old, as the questions were about traditional culture, old Zipser occupations or about the old Zipser idiom (a few Zipsers speak it, especially the elderly).

We mention that the respondents' names were public in some cases because they wished it or because they agreed to our proposal as our last question in the interview referred precisely to this. One may say that this transparent modality of research was encouraged by their openness and our mentioning their names is also a form of rewarding them (with their acceptance) for their effort.

The methodology at the basis of our research included both quantitative and qualitative methods characteristic to our field of research, where a crucial method was the interview. The expected results of our research were not only the quantitative ones, in the form of collecting information, but also observing and analyzing certain respondents' reactions, the reasons behind their answers, explaining the interviewed persons' relationship to the discussed subject. We wrote this paper independently from the text of the completed Ph.D. thesis, as a reflection on our experience, on the approached methods, and on our research

results. We did our research in the field in August and November 2010, as well as from April to July 2011.

We did our field research in Romania, Ukraine, and in Germany. In Ukraine, a person who spoke both Romanian and Ukrainian accompanied us in order to interpret our discussions. There were also some cases when respondents spoke the literary German language. In Ukraine, our field work took 19 days during which we conducted interviews with Zipser ethnics and we also went to places where we read that such ethnics lived. In the latter case, we mainly discussed with Roman Catholic priests or with some people in those communities who clarified certain issues or gave us information useful for our research (e.g. on persons who knew more about our research subject, which were the settlements where they heard that those Zipser ethnics existed). For the field research in Romania, we interviewed people without anyone else accompanying us. In Vişeu de Sus, we spent about 50 days during which we conducted interviews and we participated in religious holidays and other important events in the life of the community. We also took photos and wrote descriptions. In order to follow the group also in its continuity, respectively those immigrated to Germany, we interviewed those persons in Singern, Ingolstadt and in Nuremberg, from May to July 2011, supported by a research scholarship offered by the Institute of the Danube Swabian community from Tübingen.

In 2013–2014, to write this paper, we reflected on the challenges of cross-cultural research in the Zipser community and in general.

Results and Discussions

The reality in the field or getting into direct contact with the ethnic group determined a shift in our strategy of collecting data. Initially, we administered structured questionnaires with closed questions and these did not answer our personal exigencies and they were not appropriate to the subject of our research. The data we needed were in certain cases qualitative rather than quantitative. It was less important how many questionnaires we administered, significant being their contents and the problems respondents had in their community. We had semi-structured interviews, with open questions out of which, most of the times, secondary questions appeared, spontaneously, depending on the received answers and on the respondents.

Having had no previous contact with this ethnic group until the moment we started our research, in 2009, and coming from another culture, defined by the Orthodox religion, by the Romanian language, and being a Romanian ethnic,

the first problem we had was our credibility and the Zipsers' openness to an *Ausländer*. Theoretical studies[30] present a certain methodological approach for issues related to *the researcher's identity*, focused on respondents' psychological and motivational issues when offering information related to their group identity. The culture we were born in and in which we developed socially could create barriers when relating to persons from another culture. Thus, a trap appears and, getting out from one culture, we practically do not enter another one, even if there are major different coordinates determined by language, religion, ethnicity, because our mentality will remain always anchored in the mother culture. This perspective makes the situation more complicated because looking through the culture of an individual or, extrapolating, through that of a community, as with a prison, the circle is delimited by the transmitted way of thinking, the characteristic customs and traditions, the dialect, etc.[31] So, one of the premises of our research methodology was to find *a breach that could open these barriers* imposed by different cultures that were about to get into contact, the one of the Zipsers and the one of the Romanians.

The Zipsers speak a German dialect bearing the name of their ethnic group. Other languages they often use to communicate within their group are Hungarian, Romanian, and Ukrainian. Their living environment is mainly rural, except for Germany. Their religion is Roman-Catholic, with a powerful role for group cohesion and for maintaining their material and spiritual culture over decades. The name of these people is related to the Zips region, in Slovakia, near the Tatra Mountains, where, beginning with the 18th century, the first organized groups of forestry workers migrated to the Eastern Carpathian space.

