

Letters in Verse from the Great War

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to study the records and testimonies created during the First World War in order to understand this important historical moment in the existence of Romanian rural communities. Many of the testimonies of Romanian soldiers capture the shift from oral culture and oral language to writing and written culture. Writing, which the soldiers had yet to fully internalize, was one of the few possibilities available to them on the war front to maintain alive the connection with their families and to leave a trace about the exceptional times they were living. These written accounts, which do not always observe the rules of correct writing, make apparent and available to us today a deep layer of oral culture that had until then been orally transmitted from generation to generation.

Romanian soldiers from Transylvania were best known for writing home messages in verse, which they composed on the spot, using memorized set structures and phrases from the shared folklore repertoire circulating at the time in the village world. Privates coming from the Kingdom of Romania also made verses in their letters or journal entries, but it was less common. They would sometimes insert in their notes orally transmitted moral stories or parables, as well as other forms and pieces of the peasant oral culture to which they belonged.

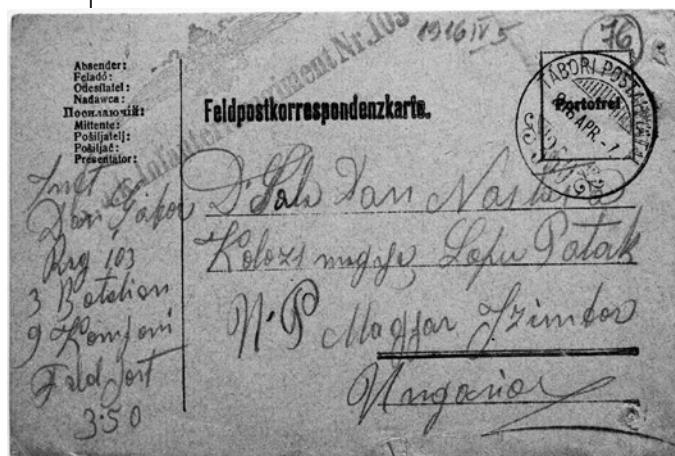
Some of these testimonies can present real challenges in terms of understanding the writing but also the semantics of some of the words. While familiarized with letters, writing, and reading, their authors had only a rudimentary knowledge of spelling and punctuation rules. To be able to discern the meanings of these writings today, one needs to first understand the complex circumstances that produced them.

KEYWORDS

Testimonies; verses; letters; soldiers; war; writing; orality; literacy; peasants; spelling; talent.

Over the past years, I had the chance to study numerous documents originating from the First World War—letters, diaries, postcards, photographs, diary entries from the front or captivity, reports of those who returned from captivity, or reports by military priests (see Florian 2017). Most of them are written in Romanian, but I also worked with notes by German, Austrian, French, or Hungarian soldiers. These testimonies piece back together fragments of the picture of an era, as well as of the life trajectories of some

of their authors who, one way or another, participated in the Great War. And by that, I mean not only the background of the war and huge mobilization that was required by the confrontation between the two camps but also the traditions, education, religiousness, convictions, thoughts, feelings, and emotions of people caught in the conflict. The past is best revealed by its involuntary testimonies: writings and productions of material culture according to Françoise Choay (1998: 43). This valuable cultural heritage consists of objects that



Postcard preserved in the *Letters from the First World War* Collection, National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch.

not only do not falsify their own reality, but they also provide new original information on everything that were left out of the historians' accounts.

Publishing a large portion of this rich and diverse documentary material in the book-album *Scrisori de pe front* [Letters from the Front Line] was an endeavor to salvage the memory of the Great War, to approach the materiality of the war and its least known facet. The volume is not a historian's view of the war, offering instead a cultural heritage perspective at the intersection of several fields of research: anthropology, ethnology, microhistory, cultural history, and more. To capture a picture as complete as possible of the era I focused on the diversity of testimonies from participants in the war, which I selected not for objectivity but, quite on the contrary, for the subjectivity that they contain, for the identity and personality of each author.

However, for the purposes of this paper, the attention switches to the testimonies written in verse, to capturing the shift from orality to literacy, and to the role the Great War played in and its influence on the process of writing letters in verse, with a special focus on Romanian rural communities.

In particular, the analysis of the notes of Romanian soldiers during the First World

War captures the very moment when the shift is made from a predominantly oral culture, typical of rural communities, to internalizing orality and to literacy. And this was made possible by the fact that the overwhelming majority of combatants, whether they came from the Kingdom of Romania, Transylvania, Banat, Maramureș, or Bucovina—the last four regions being part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time—were uneducated ordinary peasants caught up in the maelstrom of history. Under the immense pressure of the four years of the war, which changed profoundly the course of the life of each soldier, the transition was made from the several-thousand-year-old practice of communicating orally to that of communicating in writing. Since the only way to keep in touch with their families was through letters, the peasant soldiers resorted to writing before they even had had a chance to learn it properly, spelling rules included. Nonetheless, as some of the authors of the letters, postcards, and diaries admitted, writing also became a means to express their surprise and horror, to leave a trace of the altogether exceptional events they were experiencing. Most likely the transition would have been achieved anyway but at a much later date, at the end of the literacy acquisition process ongoing at that time in rural communities—which was making very slow progress, particularly in the Kingdom of Romania—but wartime accelerated it.

Comparing, to the extent possible, the written testimonies of soldiers from the Kingdom of Romania with those of soldiers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the differences can be said to be marked. The peasant soldiers of the Kingdom wrote mostly notes, front diaries, letters, and postcards made up of direct statements, in the usual reporting style, with only the occasional rhyme, as illustrated by Dumitru Dădârlat's correspondence with his wife Maria (in Florian 2017: 42–3). Those fighting in the imperial army wrote mostly in verse and, moreover, often used words borrowed

from other languages, regional and archaic words that have a certain charm but make it rather difficult to understand the meaning of their notes. As far as common traits go, both made little use of punctuation and sometimes had slightly different spellings for the same word, resulting in multiple forms of the same word.

Among the testimonies of peasant soldiers caught up in the maelstrom of the Great War, which were rather diverse in content and writing style, the novelty, and also the most difficult to decipher and surprisingly numerous, were those written in verse. Some of these writings consisted of entire notebooks that soldiers usually kept in the breast pockets of their coats. These written records are based in oral culture, sometimes taking the form of phonetically transcribed notes, only vaguely complying with the writing rules that we know and use today. Some of the testimonies present a real challenge in terms of deciphering their message. Although they knew how to write, the authors did it rather phonetically—they knew the letters and wrote down the sounds as heard from autodictation, since they were not yet familiar with the alphabetic writing which we have internalized in the meantime. That explains why there are sometimes no spaces between words, or several spellings of the same word occur. Other times the texts include words from foreign languages or the military world, words specifically made up to name things or experiences from that war, only to be later abandoned or forgotten, or words with added syllables to improve recitation of verses. Such examples are: *țug* meaning train; *roham*, attack; *kozaci*, Kosacks; *retipiș*, receipt; *asentare*, conscription; *cătănie*, military service; *răguț*, young recruit, rookie; *rezbel*, war; *vălaș*, letter; *eșu*, first day in the month; *dohan*, tobacco; *papire*, paper; *urlab*, medical leave, pass; *supăr*, wound; *ștemper*, stamp; etc.

