

ON THE ROMA QUESTION DURING THE ANTONESCU REGIME, 1941-1944. A CASE STUDY OF VLAȘCA COUNTY AND GIURGIU

BREAZU Florentin

Abstract. *This study examines the various solutions put forward by the Antonescu regime (1940-1944) to solve the question of the Roma in Romania. Authorities decided in the end to deport some of the gypsy population, mostly nomads but settled Roma as well. In the summer and autumn of 1942, more than 25 000 people were moved to the East, around the Bug river, and only half of them returned home. The article investigates how the deportation policy was applied locally in Vlașca county and the town of Giurgiu.*

Keywords: *Antonescu regime, deportation, Gypsies, Vlașca, Giurgiu.*

After WWI and the Paris peace treaties, when Romania doubled its territory and population, the number of Roma subsequently grew with the addition of Gypsies from Transylvania (who had never been enslaved) and from Bessarabia. In the interwar period, as Romanian society experienced social and economic progress, the identity of this ethnic group became more coherent, with the priest Calinic I. Popp Șerboianu founding the first Roma political organization, the “*General Association of Gypsies in Romania*” (*Asociația Generală a Țiganilor din România*). The main aim of this association was to provide solutions on a cultural and social level. Culturally, their programme envisaged: creating nursery schools for Roma children; enabling wider access to state education; qualified training; founding a further education college; and setting up a publication. From a social point of view, their intentions were also ambitious: founding soup kitchens for paupers; a hospital; building homes for the homeless; mutual aid societies; free medical services and legal aid; or working with the authorities to settle nomadic Gypsies by granting them small holdings. The Roma leaders also strongly promoted a change of the public perception of Gypsies and strictly forbade the association to be involved in politics (ACHIM V. 1998, 120-127).

Differences in political views (i.e. opportunities) between the Roma leaders eventually resulted in a new organization, the “*General Union of Romanian Roma*” (*Uniunea Generală a Romilor din România*), created in September 1933 under the leadership of G.A. Lăzărescu-Lazurică, who came from a Gypsy background but was a successful business man in Bucharest and sporadically wrote newspaper articles for „Universul” and „Adevărul literar” (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 24). The honorary president of the union was Grigoraș Dinicu, a prestigious musician descended from an old musical family. The *General Union* had the same goals as the *General Association*, but Lăzărescu was more active and succeeded in organizing the first congress of Romanian Roma on 8th October 1933, where he was elected “voivod”. A number of local branches came into existence, including one in Vlașca County, where the local leader, Stoica Vasile, succeeded in 1938 in setting up local offices in many villages: Corbii Mari, Grăția, Petrești, Cartojani, Căscioarele, Prundu, Herești, Vărăști, Dobreni, Colibași (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 135).

Until 1930, statistically there were no Roma in Romania. During the first census of greater Romania conducted that year, 262,501 individuals declared themselves to be Roma (i.e. 1.5% of the total population), of who only 101,000 spoke the language (*Recensământul ...*). A contemporary document stated that “owing to their historical fate (as slaves) and the nature of their occupation, [the Roma] live mostly in rural areas, cca. 85% of their total living in the country” (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 207).

In March 1938 a totalitarian regime took power in Romania, adopting racist legislation which did not however cause any deep changes in the situation of the Roma. In theory, until Ion Antonescu's regime (September 1940-August 1944), the Roma were not an issue for the Romanian government. The official attitude towards the Roma was not a racial one but “it was a question of defending public order and moral cleansing, by imposing the *cult of labour*”.

General Ion Antonescu himself considered that those Roma who were hardworking, “performing socially necessary activities, should be left alone”. His deputy, Mihai Antonescu, saw a solution to the Roma question in removing them from Bucharest and other large cities (including Giurgiu) and in putting criminals to work (*Stenogramele...* 593-595). On the other hand, there were no clear criteria for establishing who belonged to the Roma; many people had been assimilated and mixed with other ethnic groups, while some refused to be labeled as Gypsies.