In Romania, the most representative community is in Vişeu de Sus/Oberwischau, where group identity has been expressed, for several centuries, by their grouping in a quarter bearing their name and which was first planned to be an isolated self-administered quarter. The Austrian architect Ernst Plaud drew the plans of this quarter in 1809, and according to these plans authorities distributed Zipser colonists in the settlement of Vişeu de Sus.[32]

From a historical and sociological perspective, living together (*miteinander*) or near the Other (*nebeneinander*) produced significant changes in peoples' relationship to the Other. If in the period between World War I and World War II the proportion of Zipsers in the settlement of Vişeu de Sus was 50%, at the time of our research they represented 3.5% of the total population.[33] So, the geography of the people in Vişeu de Sus became a marker of local social relations and the construction of ethnic identity was done depending on the Other as a result of social transformation and of fragmentation triggered by political events.

Integration in a group from another culture represents the first step that can lead to reaching the aim of any research. The relationships within any social

groups, especially in the case of minorities (we take into account the ethnic ones), are built on *trust, understanding* and *communication*.[34] Out of these, as an Ausländer researcher, the first problem is related to *trust*. Most of the interviewed persons were old and that was why their openness was problematic most of the times because they were fearful of persons who tried to deceive them. The forms of perceiving the strangers/the unknown persons were different, and that was obvious especially because we conducted the research on this case study not only in Romania, but also in Ukraine. In the Ukrainian Maramureş, in the settlement of Rahău (Rachiv, Paxiv) there was a community similar in terms of space organization and other features, of Zipsers who later on emigrated to the basin of the Vişeu River, bringing their contribution to the consolidation of the community in Romania.

Testing the field was one of the most important steps in order to continue our research and this happened when the researcher introduced herself:

> *Question (Q): My name is Ioana Scridon and I am here to conduct research about your ethnic group. Do you agree to spend some of your time answering some of my questions?*

Their answers were very surprising and based on their earlier experience with other persons. Earlier there had been researchers doing studies on topics such as ethnography and language in this community and they came from the Romanian university centers of Bucharest and Iaşi, as well as from Austria:

> *Answer (A): Who sent you?*
> *A: What do you need this information for? We all have very good relations. I have nothing to tell you!*
> *A: There have been plenty of persons like you here and we've seen nothing published about us...*

The last answer above was the result of the fact that former researchers had promised respondents the written results of their research and these probably never reached them. These materials are in the library of the German Forum in Vişeu de Sus or at the town library, but because of the respondents' low interest and age (old people), they did not look for information in libraries and newspapers. They expected that researchers would give them those published results personally.

Nevertheless, this type of answers was many times a result of their experience from the communist period when many were afraid to talk freely:

Q: What do you know to have happened in the place named Dosul Tăului, in 1944? [On 13 October 1944, in the above-mentioned place, 10 Romanian ethnics were executed and the main suspects were Zipsers who had followed orders as members of the Hungarian military police.]
*A: I know plenty, but I don't know if I should tell you because maybe tomorrow somebody comes to me and asks me "Why did you say that?" (***, 82 years old)*

If in the part of Maramureş south of the Tisza, the interviewed persons were more open to discussion when we declared the aim of our visit, especially when we mentioned the name of the persons who had recommended them to us (most of the time, these were persons who had a good reputation within the respective community, such as the priest or a teacher), in Ukraine, in the Maramureş north of the Tisza, their trust depended directly on the physical presence of a very trusted person in their community. In the majority of cases, the person who opened most doors was the priest in the respective settlement. Under these circumstances, when a person they knew introduced us and enabled our start, people's openness was bigger and discussions were relaxed.

Nevertheless, in most of the cases, the Zipsers were open to and interested in discussions without us mentioning our recommendations, and we obtained the valuable information by determining respondents to show their superiority in relation to us, the interviewers. The fact that somebody is interested in their culture, and especially if the interviewer shows that she has more information than the respondents, that is the moment when *competition* appears, the respondents' memory starts to work and it opens their appetite to show that they know their past and/or that they are interested in revealing new things about the history of the community and on the approached subject, such as: the tense relationships during certain periods, for instance during the communist one, or personal examples on the subject of ethnic relations.