The hybridity visible here, where literacy and orality coexist (in the sense that literacy is based in orality), deserves our full

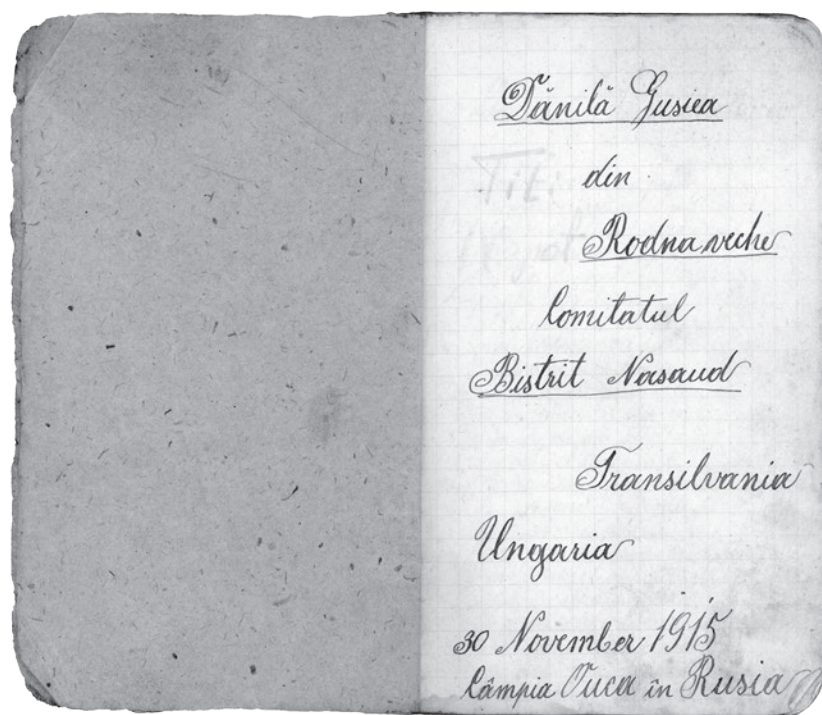
attention because it is an *in situ* example of internalized orality and an entire world shaped by it, as well as of accommodation of spoken expressions in writing. It therefore makes apparent the strong link between the older oral practice and the newer skill and practice of writing among Romanian peasants, both on the front and in villages, throughout the First World War.

It is that type of mixed orality described by Paul Zumthor, where orality and literacy coexist but writing, as a more recently acquired skill and practice, influences oral expression only partially and superficially (2008: 189–90). Mixed orality is determined by the existence of literate culture regardless, however, of whether literacy dominates that culture or not.

For the purpose of this study, several testimonies written in verse during the Great War were deciphered, transcribed, and analyzed. From the hundreds of pages included in the research, I have selected four sources and four excerpts, respectively, which I claim illustrate the transition from orality to literacy. Each excerpt has an author, and each author has his personal story determined and interwoven with the 1914 war that swept the Romanian-speaking village world as it was undergoing a slow process of acquiring literacy, thus accelerating the transition from oral culture to literate culture.

Dănilă Gușă's Notebooks currently kept in the Ethnologic Archive of the Romanian Peasant Museum were discovered by researcher Petre Popovăț during ethnographic research he conducted in 2000 in Rodna, a village in Bistrița Năsăud County. Ilie Gușă had kept the four notebooks containing the notes of his grandfather, who had fought in the Austro-Hungarian army at the beginning of the First World War. Petre Popovăț transcribed the notes, wrote down his own observations, with the intention to study them more thoroughly.

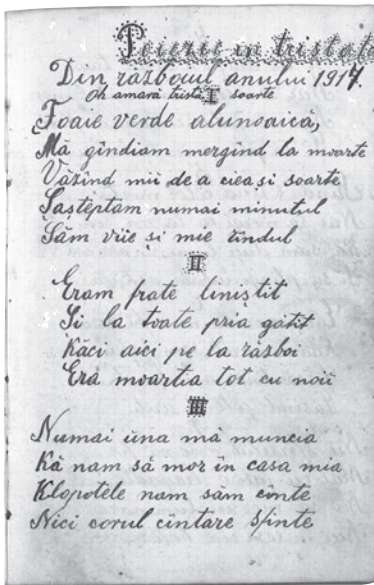




The first page of Dănilă Gușă's Notebook,
Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

From the notebooks, we learn that Dănilă Gușă was born in 1874 in Rodna Veche, Bistrița Năsăud County, Hungary (at that time). Starting with 1895, he did his military service in Bistrița most likely, during which he must have sworn allegiance to Emperor Franz Joseph. Then, in August 1914, when the war broke out, he was conscripted in the Austro-Hungarian army, along with many other men. The first troops were headed to Serbia, and during the next wave, Dănilă Gușă was included in a "battalion" sent to Bucovina to fight against the Russian Imperial Army. Wounded to one arm, he was treated and sent back to the front, and not before long, had to fight once again the Russian troops, somewhere in the Carpathians, in the Galicia region. In January 1915, out of the two hundred sixty-five men in his company, after nights and days spent in the first line, in the snow and frost, the only eight remaining soldiers were captured by the Russians. A long period of forced

exile and suffering began for Dănilă Gușă. He had to cross huge expanses of Russian territory to get to the region of Kalmykia where he did forced labor for various masters. Dănilă Gușă's notebooks include notes from captivity: scenes from the First World War, including how he was captured and made a prisoner, descriptions of his journeys and the places he saw, the religious calendar of 1915—most probably written from memory—a list of translated Russian words; one of the four notebooks is written entirely in verse. What distinguishes this author is that, under the strong impression that cultural differences, the otherness that he encountered everywhere in Kalmykia, made on him, he recorded descriptions of those settlements and communities, the physical appearance of the inhabitants, the buildings, occupations, social organization, children's education, men's and women's dress, language, religion, rituals, food, and so on.