After the Iron Guard was removed from government by Ion Antonescu on 23rd January 1941, the Roma question became an issue that needed a solution. On 7th February 1941, Antonescu requested that 20,000 Roma be transferred from major cities to the plane of Bărăgan, “where there has always been a need for labour” (*Stenogramele...* 181). The outcome of several official debates was to take a census of nomadic and settled Roma, but only of “those with criminal convictions, recidivists, pick-pockets on trains or at fairs, petty thieves and all of whom we have indication that they live from theft”. This ambiguous order led to abuses and vindictive behaviour by the local authorities in charge of this census. There was no solution in sight for months, until Ion Antonescu gave the final decision: “because of the blackouts, there were many thefts and murders, so the public asked me to defend them. [...] Investigations revealed that Gypsies were (also) involved, armed with fire arms. Then I said: **Send them to Transnistria!**” (CIUCĂ M.D. 1995). The census was decided for the 31st May 1942, and officially brought forward to the 25th May; each local police unit created plans to carry it out during one day, to avoid any evasion. The data of this census has not been processed to this

day! On 7th September 1942, when the issue of Roma deportations was history, official documentation on the Roma population presented to Antonescu was still based on the figures from the 1930 census.

In this study, I have also resorted to data from the 1930 census. Muntenia was the region with the highest percentage of Roma population, where of the fourteen counties; Vlaşca had 2, 0%-2, 9% Roma. The total population of the county was 296,412, of whom 6,459 (2.2%) were Roma, while only 3,481 of those (53.9%) could speak Romani! In rural areas, from the total population of 265,396 people, 5,706 were Roma; they were only present in 137 out of 236 total villages of the county. Villages with over 50 Gypsies (31) were mainly those of the subcounties: Dunărea (Malu, Găujani, Vedeia, Putineiu, Beiu, Frătești, Pietroșani), Călugăreni (Băneasa, Singureni, Strâmba), Călniștea (Drăgănești, Letca, Răsuceni), Neajlov (Purani, Preajba, Cartojani), Glavacioc (Mârșa, Blejești, Ciuperceni). The town of Giurgiu ranked 7 out of 15 urban centres with over 500 Roma inhabitants, with 753 Gypsies counted (2.4% of the total population of 31.016). Urziceni topped the list with a Roma population of 13.4% (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 207).

The data collected by local authorities in the 1942 census offers different information sets which do not shed more light on the Roma question during WWII. On 12th May 1942, before the census had begun, Giurgiu town hall received from Vlaşca prefecture "two lists of Gypsies and thieves from Giurgiu, being asked to contact the Legion of Gendarmes to establish a way for their eviction from the county, but without burdening or blighting the lives of rural inhabitants". The figures in the government tables show that "thieves" were a special category: only 89 were listed, of whom 27 married, 21 in the army, 9 in prison were, 6 had disappeared and only 53 lived in the town at that moment. "Gypsies" on the other hand, were 1,277 of whom 317 were heads of household, 217 married, 53 widowed, 28 lived in common law marriages, and one was divorced. By trade and profession: 57 had a trade, 176 were labourers, 35 were housewives, and 49 were listed as having "other professions". Concerning their property status, 229 owned their homes and 88 were renting. In a police source, written on 25th May 1942 as part of the ordered census, 179 adult Roma were counted, adding on average 3-4 children to each grown up. These documents do not explain whether nomadic Roma were taken into account, although the data collected by the police is closer to the official government figures.

Authorities evicted **nomadic Gypsies** first. There is no exact figure available for the number of dwellings in the county of Vlaşca at the end of May 1942, because families were counted in legions by gendarmes as they were crossing the river Prut. Officially, the deportations were to take place between 1st June and 15th August; in fact until October 1942 11,500 people (6,700 of whom were children) "were settled in Transnistria by government protection". Roma men who were enlisted in the country or on the front were stricken from military records and sent to join their families in Transnistria (ACHIM V. 2004, I, 269-271).

In the next step, authorities counted and registered 31,438 **settled (non-nomadic) Gypsies** who were not enlisted already; after the selection, a first cohort of "dangerous and undesirable" Roma with their families, 13,176 people in total, faced eviction (*Comisia...* 232). Romanian authorities did not have a precise action plan concerning these deportations. Initially, they intended to put the Gypsies in camps or take them beyond the river Bug; eventually authorities decided to deport them. While nomadic Roma travelled with their own means of transportation, for the settled Gypsies „water transportation from the ports of Giurgiu or Oltenița would have been more practical" (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 150). Authorities felt that „this would provide more security", but the carefully prepared operation was abandoned in the end, switching to using trains. Between 12th and 20th September 1942 nine special trains, leaving various towns in Romania, transported over 13,000 people beyond the river Bug (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 192). At their destination, they were settled in the "Gypsy colonies", at the edge of Ukrainian villages on the shores of the Bug. Later they were dispersed through the villages, working on farms or in workshops as paid labour or working their own trade, when they were not busy with petty theft and begging! From Vlaşca County, 242 people (unfit for service) embarked in 6 train carriages, which joined train nr. 7 (code E.9) running on the Alba-Iulia - Tighina route (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 206). From the town of Giurgiu, 32 Roma (4 men, 13 women and 15 children, with the youngest only 3 years old) were taken to Bucharest under the supervision of only two gendarmes to join train nr. 2 (E.4) running from Pitești to Tighina. Officially, the Giurgiu Gypsies "had no clear trade to provide an honest subsistence" (!). Two more individuals joined this group of deportees, although they were not on the list of undesirables, but followed the convoy "requesting to be sent away, too, because they were alone in the world" (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 238).