Another difficulty that we needed to cope with was related to *understanding*, *to free discussion*, *to the respondent's informed consent* about the message he or she wanted to send, about the initially presented purpose—research—for which the offered information would be processed and used. Any question we ask should have a concrete and direct introduction, or it should stem from a previous question. If the questions are direct and do not have a logical succession, we run the risk that respondents do not use their memory and give short, indifferent answers of little value. Moreover, the best length of an interview is two hours at most. Respondents no longer focus after two hours.

To easily obtain information from the community members, an important step was to get closer to their group in the first months of research (August–

September 2009) by taking part in various events that were significant for their community, such as secular and religious traditional holidays in August (*Heimattreffen*—bringing together Zipsers from all over Romania and not only), in September (*Droben im Wassertal*—celebrating the Zipsers working in wood exploitation in the Vaser Valley), in October (*Oktoberfest* and the the feast of the patron of the church), in December (going to church on Christmas day—*Herodesspiel*—and on New Year's Day), as well as showing interest for the ethnic group and then for the German Forum that represented this community. Showing interest was possible by asking people about small "curiosities":

> *(Referring to the holiday **Droben im Wassertal**)*
> *Q: I come from another region of Romania and I find your customs very interesting and new. What does this religious holiday mean for you? Is it a simple meeting or does it have something more special? [The new elements for someone who does not belong to their ethnic group are especially the traditional customs such as the Biblical theatre Viflaim, the carnival during the Fărşag, etc.]*
> *A: For us, this holiday is not a simple meeting, we go back thinking of our ancestors who were renowned log drivers and workers in the woods. The fact that we are now in the Vaser Valley in the chapel raised to pay our respect to them means that we did not forget who we were. (Walter J., 54 years old)*

Traditions, similarly to traditional knowledge, can be viewed as cultural knowledge and practices which are essential to people's adaptation to their social and biophysical environment. The only thing that could be in favor of their being open to discussions was our interest in their culture. Later on, after becoming familiar with their ways, we managed to focus their attention on the discussed subject using introductions related to their history or to details of their holidays.

For communication and research and especially for interviews, Fiona Smith[35] proposes a series of rules that could maintain respondents' interest at a high level. She proposes that researchers should manifest an interest in the details of their culture, listening to them, observing and establishing a relationship between researcher and respondents. By stressing that respondents are different and by no means inferior, researchers should provide feedback, they should ask questions that show interest for a certain peculiarity and ask for reflection.

Another way could have been through the German Forum, but their interest was rather low especially as there was no clear statistical data for the members of this ethnic group (their number, their occupational structure, age and genre structure, their presence within the settlement and in Romania), who declared they were Hungarian or German because there was no mention of the Zipsers' group in the census questionnaires.

Their reactions to our questions or to the approached issues were very different, because some answered trenchantly that they did not want to discuss the matter, that they did not trust us, reminding us that they had already met such researchers who only wasted their time. Others were initially worried that somebody could intrude in their ethnic group and disturb their peace researching their past and especially the way they perceived their past at the individual level. In the first case, of a categorical refusal, there was one person out of the 52 interviewed. Some of these apologized that they had too small a vocabulary in Romanian and that they were not aware of certain aspects. These situations appeared during thematic discussions about the characteristic occupations of these Zipsers, related to log driving or to organizing their work in forestry. A good example could be the word naming the installation for stopping the water (akin to a dam), named *hromadka* in the local German dialect. Thus, after explanations and drawing sketches, we needed an interpreter that knew the word in the German idiom and in Romanian too.

Researchers' expectations during fieldwork, in general those of sociologists and of ethnologists, are quite diverse and for a novice are really only ideas. If initially the zeal is to find what is new in any interview, this impression may disappear from the beginning.