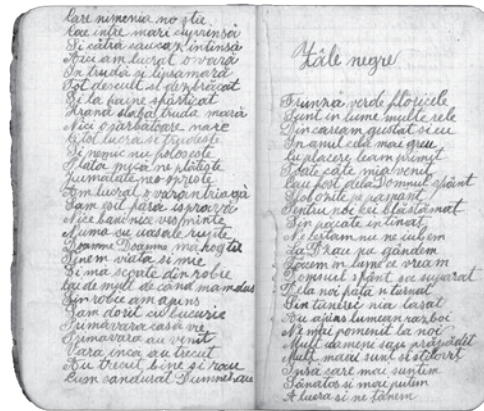
Page from Ioța Boldurian soldier's Notebook, preserved in Boldurian's family collection

The volume *Întristaria de Ioța Boldurian* [The sadness by Ioța Boldurian] was published in 2018 in Timișoara, edition supervised by Vasile Bogdan, with interviews, foreword and afterword by Vasile Bogdan, annotation and final text by Florin Gâldău, and further annotation

and graphic design by Grațian Gâldău. The work edited by Vasile Bogdan is organized around the rhyming notes from the front of Ioța Boldurian, a Romanian peasant born in 1883 in the village of Cerneteaz (Hungary at that time, Timiș County today) who was conscripted in the Austro-Hungarian army and sent to the front in Galicia,¹ in the summer of 1914, at the beginning of the war. The fighting was fierce in that region—which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and Ioța Boldurian was captured by the Russians in March 1915. He came back home in spring 1918. While he was a prisoner in Romna, what is now probably Ukraine, he kept a diary in verse, in which he described his itinerary, giving the exact dates, the battles he took part in, the events that left a mark on him, the horrors of the front line, and the deaths of his brothers in suffering; he put into verse his feelings and emotions, especially his homesickness—it had already been around three years since he had hugged and said goodbye to his wife and children; he wrote down poems that were circulating at that time in the village world, with both known or anonymous authors, but most likely orally transmitted.

Scieri țărănești, documente olografe în arhiva Institutului de Etnografie și Folclor „Constantin Brăiloiu” [Peasant notes, holographic records in the archive of Constantin Brăiloiu Institute of Ethnography and Folklore] (Jiga-Ilieșcu et al. 2005) is an anthology specifically compiled to serve for future research, offering a selection of notes by Romanian peasants covering a period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the Second World War that capture the process of literacy acquisition and the transition from a predominantly oral culture to the internalization of writing. From this anthology, I will mostly refer to the excerpt *Versuri din cătănie și depe câmpul de luptă 1915. Neculae V Clonțea. Viștea Superioară Comitatul Făgărașului* [Verses

from the military service and from the battlefield 1915. Neculae V Clonțea. Viștea Superioară Făgăraș County].

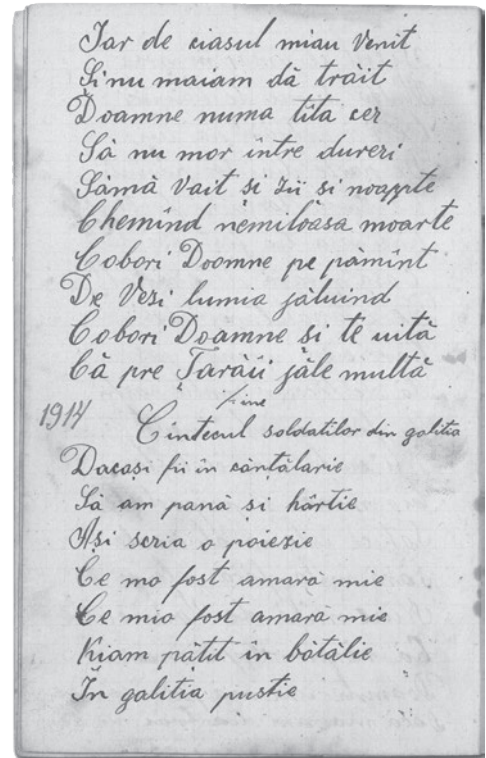


Page from Dănăilă Gușă's Notebook, Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Among the notes and recordings collected by ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu—during fieldwork research for monographs supervised by sociologist Dimitrie Gusti—and kept in the archive of the eponymous Institute of Ethnography and Folklore are several notebooks containing verses by soldiers. Brăiloiu studied these notes written by peasants and published an extensive study *Poeziile soldatului Tomuț din războiul 1914-1918* [Poems by soldier Tomuț from the 1914–1918 war] (1944). “The peasants around there call this kind of book *versș* (sometimes *viers*), a term—very old apparently—that they understand as: (1) a more or less literate poem meant to be sung; and (2) a handwritten notebook including mostly such poems” (Brăiloiu 1944: 7). Brăiloiu pointed out the documentary value of such testimonies:

... a multitude of everyday minutiae, events at home and elsewhere, which provide a living record of those times: conscription, announced by the *vornic* [crier] and gendarmes, ringing the church bells, and sounding the shepherd’s horns; famine on the firing line, where soldiers had to eat horse meat; behind the frontline, the requisitioning of cattle, rationalization of bread, buried treasures, inflation (money “of steel, paper, and iron,” not “shiny and desirable” like the Austrian money), the “pagans” who

Scrisorile lui Szfară Augustin către ai lui [The letters of Szfară Augustin to his family] are kept at the National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch, *Scrisori din Primul Război Mondial* (First World War letters) Collection. Cluj-Napoca was one of the centers of Austro-Hungarian military censorship; letters written by all nationalities fighting under the imperial flag that never reached their recipients were collected here. *Societatea Muzeului Ardelean* (Society of the Transylvanian Museum) collected these letters; they later entered the collections



Page from Iota Boldurian soldier’s Notebook, preserved in Boldurian’s family collection.

speculated and sold bread “dearly” to orphan girls and widows, the wives sleeping with the Russians (the Moskals had their ways with them), the villages where only girls, old women, and children were left, or the burnt villages—all of these constitute undoubtedly small pieces of history (Brăiloiu 1944: 20).

of the Library of the Academy, Cluj-Napoca branch; and, in 1974, finally reached the storage of the State Archives in Cluj-Napoca. Among them were the letters of Szfară Augustin to his family—his mother, brother, sister, aunt, and nephews and nieces. From November 1914 to March 1916, for almost one and a half years, Augustin sent over thirty-three letters, some of which written in verse, from the places that he visited with his regiment—from Cluj, Pardubice, Prague, Budweis, etc. He wrote a lot to his family, as much as two letters a day; most of the times

he described his emotional state and his health, which went from bad to worse after he was wounded, asking his family to send him a package or money, but most of all to

answer his letters, as he was convinced that he would feel better every time he received a letter from home.



Letter from Sfară Augustin to his family, preserved in the *Letters from the First World War* Collection, National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch.

These four sources, each consisting of dozens of pages of notes in verse, are to a great extent representative for the communities of Romanian peasants in Transylvania, Banat, Maramureș, and Bucovina during the Great War. They are illustrative of a letter-writing style rather widespread at the time. They show us a new face of ourselves, as in a mirror, but the time elapsed since they were written creates an effect of distancing, inaccessibility. At a first reading, these texts can be difficult to decipher. To understand

them, to make them once more accessible, one must explain the “ingredients” and the conditions of their making: the existence of a shared, preponderantly oral fund of peasant culture; the superficial internalizing of writing typical of the beginning of literacy acquisition in rural communities; the particularly extraordinary pressure and the impact of living through the war; and last but not least, each author’s personal talent in using the shared repertoire of oral culture and his improvising skills.