For the operation to succeed, "the Gypsies were picked up 24 hours beforehand and kept under police arrest, and on the morning of 11th September were handed over to the Vlaşca Legion of Gendarmes". They received 5 rations of bread per person, far from sufficient under the circumstances. "Their property and movable goods were registered and handed over to the Giurgiu Office for Romanisation". After this first step, local authorities were convinced that deportations would continue. The close monitoring of the Roma communities created panic and unrest: "some sold their belongings, and others complained to the Presidency of the Government and the Ministry of Interior. They were however persuaded that nothing would happen to them, so at the moment everyone is looking to their own and has forgotten about eviction". Such was the case of three Roma (*spoitori*) from Giurgiu, who did not meet the criteria for eviction. Their petition contains short biographies, just like many such documents signed by nameless Gypsies who considered themselves true Romanians: "we have been living in Giurgiu for a long time, we have families, children and permanent homes, milky cows; we are soldiers of this country and now face the situation of being send to Transnistria as colonists. Because we are neither vagrant nor nomads, but have blended entirely with the Romanian life and

community of our town, we want to stay here, as peaceful citizens of this town.” Theirs was a fortunate case, as on 14th October 1942 the Romanian government decided to stop the deportation of Jews and Roma to Transnistria, except for “exceptional cases who endanger social order” (ACHIM V. 2004, I, 286).

Similarly to the official stance in the case of Jews in Romania (only Jews from Bessarabia, Bucovina and Dorohoi were deported), the Romanian state did not persecute the Roma refugees from northern Transylvania (taken by Hungary in 1940-1941) or those living on the large estates in the south of the country (such as in the counties of Dolj, Romanați, Ilfov and Vlașca) (*Raport final...* 241). It was only in the summer of 1943 that “the Ministry of Internal Affairs took cognizance that on some of these estates live regular colonies of Gypsies, who dwell in half-buried shanties in the dirt, exploited and paid a pittance by the landlords.” The report named the large estate holders: 15 private persons, 3 natural persons (The Romanian Academy, the Crown Estates and the Ministry of Agriculture). For instance, landlords from Răscăcenii de Sus, Dan Noica, Andrei Noica, and Iordache Noica used Roma labour, nearly 50 people. All landlords were ordered to improve the living conditions of the Roma, who would otherwise be deported to Transnistria the coming autumn. Some landlords, such as those in Teleorman County, followed the official instructions, while others did not. Vlașca County fell in the latter category.

The sweeping legislation allowed for much abuse, confusion and even disregard for given orders. This was the case in the village of Preajba-Vlașca, where the chief of the Gendarmes did not follow the route and brought four Gypsies to Giurgiu one day too late for deportation! (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 284). Having returned home, the men disappeared, and only one of them (called “Moarte Rece” - cold death) was caught. A small rebellion of 50-60 Gypsies ensued, requesting freedom for the arrested. The gendarmes dispersed them and identified the main agitators. The report said that: “the Gypsy Moarte Rece with his family, consisting of his wife Floarea, daughters Lina and Floare, also the Gypsy Ioniță Dumitru with his family consisting of Anica, his common law wife, and Gheorghe, Nicolae, Dumitra, Lina and Maria were proved **heads of the riot**. After their trial and execution of sentences they are to be evicted to Transnistria.”

