



My Natal Village

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Introduction

At the suggestion of Professor Surd, who presented me with a challenge, when he raised a question somewhat along this line – “What do you think Mr. Nicoara, would you care to come to our symposium with a brief desertation written in English, containing your thoughts, and nostalgic recollections about your natal village?” I was reluctant at first to undertake such an assignment, because it is now a numbers of years, since I left my village, but there is a saying in America that says – “You can take the boy out of the farm – but, you can’t take the farm out of the boy.” I have substituted the word “village” for the word “farm”. In other words, “You can take the boy out of the village, but you can’t take the village out of the boy.” The fact of the matter is, that I am still emotionally attached to my village, and therefore it is with distinct pleasure that I am submitting this presentation.

Location

In this unlimited, great general and three dimensional expanse of space, in the world in which humanity finds itself, could be found another more limited space known as the village of “Sohodol.” It is a rural village in a mountainous region known as the “Roşia Montana” in the Judicial District of Alba in Romania. It can be considered isolated in one sense, and yet part of the very fabric of the inhabited area of the region. It is connected by a feeder road at a distance of five km from the city of Campeni, and about 12 km from the city of Abrud. The nearest railway was in Campeni and the principal road of better quality also ran through Campeni. The transportation of the agricultural production to the markets was done by oxen pulling the loaded wagons, and people in general walked the short distances from their village to the nearest city, from where the train, and later the buses would transport them to areas beyond Campeni. The only industry to speak of in close proximity was the gold mine in the Rosia Mountains, and for the villagers to reach the mine, they had to walk several hours over the hills to reach it

Social and Cultural

In brief, life in the village generally centered around the church and family. There were numerous church holidays throughout the year, in which social functions and village gatherings took place. Smaller social activities were observed within the family circle, such as baptisms and birthday anniversaries, while the weddings were generally part of a larger attendance of relatives and other villagers. In the summer months, Sunday afternoons was a time for the villagers to gather at the village square and to listen to a local instrument orchestra or band who entertained them with song and dance music. Almost no social activity took place without the presence and consumption of alcohol, which was generally made by the peasants themselves. The village had a public elementary school and many of the younger children did have an opportunity to attend, inspite of the fact that in some cases, children were withheld from attending classes in order to help at home.

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There was a percentage of illiterate folks, and about the only village residents that were more academically prepared were the priest and the school teachers. Anyone wanting to attend school beyond the elementary level had to go to either Câmpeni, Abrud or elsewhere. There was no local library in the official sense, although books were read and passed on from neighbor to neighbor for those who could read.

Village Living

In addition to the cultural and social activities that existed. Life in the village consisted of the work that necessarily had to be carried out in order for families to make a living and to provide for themselves and their children. There were no labor-saving devices, therefore all of the labor was done by hand. While the area was agrarian, the topography of the region did not lend itself to crop production. Every family found a spot for planting and raising a garden and most every family had a few fruit trees on their property. Most of the activity centered around the raising of livestock, consisting of cattle, sheep and goats, and every family raised a pig or two and had a few chickens. There was always an adequate water supply. Flowing springs were to be found in most places from which fresh drinking water could be obtained and in some cases wells were dug in the peasant's own yard. At any rate, the water had to be drawn by bucket or pail. There was no water piped into people's homes. The peasant homes were spread out in clusters. Generally in groups of three to four houses. The peasant homes were not luxurious, but small, comfortable and furnished within their means, primarily with their own hand made furniture and needs, such as blankets, quilts, towels and other hand-made needs. The rest of our neighbors lived a few hundred meters away over the hill, or beyond the forest or "after you cross two or three creeks." The main economic activity of the village was the "tirg" or the "market". It was at the market that the families sold their produce and handicrafts, and at the same time purchased their basic necessities, which they could not produce themselves. The nearest market was in Câmpeni. There was no local medical clinic and the peasant folk had to go to Câmpeni to acquire medical attention, or for the most part relied on traditional forms of herbal medication. There was always a village woman, who acted as a mid-wife at the time of birth-giving, or some person, who knew how to splinter a broken foot or set into place a dislocated shoulder, and always someone who had a pair of pincers and could pull a tooth. There were things going on in the world around us that we were not aware of. I recall very vividly a time when someone from Câmpeni came into our village and rode a bicycle. All of us grade two students, marveled at that wonderful piece of transportation equipment. There were no telephones, no radios or mass media means of communication. There were some newspapers, and on occasion a copy would reach the village, but for the most part communication was done by person to person and "word of mouth."