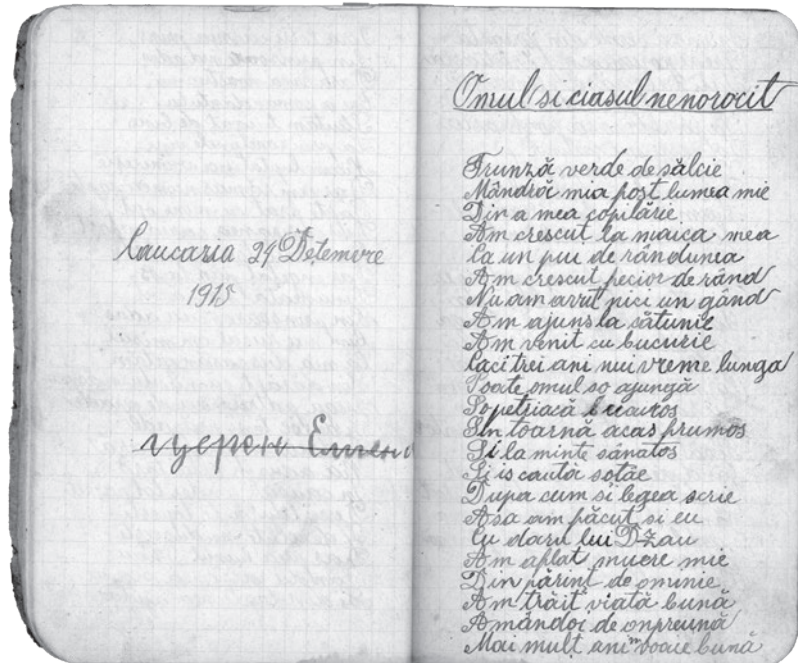


Verse Writing and the Shared Fund of Peasant Culture

A great proportion of the notes that remain from Romanian soldiers in Transylvania, Banat, Maramureş, and Bucovina who took part in the First World War are written in verse, in contrast with the records remaining from the soldiers in the Kingdom of Romania. They too wrote letters in verse but to a much smaller extent. Writing in verse naturally followed the collective, ritual practice of communication, i.e., oral communication. Stored in the collective memory was a shared fund of semi-standardized formulations and

structures, rhyming storytelling techniques tailored to different recurring events and occasions, even fragments of poems or whole works by known or anonymous authors that were circulating at the time. This relatively vast folklore repertoire served particularly those who had the necessary skills to mix and improvise in order to create their own versified formulations. And every time, these creations had a recipient, or at least that was what the author had intended.

For illustration, I provide an excerpt from Dănilă Guşă's notebook with verses, as transcribed by Petre Popovăţ, held in the Romanian Peasant Museum Archives:



Page from Dănilă Guşă's Notebook, Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

Caucasus, December 24, 1915

Man and the Cursed Hour

Green willow leaf/ How I loved the world/ Since I was little/ I was my mother's child/ Like a chick to a swallow/ I was raised a simple lad/ Not a care in the world/ And when I first did my service/ I went willingly/ For three years is not long/ You

Caucas, 24 Decembrie, 1915

Omul și ciasul nenorocit

Frunză verde de sălcie/ Mândră mi-a fost lumea mie/ Din a mea copilărie/ Am crescut la maica mea/ Ca un pui de rândunea/ Am crescut fecior de rând/ Nu am avut nici un gând/ Am ajuns la cătunie - / Am venit cu bucurie/ Căci trei ani nu-i vreme lungă/

can see the end of it/ And even find some joy in it/ And then you go home merrily/ With a good mind/ Look for a wife/ As is written in the Law / And so I did/ With God's help/ I found me a wife/ From decent folk/ We had a good life/ Together we lived/ Quite a few happy years/ Green leaf in the window/ Hard is the emperor's order/ And it has to be fulfilled/ And the emperor's harsh order said/ That all who'd done their service/ Had to go fight in the war/ So I set off from my dear village/ ... Since I left my home/ Not one good man have I met/ Many woes came upon me/ Only sorrow and regret/ The longer my soldiering/ The more miserable and sad/ Many hardships have I had/ I looked round/ And saw the whole world/ Down to the west/ From where I'd come/ And then I felt so lonely/ So much sorrow and homesickness/ For my dearest wife/ And my dearest children/ ... Now the Russians took me/ And brought me to the sea/ Since the Russians got me/ My heart gone and dried up/ For being captive in Russia/ Crushes your very soul/ It makes you come undone/ And leaves you bone dry/ ... Green apple leaf/ What's a man's life worth/ Now it's blooming/ And next is no more, all withered/ For in this here life/ Many woes I've come to know/ But there's no greater ill/ Than the horror of the war/ This is the worst of all/ As given by God/ I set off to battle/ With the best of brothers/ And we got to the Carpathians/ In the forest made of firs/ Where death lurches all around/ Many good lives/ I had to watch go out/ For there was nothing I could do/ Just sit by myself and watch/ Had I made one move/ The bullet would've quickly mown me/ ... One day 'bout evening/ The fire started again/ We worked hard all night/ Spent all our bullets/ All were killed/ Except for eight of us/ Not much to look at/ And when the morning came/ We saw the Russians before us/ They surrounded and grabbed us/ To make us prisoners/ Took away our arms at once/ And showed us a house/ So I headed there/ Like the

Poate omul s-o ajungă / S-o petriacă bucuros / Și-ntoarnă acas' frumos / Și la minte sănătos/ Și îș' caută soțâe/ După cum și legea scrie/ Așa am făcut și eu/ Cu daru' lui D-zău/ Am aflat muere mie/ Din părint' de ominie/ Am trăit viață bună/ Amândoi de-ompreună/ Mai mult' ani [în] voaie bună/ Frunză verde din feriasță/ Grea-i porunca-mpărătiască/ Lute trebe să să 'plinească/ Au venit poruncă aspră/ La război ca să porniască/ Toț' care au cătunit/ Și eu încă am pornit/ Din satul meu cel iubit/ [...]/.De când de-acas-am plecat/ De om bun eu n-am mai dat/ Multe rele m-a' mâncat/ Și tot jele și bănat/ Cu cât drumul mi-am lungit/ Tot mai jelnic și urât/ Și mult greu am împlinit/ Ocii mi-am făcut roată/ M-am uitat în lumea toată/ Și în jos, cătă 'sfințât/ Din cătră eu am venit/ M-au ajuns mare urât/ M-au ajuns un dor și jele/ După scumpa mea muere/ După pruncii mei cei dragi/ [...] / Ieu acuma-s prins la rus/ Lângă mare am ajuns/ De când rusul m-a luat/ Sufletul mi s-a uscat/ Că robia din Rusia/ Îți zdrobește inima/ Te face din om neom/ Și te uscă ca pe-un pom/ [...] / Frunză verde-a mărului/ Ce-i viața omului/ Astăz' este și-nflorește/ Mâne nu-i să veștezește/ Cât în lume am trăit/ Multe reale-am pătimit/ Însă, rău mai mare nu-i/ Ca groaza războiului/ Iel e cel mai mare rău/ Lăsat de la Dumnezeu/ Am pornit la bătălie/ Cu uameni de ominie/ Ș-am ajuns între Carpați/ În pădurea cea de brazi/ Pe tot locul te aștiaptă/ Moartea, ca să te răpiască/ Multe vieț' frumușele/ S-au stâns privind sânгур la ele/ N-am putut să le ajut/ Sânгур numa' să mă uit/ De mișcam minten îndată/ Glonțul minten mă săgeată/ [...] / Într-o zi, cam de cu sară/ S-a început focu' iară/ Noaptea-ntriagă ne-am trudit/ Gloanțele le-am isprăvit/ Toț' dintre noi au murit/ Numa' opt am fost rămas/ Și noi trudiț' de năcaz/ Când au fost de demineață/ Am văzut pe rus în față/ Ne-ncunjoară, ne apucă/ Prisoneri ca să ne ducă/ Ni-a luat armele-ndată/ Și o casă ne arată/ Pe urmă, am și pornit/ Ca omul cel