The cultural differences, the ones represented by respondents' German, Roman-Catholic background and the researchers' Romanian, Orthodox background raised certain barriers in communication. During scientific research upon culture, the major problems concern the respondents' openness to questions. The main restrictions are imposed by the way in which the Romanian and the other minorities in the area (Hungarians, Ukrainians, Poles, etc.) perceived the ethnic group of the Zipsers. Taking into account two of the minorities in Romania, the German and the Hungarian ones, one can notice major differences in the way the Romanian majority relates to the German and to the Hungarian minorities. After Romania became a democratic state, the forms of representation and exteriorization of patriotic feelings changed in both cases. The Hungarians started to bring strong arguments supporting their past and the importance of their presence on the Romanian territory, while the Germans, including the Zipsers, chose to leave for Germany and complete their identity and belonging there.

The post-socialist period determined that Germans, although they emigrated and left their material belongings to the Romanians, were considered a model for organizing life, and the Romanians' interest for the German spatial identity grew as time passed. These two examples shaped opinions within the framework of the relationships between Romanians and Germans and this was an explanation for the significant openness with which the Germans answered diverse

requests on interesting topics such as their history, culture, and civilization as related to another culture.

As researchers anchored in the Romanian culture, defined by elements like language, religion and ethnic affiliation, faced with a German speaking ethnic group, and conducting an in-depth study on cultural (spiritual) and material identity, this is one of the first problems we had:

> *A: How can somebody like you, from outside our culture, understand what tradition and customs mean for us, which are the relationships with the others, which were our feelings during key moments in our history? (Georg F., 62 years old, Vişeu de Sus) [The respondent's refined discourse is supported by his university studies and by his status within this ethnic group.]*

This point determined a shift of orientation and the necessity to approach this problem from an interdisciplinary perspective, not only from a historical and geographical point of view, but also from a sociological one. In this context, the researchers' experience may be revealed if they do not have moments of inspiration in order to answer in such a way that they "save the situation":

> *The necessity of such a study focused on facts from history is great, especially because most of the previous researchers came from within your group.*

Language did not pose any problem in obtaining information. In most of the cases we used Romanian, and for the research in Ukraine we used German. But the dialect posed problems. Most of the Zipsers spoke a dialect of German and they did not speak literary German very well or at all. Thus, Romanian was the common ground for understanding. Still, some of the problems we coped with were related to transcribing words used in the fields of forestry or gastronomy that had different forms in Romanian, Hungarian, and in German. During certain interviews, where the discussion focused on obtaining more technical data, as in the case of the previously mentioned case of *hromadka*, a local interpreter was necessary. In most cases, the interpreter was a member of the family, a younger person, who could explain terms using many details and thus could render as clearly as possible what the respondent had narrated and explained.

In Germany, most of these ethnics, although they called themselves Zipsers and their homeland was the Zips region—formerly Austrian, Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Polish and at present Slovak—during discussions made references to Vişeu de Sus. Most of them left for Germany through the very well-known program of *trade in Germans* (a German-Romanian program for the repatriation of the German ethnics from the territory of Romania for a fee es-

tablished previously according to their qualification. For each person that the Romanian state let go, it received between 4,000 and 10,000 German marks). Thus, their openness for interviews was very high especially because their homeland was the *Ţipserai Quarter* in Vişeu de Sus and the ethnologist Ilk considered, after repeated investigations, that they were *Vişoveni* (from Vişeu) Zipsers. The meetings we had with the Zipsers in Germany refreshed their memories about their past in Romania, introducing the respondents easily in the discussions related to interethnic relationships in Romania or to mutual assistance relationships within Germany.

In addition, *the researchers' personality* is very important for the success of a case study, the way in which researchers can catch respondents' attention before and during discussions. The relationships that researchers have to build with the group that they want to research should be based on openness, trust, interest, and tolerance.[36] The way in which we ask questions, their flow, the way we lead discussions, our gestures, our behavior, our sociability as researchers, all these could confer credibility from the start or, in certain cases, can lead to more time for respondents to trust us during discussions, to be open and relaxed when sharing information.