My Personal Experience

Up to this point, I have generalized and endeavored to give you a brief picture of the kind of a milieu that I grew up in. Living in the village of Sohodol as I did, meant that I lived in a four-season climate. It was after the Second World War, the Communist system had come into being. I was too young to understand all that was taking place. My recollections force me to share with you my living experience based on this background. My family was poor. Our farm consisted of about two hectares and it was on this patch of land that my parents were raising three children and providing for themselves. All of the other families were also poor, and we all depended heavily on nature to make our living. It was very important for nature to cooperate with us in order to give us a more abundant living. In other words, we required the rain to come at the appropriate time, and like wise for the sun to shine at haying time, and oddly enough, in general the region had a satisfying climate. Because of the poverty we were living in, as a child I had none of the toys, that we see to-days children enjoying. My earliest recollections of beauty in life was my contact with nature.

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Running or walking up and down with other village children, through the growing wild flowers, by the edges of the flowing creeks or the forests, and this left an imprint in my mind of that corner in Heaven called Sohodol, that will never be erased.

My education consisted of seven classes taken at the elementary school of Sohodol. From my father, who was a simple peasant, I learned to love reading. He read a lot and had a sizeable quantity of books in our home. I left Sohodol and came to Cluj-Napoca in 1952 to attend High School. After two years I had to give it up, because my father was unable to support me any further. During the first four grades at school I began to read and study the geography and history of the world. I buried my nose in books about "travel." As an answer to my childhood dreams and visions, my future destiny provided me with the opportunity to travel. I have visited 17 countries so far, and speak four languages fluently. I plan to visit a few more countries if my years and health permit me.

Spring

In spite of the poverty in the area, there was a certain charm and beauty to life. Starting with spring, I remember well the melting of the snow, and the bubbling noise of the all the little brooks and creeks. The snow-drop (Ghiociei) and other beautiful flowers that cropped up. The fruit trees around the homes would come into bud, one by one, and later into bloom, each with it's own color and aroma that it spilled into the air. The forest would arise from it's winter sleep and fresh leaves of chromatic green would appear on the deciduous trees, as they again appeared between the pine evergreens. The grass began growing on the mountain slopes embracing patches of colorful wild flowers.. The peasant would harness his oxen to the yoke and plow the garden spot in readiness for planting. All the while, the lark (ciocirlia) also known as the "bird of the plowman", together with the Cucu, (cookoo) the robin and other birds were naturally singing and chirping away and enjoying this natural haven, while from the grass arose the weird noise and sounds of the crickets.

Summer

The summer season called for more work. Some of my recollections bring to mind the falling of the rain, and the sweet smell of the air the next morning. Sometimes the mornings were foggy, but after the fog lifted we would head for the forest to pick strawberries, and mushrooms which were a basic food item. My father in addition to being an ordinary peasant, was also a violinist and he would be in demand to play at weddings and other occasions, which generally took him away from home during the week-ends, but did give him a little added income. I recall some of the music and songs with nostalgia as I heard him occasionally practicing on the violin. It is regretful that we did not have tape recorders in those days to record some of those old sings and melodies, that are now and forever lost. During the week days, the work consisted of hoeing the vegetables rows in the garden, and then came the sickle and the haying season. This was hard back-breaking work. The grass was cut by scythe, then gathered by hand fork and stacked into hay mounds, that would later be brought to the yard for the winter feeding of the cattle and sheep. I was too young to be of help for the heavy work, but I was relegated to pasturing and herding the cows and the sheep. Then there were everyday chores to do such as milking the cows, setting the milk to ferment for the making of cheese and butter and feeding the one or two pigs as well as the chickens. Saturday was Market Day in Câmpeni, and my mother would take her basket and walk to the market. She might take something to sell, such as some handicrafts or farm produce like a jar of cream, eggs or maybe butter, and returned with a few candies, or a kind of sweet bread with a colorful design and something like a little mirror in the middle and made in the form of a heart. It was referred to as the "Puiu Târgului". As children we enjoyed it so much, for so little.

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Autumn

This was the season of the year which called for preparation for the winter.