miserable man I was/ I saw things/ To make the devil scared/ The Russians jumped in front of us/ They danced and wanted to sing to us/ Then we went inside the house/ They put us at the table/ Gave us bread, gave us tea/ To warm us 'cause we were frozen/ And gathered more than a hundred of us/ And led us away/ We followed the downhill road/ Tears rolling down our cheeks/ We went slowly, silent/ Just like dumb men/ Our heads bowed/ Our eyes drowning in tears/ With our hands we held our clothes/ For there was a terrible wind/ And when we passed through towns/ People on seeing us/ Asked where we were headed/ To Siberia, we said/ When they heard so/ God, how they pitied us/ They gave us money and food/ And clothes to those unclothed/ The ladies, how they cried/ And cursed the Russians/ Bad and cruel people/ You took us by force/ Our soldiers you catch/ You send them to Siberia/ To work them to death/ And starve them to death/ Money, watches, all we had/ They snatched them right away/ We couldn't fight them/ And had no one to tell it to/ They marched us out of the country/ And we entered bitter Russia/ We finally reached the train/ Which was to take us farther/ We had neither money, nor food/ The cold was so bitter/ One month we were in the train/ Eaten alive by lice/ When the train stopped in the station/ They took down dozens of dead men/ And hid them all at once/ So no one can know/ How terrible they made our journey/ And make it heard back home/ Finally the train arrived/ In a nice, famous town/ Samara they call it/ We got to it in the evening/ Gnawed by bitter hunger/ Then a wire came/ To go back to Kazan/ The Hungarians went on/ We Romanians went back/ They waited for us in Kazan/ With little food/ And then took us/ Frozen to the bone/ Two weeks' marching/ We all had frozen hands/ And faces, and noses/ But hunger was hardest to fight/ Many lads died on the way/ And then we reached lalaboga [Yelabuga]/ Dănilă Gușă.²

năcăjit/ Am văzut lucruri de care/ Și dracul încă să spare/ Ne săreau ruși-nainte/ Ne juca și vrea să cânte/ Am intrat pe urmă-n casă/ Și ne-a băgat după masă/ Ni-a dat pită, ni-a dat ciai/ Să ne-ncălzăm, că-ngețai/ Și au strâns mai mult de-o sută/ Și ne-a luat să ne ducă/ Am luat pe drum la vale/ Lacrămile curgea vale/ Ni-am luat încet, tăcuț/ Tocmai ca și nește muț/ Cu capu-n pământ plecat/ Ochii-n lacrimi înecaț/ Mânile ținem veșmântul/ Căci grozav mai sufla vântul/ Prin orașă când treceam/ Oamenii, cât ne vedeau/ Ne-ntreba unde mergem/ La Siberia - răspundeam/ Îndată cât ce-auzeau/ Doamne, amar să mai căeau/ Ne da bani și de mâncare/ Și veșminte, care n-are/ Doamnele, cum mai plângeau/ Și pe ruș' îi ocăreau/ Uameni răi și fără milă/ V-aț' suit pe noi cu sâla/ Soldații, care-i prindeț'/ În Siberia-i trimeteț'/ Ca să piară de trudiț'/ Și de foame hamnisăț'/ Bani, ciasuri și ce-am avut/ Ni-a luat în un minut/ Nu ne-am putut 'potrivi/ Și la cine a pârî/ Și ni-a scos din țar-afară/ Am intrat în Rusia amară/ Am ajuns cu greu la tren/ Mai departe să mergem/ N-am avut bani, nici mâncare/ Frigul era foarte mare/ O lună pe tren am stat/ Și păducii ne-a mâncat/ Trenu-n gară cât stătea/ Zăci de mort' îi coborea/ Și-i ascundea iuti îndată/ Ca nime' să nu priceapă/ Cu ce groază ei ne poartă/ S-audă în țara noastră/Trenu-n urmă au sosât/ În oraș mândru viestit/ Samara este numit/ Am ajuns în el de sară/ Mâncaț' de foame amară/ Au venit un telegram/ Să-nturnăm cătă Cazan/ Ungurii s-au depărtat/ Noi, rumânii-am înturnat/ În Cazan ni-au așteptat/ Cu puțină demâncare/ Și pe urmă ni-a luat/ Aproape toț-înghețaț'/ Pre jos doauă săptămâni/ Toț' am îngețat la mâni/ Și la obraz și la nas/ Da' de foame, ce să faci/ Mulț' feciori s-au prăpădit/ Și pe drum au tot murit/ Până în lalaboga am sosât/ Dănilă Gușă.





Page from Dănilă Gușă's Notebook, Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

The last page of Dănilă Gușă's Notebook, Ethnological Archive of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant.

The State of Education and Level of Literacy

The available data tell us that the four soldiers were born at the end of the nineteenth century. Dănilă Gușă was born in 1874, in Bistrița, and Ioța Boldurian was born in 1883, in Timiș, and he graduated seven grades at a Hungarian-language public school. The younger ones were Neculae Clonțea from Făgăraș, who was conscripted later, and Șzfară Augustin from Sălaj. Each of them was only partially familiarized with writing and spelling and punctuation rules of the Romanian language—it is known that Romanian-language education, whether public or religious, in turn of the twentieth century Transylvania was in many regards lacking (Brusanowsky 2010: 294–310).