The population did not support such government action, especially when it targeted Roma accepted in their communities with established economic roles (in many cases they were the only artisans in a given village). Local town halls gave certificates of “good behaviour” to Roma to shelter them from eviction, arguing that “they can be considered Gypsies only by their origin” (*Raport final...* 243). Important politicians, intellectuals (George Enescu wrote to Ion Antonescu personally “not to take his musicians to the Bug”), managers of the Romanian Railways and other large concerns protested against deportations, declaring that “our Gypsy tradesmen and workers are well qualified, especially as blacksmiths, and they belong to our workers with pension rights, are orderly and disciplined, making an important contribution to our war effort” (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 242).

Deportees and family members left behind in the county addressed various complaints to the government, requesting repatriation. Three commissions were created in December 1942, to “end the numerous complaints of irregular eviction, which are mostly ill-founded.” The investigations lasted until the beginning of February 1943; of the 7,300 registered complaints, only 1261 people (311 family heads) received a favorable answer. One of them was from Giurgiu and 67 from Vlașca. Gendarmes from the counties of Ialomița, Vlașca and Teleorman reported that “a significant decrease in thefts and burglaries” was evident, “proving that this measure has paid off”.

Most fugitives, according to official reports, were caught by the authorities, but few were sent back to the colonies, due to the restrictions imposed during the typhoid epidemic until the summer of 1943. After an investigation, an official protocol concluded whether the fugitives were to be returned to the Bug or to their homes.

Such was the case of Florea Vasile from the village of Găujani-Vlașca, who escaped with a group of Roma in October 1943 and hid in a train carriage with the consent of the guarding officer. Florea was 45 years old, married without children, without a police record, a field labourer and silversmith, owning his own house, who had previously served in the Romanian army, unit 1921, 10th Artillery regiment. He told his story: “I was evicted together with Gypsies from all over the country, but I don't know for what reason because I was neither put on trial nor sentenced; I had the means to support myself and my wife. Because of bad treatment at the place where we were deported, on the night of 21st September I found a train with soldiers leaving for Bucharest, transporting an aero plane. We begged them and they took us on board, but in Barboși station we were discovered and taken off the train. The gendarmes arrested us at the station. I ask to be allowed to stay in the country, because I have the means to support myself and am a well-behaved man (...) and to do state service because I did military service.” According to these facts, Florea Vasile should not have been deported, primarily because he had been an active soldier and served his country, was not dangerous, had no record and had the means to provide for his family through honest work! Perhaps his is one of the many cases of the “black September”, when “subaltern authorities displayed a lack of understanding and awareness, exacerbated by a lack of control by superiors” (NĂSTASĂ L. & VARGA A. 2001, doc. 253).

The “horrors of Transnistria”, famine, disease and poverty, led to the death of around 11,000 of the 25,000 Roma deported between May and September 1942 (FRASER A. 1995). There were no organized executions of Roma on the part of the Romanian authorities, just a few cases of shootings by German officers because of food thefts. The survivors returned to Romania in the spring of 1944, as the Romanian army and authorities retreated before the Soviet offensive. The only government directive concerning the returnees was to “make them work” which did not solve this social issue. Many evicted Roma were sent back to their home villages, only to serve as cheap agricultural labour. The

policy of ethnic cleansing against the Roma ended after 23rd August 1944. An official government mandate from 13th September 1944 ordered that Roma “be allowed to practice their trades and be guided towards various jobs”.

During the post war years, the Roma were neglected by authorities. They did not manage to obtain recognized status as an ethnic minority even in 1948, when this would have secured some rights and safeguard for their identity. On the contrary, the Communist regime enforced a policy to settle nomadic Gypsies. In April 1948 the government launched a huge operation to identify and register Gypsy camps. A “Romanianisation” of Roma also began, as the Communist policy of social purification was in full swing. Authorities moved Roma into houses belonging to enemies of the Communist regime (aristocrats, kulaks, merchants or intellectuals), on the edge of villages (known as “țigănie”- Gypsy neighbourhood), or in the houses of the Saxons who had emigrated from Transylvania. In towns, new Roma quarters appeared on the outskirts. In Giurgiu there are still traces of those changes, with the Roma of “healthy social origins”, elevated by their status as victims of the Antonescu regime, taking over the beautiful houses of the interwar merchants and shopkeepers in Strada Gării (PONCE E. 1999).

In the final analysis of the Romanian Holocaust, Vlașca County and the town of Giurgiu were part of the racial policy of the Antonescu regime, a local variant of the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler's extermination policy in Germany. **The Roma deportations to Transnistria represent the Romanian episode of the tragic history of the Roma during World War II.**

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