Similarly, it depended on researchers, on the way they were seen by the community and it depended on the researchers' skills to lead discussions in the direction intended for their research. In some situations, our questions provoked some unexpected reactions from respondents, either the fear to continue discussing the subject, because of repulsion felt towards a certain person, or revolt and pain manifested through crying, talking louder, their refusal to continue or stubbornness to continue only on a subject discussed at a certain moment. Retorts such as the following are relevant for the issues mentioned above:

A: You said I should speak, now let me speak. (Maria K., 87 years old, Vişeu de Sus)
A: Memories still hurt me. (interview with Baila Rosenberg[37])
A: I can still see them as if it were happening right now, how they begged for mercy [in the case of the Jews' deportation]. (Maria K., 87 years old, Vişeu de Sus)

The moment in which the researcher chooses to be part of the interview, he or she, without being able to manage spontaneously diverse situations, becomes a factor triggering the personal memory and he or she becomes a member of the respective community.[38] That is why researchers' training, both professional and emotional, is very important. Most of the time, interviews meant a heavy emotional burden, as they included open declarations of certain repressions of a regretted past. These were extremely exacting for both participants and researcher and that was why we split those interviews into several sessions. An interview

lasted no more than two hours. During discussions with old persons and during those on the subject of deportations after World War II, because of their emotional burden, respondents wished the interview stopped. Or the atmosphere was so full of emotions that we had to interrupt the interview:

> *A: It's very difficult for me to tell you about my youth. I was deported when I was 17, two weeks after I got married. They did not take my husband, but they took me although I was only 17. I arrived in Siberia being young… (Maria K., 87 years old, Vişeu de Sus.)*
> *A: I had a difficult life in Siberia. I worked in the chromium-nickel factory. I saw how people were dying... and it is very hard, dying. Five of our family were taken to Siberia and I was the only one to come back [then the respondent started to cry]. (Johann W., 94 years old, Hust, Ukraine)*

Because members of the community had not disclosed certain information until our conversation, their openness was bigger in telling us than in the case when a member of the community itself would have conducted the research. The *researcher's neutrality* represented an advantage, but we still had to observe a certain rule:

> *A: What I tell you now remains between us, I do not wish someone to write somewhere what I said. (***, 67 years old)*

The final presentation is one of the most important and difficult tasks. After approximately two years of research (2009–2011) and of direct contact with the community, many interested persons waited for us to publish the results, both Zipsers and Romanians. As part of their individual memories and histories, there were certain moments when the trap of subjectivity appeared, especially in the final stage of analyzing and structuring the information. As the field researcher's (Ioana Scridon) wish was to describe diverse situations as neutrally as possible, after she read the text again and third parties read it (her Ph.D. adviser and a member of her family, with university studies in philology), she reached the conclusion that although she had resisted getting involved into the problems of the community during her research, her thinking started to function differently when writing her conclusions. Despite making comparisons and connections to other scientific fields, verifying the historical accuracy of certain dates and events and avoiding the pitfall of various histories that would open your imagination, and despite indirect involvement (due to respondents and conversations with them), interpreting answers was difficult in terms of observing scientific and historical objectivity. These asked for repeated re-readings and changes to the initial text.

Most of the time, after gaining the subjects' trust, some of them narrated different real events placing them in a bad light, they took a position regarding the Germans' role in history, they recognized the Holocaust, they revolted against it, against deportations, and against the processes of assimilation initiated by the Hungarians. New research completed the history and characteristic features of the Zipsers in Romania.[39] Studies on the German minority in Romania treated very superficially these subjects but they still represented local historical truths different from the official discourse on history. Thus, our considerable responsibility was to clarify the controversial or "high-pressure" situations of this ethnic group, in a public manner and with a language permissive enough so that certain things were said without leaving any place for interpretation. The necessity to take a stand is part of the *researcher's ethics*.

In this case study, we clearly showed that for geographical cross-cultural research the method was as significant as the result, and thus the need for paying attention to the circumstances, to the researcher-respondent interaction, to their personal traits, etc., because all these impact the type and especially the quality of the obtained information.