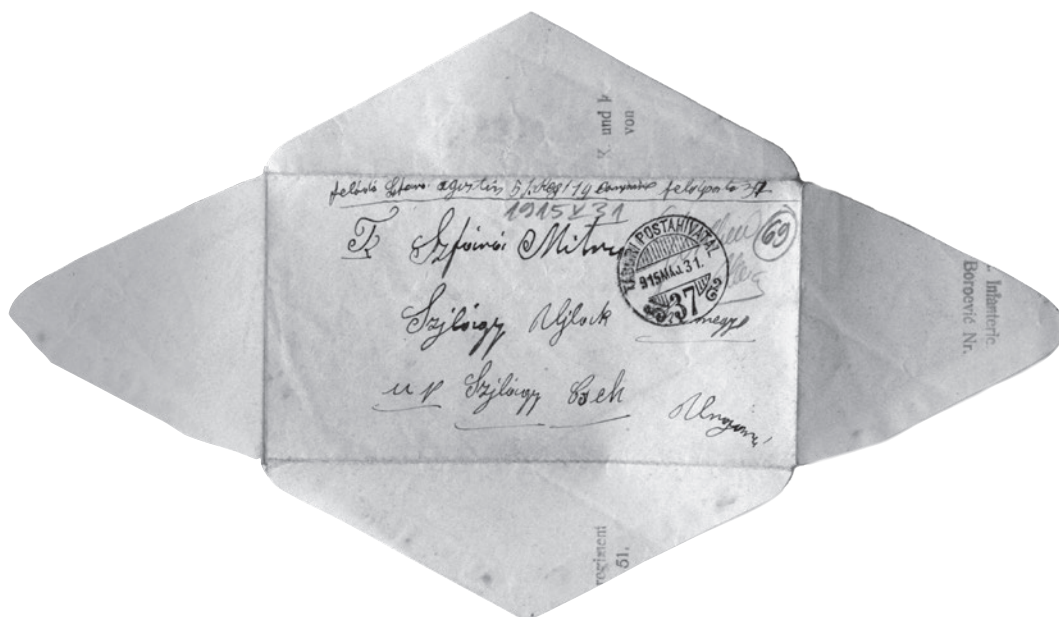
Under the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy (1867–1918), the educational policy in Transylvania was controlled by the government in Budapest. The School Law in force at the time provided compulsory primary education for children from six

to twelve, while breaching the rights to educational and cultural autonomy of non-Hungarian ethnic groups. It was particularly from 1880 to 1910, the period when the four soldier authors could have at least in theory attended primary school, that Romanian-language education in Transylvania came under great pressure. The Hungarian government had just launched and started implementing a policy to assimilate the other nationalities, for the purpose of creating a unified Hungarian nation-state. The first step under the nationalist policy, also known as Hungarianization, was adopting the School Law of 1879 that introduced Hungarian as a compulsory subject of study in primary schools, including the schools of other ethnic groups, and stipulated the decrease in the number of hours taught in the mother tongue. This law also aimed to develop secular education to the detriment of religious education, which accounted for 90 percent of primary schools existing at that time. One of the effects of the law was a decrease in the number of Romanian schools from 1880 to 1900.

Romanian schools, most of them administered by parishes, so religious schools, were also facing several other challenges at that time. They were experiencing various degrees of shortages and poverty; for instance, there were not enough buildings for schools, the existing ones were too crowded or inadequate, the teachers were poorly paid and sometimes undertrained, and the teaching material

(textbooks, blackboards, maps, globes, etc.) was lacking.

This policy to assimilate the other ethnic groups and forcefully impose the Hungarian language also applied to first and last names, which were Hungarianized. This explains why letters and postcards written in Romanian, in the holdings of the National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch, have senders and recipients with Hungarian names.



The envelope of the letter sent by Sfară Augustin to his family, preserved in the *Letters from the First World War* Collection, National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch.

From Neculae V. Clonțea's notebook, we learn that, on the front, illiterate soldiers had

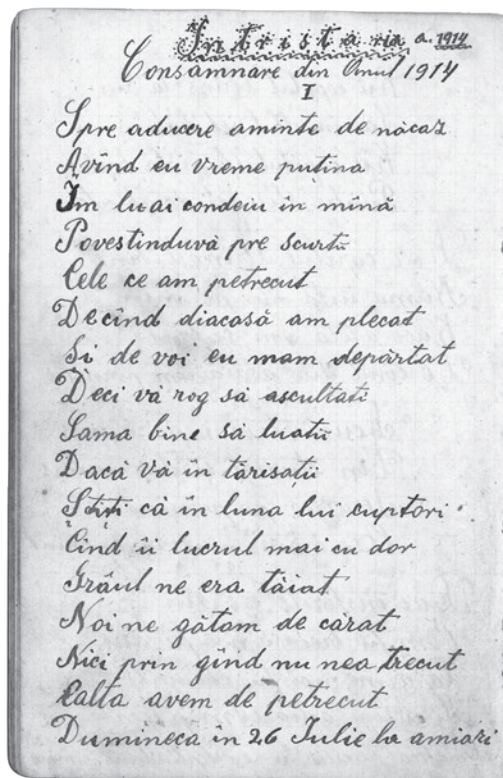
to ask literate ones to write or read letters for them:

It's bad enough/ When you don't read and write/ For if you want to write a letter/ You must depend on others/ But how hard it is/ To ask all the time/ When you want to write a letter/ To send it in the post/ Let your family know/ How you've been/ But it never gets easy/ To ask a stranger/ As it often happens/ That your asking has no answer/ Especially on the train/ I saw many people asking/ This or another man/

Apoi mai rău e de cine/ Nu știe ceti și scrie/ Că când vrea să scrie carte/ De alți trebuie se se roge/ Dar cât îți vine de greu/ A te ruga tot mereu/ Când vrei ca se scrii o carte/ Pe poștă a o trimete/ Ca se știe și ai tei/ Tu în ce stare mai stai/ Dară tot cu greu îți vineri/ Se te rogi de nu știu cine/ Se'ntâmplă de multe ori/ Zadarnice-atale rugări/ Eu mai cu seamă pe trin/ Am văzut pe mulți rugând/ Pe unul și pe altul/ Ca se'i

To write them a few lines/ To write down their thoughts/ In three, four or five lines/ But only few are willing to do it/ So I tell you honestly/ I thank God/ And my good parents/ That they took care of me/ And put me in school/ Where I learnt to read and write/ I had no idea before/ How much this was worth/ To write and read/ And to know arithmetic/ If you don't know how to read/ And you receive a letter/ You have to give it to someone else/ To tell you what it says/ And so it often happens/ That he who reads it to you/ Tells you this or that/ Not what the letter says/ And this causes you much trouble/ And does you much wrong/ So you come to appreciate/ Those who write and read/ So my advice for you, brothers/ Is to command your children/ To work hard in school/ To not miss one day/ To learn to read and write/ So they can have a happy life/ June 27, 1915 (Jiga-Iliescu et al. 2005: 67-9).

scrie puținel/ Se'i scrie ale lui gânduri/ În trei patru sau cinci rânduri/ Dară puțini se găsec/ De cari voea 'i-o'mplinesc/ Acum vă spun drept că eu/ Mulțamesc lui Dumnezeu/ Și la ai mei buni părinți/ Că de mine a grijit/ La școală de am umblat/ Ceti scrie-am învățat/ Până acum n'am știut/ Cât prețuiește de mult/ A scrie și a ceti/ Și bine a socoti/ Cine nu știe ceti/ O carte de va primi/ Trebuie la alt s'o dea/ Să vadă ce'i scris în ea/ De multe ori nimerește/ Că acel ce 'i o cetește/ Îi spune una și alta/ Nu'i spune ce zice cartea/ Și așa îl năcăjește/ Mult reu îi pricinuieste/ Atunci ști a prețui/ Cei a scrie și-a ceti/ Pentru-aceea fraților/ Porunciți copiilor/ La școlă a se sili/ O zi ei a nu lipsi/ Se'nvețe-a ceti și scrie/ Ca se aivă bucurie/ 27 Iunie 1915" (Jiga-Iliescu et al. 2005: 67-9).