After we came home from school, we would pick up the blankets of leaves shed by the trees and store them for bedding for the cows and sheep during the winter. The gardens had to be picked. One staple food item was cabbage. Some of the cabbage heads had to be shredded, while other cabbage heads were placed whole in barrels or wooden containers in the cellar for pickling (sauerkraut) and for winter storage. The potatoes had to be dug and other root crops such as carrots, turnips and beets. All of these crops were generally stored in the cellar and except for the potatoes were usually covered with sand. Other garden products such as pumpkins were stored and used both for human as well as animal consumption. I recall how after a night storm, the morning after, the ground under the fruit trees would contain so much fallen fruit caused by the storm. There were apples, pears and plums. They were luscious and tasty, and we picked them up because our diets consisted of these fruits, some of which would be dried and again stored for the winter. Another important task that had to be accomplished during this season was the cutting and bring home the winter's wood supply. It was with wood that the homes were heated during the long and cold winter months. As fall the season wore on, and as the days became smaller the peasants would huddle around their yards and perhaps exchange some village news or share other information across their yard fence or perhaps sitting on a bench on their front porch. In the conversation interim one would hear the sound of a cow bell or the barking of a dog. There were moments of peace and tranquility. The last task which was done in late autumn and generally near Christmas was the killing of the pig, the making of sausage, the pickling and smoking of the bacon and hams.

Winter

We knew that the winter season was upon us, as we watched the long line of migratory birds in flight going to the south. Snow began to fall regularly and as a child I had a snow sled and a make-shift pair of skis. As I recall there were very heavy snowfalls and my father would get up very early in the morning to shovel the snow and clear a path from the house to our animal shed or barn, so that my mother could get there and milk the cows. I recall running through those paths, as if they were tunnels, because the snow banks were much higher than we were.

At Christmas time, we would organize ourselves into groups and go singing Christmas carols from one neighbor's house to another. Sometimes the snow was so deep that we could not get to some people's homes, and we would be forced to turn back. When such heavy winters with much snow occurred, I could hear the older people saying that – "the higher the snow-the better the crops the next year." There was no electricity in the rural areas in Romania at that time. We did not have electricity. Our evening light in the home came from a kerosene burning lamp. The long winter evenings were spent in both a social and yet productive manner. People would get together at different homes. The women especially were constantly busy doing handwork. There was the spinning of wool or flax fibre into yarn. Sometimes the odd man was good at carding wool and would pitch in to help the women. The women would knit socks, sweaters, and other forms of clothing. There would be the stripping of feathers and the making of pillows and quilts. This was an especially important task for a family with many girls, since part of a girl's wedding dowry consisted of pillows, quilts and blankets. In addition to the spinning of wool, the linen thread from the flax-fibre had to be woven into cloth, and this was done on a "weaving-loom" (razboiul de tesut). Much of this work was done in the evenings by lamp light at such events known as "work-bees" (claca). Women worked extremely hard and it never ended. There were none of to-day's facilities. I remember women taking their babies to the field with them and breast feeding their babies during a work break. There were no "throw-away" diapers. Clothes had to be laundered by hand, and the water oftentimes had to be drawn by hand from a nearby well or creek. As I think about my own mother now, I know for certain that she never had a chance to go to a restaurant for prepared meal in all

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her life. All of our clothes were made by my mother, because we could not afford to purchase commercially made fabric. During this time, the men in general had it easier. Some men used the evenings for playing cards, for having a few drinks, and for telling tall tales about their youth and their experiences, and this was a respite for them from the summer months of the manual field labor.

Conclusion

Having shared with you my recollections of my youthful living experience from the village in which I was born. I have made a full confession to the extent that my memory has served me about an area in which poverty is clothed in beauty. In my home in Phoenix, Arizona I have paintings hanging on the wall, that I have painted myself with scenes from the Sohodol region and its mountainous features. When Professor Surd walked with me to the place where I was born, he looked around and exclaimed – “ lonele (Johnny), now I realize why you are so nostalgically attached to this place.” Since 1952 I rarely came to Sohodol, but Sohodol is everywhere with me. I think it is one of the dearest and finest places on earth, and I think that everyone carries a nostalgia about his birthplace, even a person born in the desert. But as for me – I might conclude with a small prayer – “: O God! If there are cities in heaven that have streets paved with gold – I would prefer to have YOU leave me in Sohodol, at the edge of a forest, between flowers, butterflies, birds and their songs, and the babbling flow of the water in the creeks.”