Conclusions and Recommendations

THIS PAPER is a methodological reflection on research field experience in a case study concerning the Zipsers' identity. Based on qualitative interviews with members of this minority living in three countries (Romania, Ukraine und Germany) the paper stresses both the importance of the researcher doing cross-cultural research and the respondents' role.

No matter how open people consider an ethnic group to be, because it is different in culture, language, religion, traditions and customs from the researchers', their access to the respective group is rather limited. The relations with the Other are doubted on both sides. Researchers get closer to the ethnic group step by step, giving plenty of time for such a relationship. Testing the field is one of the main access doors in investigating the Other.

The next stage, if testing the field is unsuccessful, is finding a trustful person in the community, someone honorable and respected by the ethnic group, who will make the necessary introductions so that the chances to obtain the needed information are higher. Very often, it is not enough that researchers have theoretical information about how one should conduct an interview or how to get into contact with another culture in order to research it. Researchers have to resonate with the ethnic group and they have to find the little gate that leads to persons whose support guarantees success.

At the same time, the way in which the community perceives the researchers is crucial. Essential is the way in which they introduce themselves to the community, their attitude, the way in which they start or intervene in a discussion, how they lead the discussion, etc. Researchers' adaptability, flexibility, and spontaneity in new situations are compulsory features. The traps that any conversation may have, either on taboo subjects or by losing focus on the topic, could determine respondents to lose their interest. The main disadvantage was that we did not speak the local dialect, which would have facilitated our access to the community.

The final presentation must be impartial, clearly formulated and mainly supported by respondents' answers and quotations. Certain situations may contradict facts and then it is advisable to introduce examples in order to support the correctness of the formulated hypotheses.

Therefore, we conclude that we accomplished the aim of our research, that of presenting an example of good practice in geographical cross-cultural research with a focus on the way in which we convinced people to take part in the research, because of their reservations in regard to outsiders and of cultural and linguistic barriers. Thus, in order to obtain the necessary information, the field researcher had to contact the persons she already knew in the community and those helped her select and contact participants, also facilitating the researcher-respondent interaction. This situation underlined the strong ties among community members and the nature of their relationships. In addition, employing qualitative methods favors case studies where there is a need for mediation between researchers' opinion and that of the studied community, reducing the risk of research blocks. Moreover, context, trust and knowledge about the topic influenced the selection of participants. Context means the cultural elements, values and needs of both researcher and community, resulting in a mutual relationship between them, creating trust and the best conditions for dialogue. Similar studies[40] confirmed this conclusion.

Although cross-cultural research is difficult to approach and implement, in the end we had enough proof that researchers who want to pursue it should develop certain competences such as flexibility, making them easily adaptable, and negotiation. Therefore, we recommend that researchers interact as much as possible with the members of the community they research and gain an understanding of the characteristic features of the space and of the culture in focus.

In this theoretical and methodological context, we offered suggestions about planning field research under similar circumstances, but especially for the Zipser community.

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Notes

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Abstract

Approaching the Other in the Zipser Community: Identity Issues and Methodological Insights into Geographical Cross-Cultural Research

The present paper explores aspects of identity and research methodology in the context of ethnic diversity and of the history of the Zipser community, a German-speaking ethnic group. The aim of our paper was that of presenting the Zipser community in the framework of an example of good practice for geographical cross-cultural research, with a focus on the way in which we convinced respondents to take part in it. Using this case study, we clearly showed that for geographical cross-cultural research the method is as significant as the result, hence the need to pay attention to circumstances, to the researcher-respondent interaction, to their personal traits, etc., as all these impact the type and especially the quality of the obtained information. Although geographical cross-cultural research is difficult to approach and implement, in the end we had enough proof that researchers that want to conduct it should develop certain competences. To sum up, the main feature of geographical cross-cultural research is the central place of the researchers' experience and the respondents' interpretation or vision, which result in many advantages among which the most significant one is the exchange of qualitative information. In addition, we offered suggestions about planning field research under similar circumstances, but especially for the Zipser community.

Keywords

methodology, identity, alterity, Zipsers, qualitative approach