Page from Iota Boldurian soldier's Notebook, preserved in Boldurian's family collection.



The War Lived as an Extreme Situation

The Great War certainly had a deep, overwhelming impact on every private, sergeant, or officer, and on the world as a whole. “If it weren’t for the First World War, many later developments would have not happened. The world would be a different place today” (Boia 2014: 28). The conscripts in particular, who made up the bulk of the armies, were peasants taken out of their settled lives, many of them, as they wrote in their verses, had completed their military service (Ro. *cătănie*) but only had a vague idea of what the war could entail. They might have known something about it from the stories of their forefathers, or from folklore. Each of them tried to survive, had its unique personal experience of those dramatic years of the war. For many of them, writing was an important source of support during both dark times and brighter days.

In an important work on the effects of the First World War on the rural world, Eugenia Bîrlea found that:

The form of the First World War letters shows that, for the majority of the rural population, this was not a comfortable means of communication. The clumsiness is visible not only in the inability to express their feelings in a nuanced way. The traditional village world was dominated by song. Overwhelming emotions, whether of joy or of pain, all human feelings were *codified*. Performing folklore genres appropriate for each emotional state had a *cathartic* purpose. In singing *cântec de jale* [song of sorrow], they achieved a state of peace and quiet waiting. Folk creation channels personal experience into pre-existing patterns that allow for personal expression, as each performance becomes a new version. The constraining role of the pattern unifies one’s personal emotional experience with everybody else’s. When offered the opportunity to communicate their

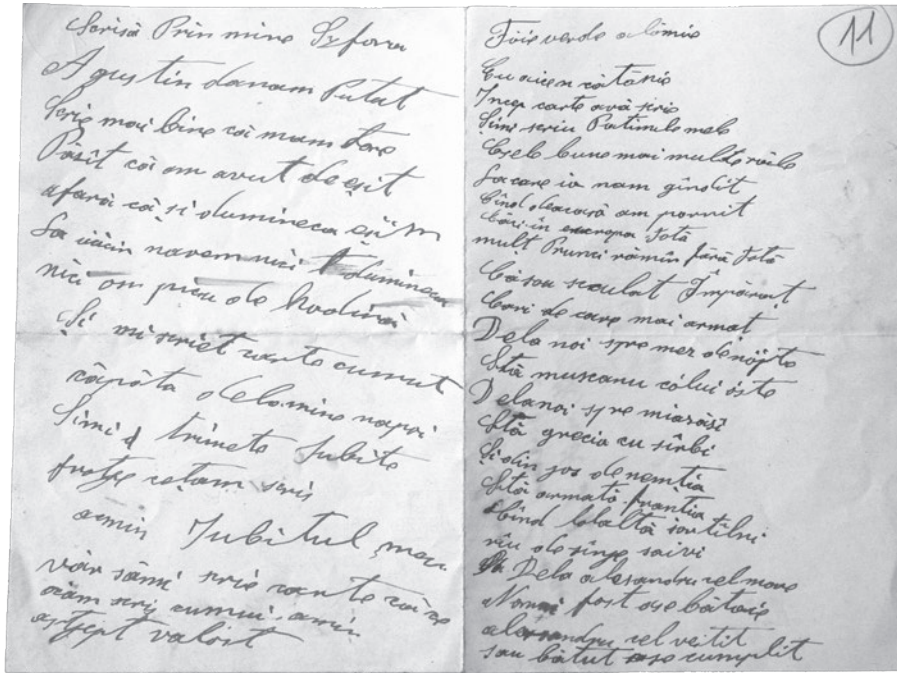
feelings in writing, they faced the challenge resorting to the verses of folk songs, which helped them express their feelings, the ineffable nuances of human emotions (2004: 253).

Studying the notebooks of Romanian-speaking Transylvanian combatants, one notices that they start off on a more optimistic note but, as one follows the manuscript to the end, the authors’ state of mind turns increasingly darker, more pessimistic, and redemption is often to be found in religious faith, in the state of prayer. Each of the four authors introduces himself briefly at the start of the notebook, on the first page, recounting the moment the drums sounded the conscription in their village and they left for the front, the sad goodbye to their families. Other common theme to the verses in the soldiers’ notebooks are: the fierceness of battles they engage in; nostalgia for their peaceful lives at home; longing for their wives, children, mothers, and other family members; almost constant hunger; lack of sleep; loud sound of bombs, shells, and machine guns; feeling isolated; death of some of their brothers in arms; fear, nearness and inevitability of death; faith in God and prayers.

Reading Dumitru Caracostea’s work (2015), which draws on a large number of direct accounts by participants, officers and soldiers, in the First World War, especially originally from the Kingdom of Romania, but members of the imperial army too, the prevalence of the themes listed above is confirmed. The more prominent psychological aspects of participating in the war that Caracostea analyses overlap with the main themes of the soldiers’ poems: the soul and its states; fear and what amplifies it into panic; strong visual and especially audio sensations; self-preservation instinct or hunger to be alive; ownership and family instincts; fame acquired by some of the battles in the war; isolation; and, finally, trust in God.

I have selected a letter written in verse by Szfară Augustin (held in the *Letters from the First World War* Collection, National

Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch) to illustrate the state of misery caused by participation in the war:



Letter in verses from Szfară Augustin to his family, preserved in the *Letters from the First World War* Collection, National Archives of Romania, Cluj Branch.

October 29, 1914

Brass green leaf/ From the army/ I start to write you a letter/ I write about my woes/ More bad than good/ Things I couldn't imagine/ When I left home/ For across Europe/ Many children are left fatherless/ Because emperors have gone to war/ One better armed than the other/ North of home/ There's the Moskal army/ South of home/ There's Greece and the Serbs/ And south of Germany/ There's France and its army/ And when they meet/ A river of blood'll flow/ Since Alexander the Great/ There's been no such fighting/ The famous Alexander/ Who fought so fiercely/ Back in the Old Testament times/ And it had no match until/ This cruel and fierce war/ Which has taken hold of Europe/ We're not very afraid/ Because Germany is a great power/ Along with Austria-Hungary/ They'll fight together/ We'll fight with our

29 Octombrie 1914

Foie verde alămie/ Eu aice n cătănie/ Încep carte avă scrie/ Îmi scriu Patimile mele/ Cele bune mai multe râle/ La care io nam gândit/ Când deacasă am pornit/ Căci în europa totă/ mulț Prunci rămîn fără tată/ Că sau sculat Împâraț/ Cari de care mai armaț/ De la noi spre mez de nopte/ Sta muscanu călui oste/ De la noi spre miazăzî/ Stă grecia cu sîrbi/ Și din jos de nemția/ Stă armată franția/ Când lolaltă sontîlni/ rîu de sînge sa ivi/ De la Alesandru cel mare/ No mai fost așe bătaie/ Alexandru cel vestit/ Sau bătut așe cumplit/ Aceio fost în lege vecie / Și niau găsit așe Părecie/ Rezel crîncen fioros/ Pe europa sau întors/ Nu ne temem așe tare/ Că nemțiai Putere mare/ Cu austra ungaria/ Tot odată sor lupta/ Niom lupta cu pept cu brață/ Pe rusia cea măriață/ Dar muscari din mez de nòpte

chests, our arms/ Against the great Russia/
 But the Moskals keep on coming/ From the
 north with a big army/ And there'll be a
 mighty battle/ One fiercer than the other/
 And the lads in the first line/ Will all go down/
 One thousand, two thousands/ No matter
 how new their rifles/ One thousand, three
 thousands/ Always from the first line/ And
 the reserve at the back/ Keeps on fighting as
 they fall/ And so many lads will die by fire/
 Like the buffaloes in the mud puddle/ Like
 the wood in the forest/ Cut down by the axe/
 Oh, the heaven is crying still/ To see so much
 blood/ The moon and the sun/ The morning
 star and other stars/ They all cry/ The poor
 people too/ Because they took away their
 children/ To be captured by the enemies/
 By the Serbians and the Moskals/ Their poor
 bodies/ Run over by canons/ Miserable life/
 Cut up with the sword/ For when the sword's
 thin/ I see it and I feel ill/ For when the
 sword's rusty/ I feel my heart full of loathin'/
 And the pagan sword/ Chops off Romanian
 heads/ This is my letter, mother/ Which I've
 written from my homesick heart/ He who
 wants to believe/ Should read and see for
 himself/ He who doesn't want to believe/
 Lord, take him to see/ To see like I saw/ How
 I live in foreign countries.

/ vin Potop Potop cu òste/ Şor da luptă
 crîncenòsă/ Cari de cari mai fiòròsă/ Iarî
 în fruntia linii/ Vor pica toţ feciori/ Pică
 omie pică două/ Tot degep puşca ce nouă/
 Picăo mie pică tri/ Tot din frunte leniei/ Ior
 rãzãrva dela spate/ întãreşte mai departe/
 Şor sta morţ fecior n foc/ Ca şi bivoli n
 bãltoc/ Cum stau lemnile n Pãdure/ Ces
 tăiete de săcure/ Oh şi ceriul încã Plãnge/
 unde vede atãta sînge/ Plãnge luna sòrele/
 Luciaferi stelele/ Iar Poporul econom/ Cã
 nes duşi copii lor/ Des de pradã la duşmani/
 Şi la sîrbi şi la muscari/ Nãcãjite trupurile/
 Cãlcate cu tunurile/ Amãritã viaţã/ Tãietã
 cu sabia/ Cã sabiai subţiricã/ Undeo vãd
 inimami picã/ Şi sabiai ruginosã/ La inima
 mei greţòsã/ Şi sabiai de pãgîn/ Taie capuri
 de rumîn/ Astai maicã cãrtice/ Scrisã cu
 dor din inima me/ Cui place vre sã criadã/
 Sã cetiascã şi sã vadã/ Dar cine nu vre
 sã criadã/ Dul Domne pre el sã vadã/ Sã
 vadã şi el ca mine/ Cum trãiesc în țãri
 strãine.



To conclude here, it is worth noting that the majority of those who came back from the front bearing these notebooks full of verse, having survived the war, did not continue to write in their home villages. In the trenches, on the battle fields, during marches, in war hospitals or as prisoners, their journaling had been a means to communicate with their close ones and ultimately survive.



Improvisation and Personal Talent

Personal talent in using oral structures, creating new combinations and improvising is what distinguishes the authors. Each had his unique way of using the fund of oral expressions and his innate gift, the result being the originality of his verses.

Ioţa Boldurian came back to his home in Banat region with a notebook full of verses, which his family kept, and in which he described his itinerary and experience of the war. Standing out among the verses is an excerpt that covers several pages of his notebook, which he called *Întristaria* [The sadness].

Notes from 1914

Not to forget my troubles/ Since I had a little time/ I picked up the pen/ To tell you the brief story/ Of the things I went through/ Since I left home/ And went away from you/ So please listen to me/ Pay attention/ If it interests you/ It was in July/ When work is at its height/ We'd cut down the wheat/ Just about finished carrying it/ No idea did we have/ That we had something else to do/ Sunday July 26 at noon/ ... Then tomorrow around evening/ We left for the station again/ After we all got on board/ Danger fell upon us/ Two trains crashed/ A few lads got hurt/ Then we started around evening/ Traveled until dawn/ When we arrived in Lemberg/ We slept in the train station/ When the sun came up/ We set off on foot/ Through the streets of the capital/ The capital of Galicia/ The sun was high in the sky/ It poured down heat/ We had such a hard time walking/ The road was full of dust/ From automobiles and carts/ The roads were also full/ Of infantry/ Honvéd³ soldiers/ Gunners and Hussars/ Dragoons and Ulahns/ Bosniaks and Landsturm⁴/ Jagers⁵ and so many others/ With bright swords/ Glinting in the glorious sun/ ... Monday August 31, 1914 after Mary's Assumption/ In the fire at Kulikow/ I will start here/ Telling you about the fighting/ As we reached it in the morning/ Our faces went dark/ For the road was full/ Of carts with wounded men/ Some of them badly maimed/ Others with wounds on arms/ Legs and so on/ From the enemy fire/ For on Sunday a battle had been fought/ For three hours in the evening/ Many soldiers were killed in it/ For the wretched Russians/ Had made holes in the ground/ And strong redoubts/ And no one could get them out/ ... Lemon green leaf/ October 1/ 'Twas before daybreak/ When the Russians started/ Sending fire upon us/ At first light/ They had brought terrible death/ Blood flowing in the ground/ All red blood/ From wholesome lads/ When they fired their rifles/ The bullets came like flies/ And

Consămnare din Anul 1914

Spre aducere aminte de năcaz/ Avînd eu vreme puțina/ Îm luai condeiu în mână/ Povestinduva pre scurtu'/ Cele ce am petrecut/ De cînd diacasă am plecat/ Și de voi eu mam depărtat/ Deci vă rog să ascultați/ Sama bine să luații/ Dacă vă în tărăsați/ Știți că în luna lui cuptori/ Cînd îi lucrul mai cu dor/ Grîul ne era tăiat/ Noi ne gătam de cărat/ Nici prin gînd nu nea trecut / Calta avem de petrecuta trecut/ Dumineca în 26 Iulie la amiazi/ [...] / Apoi mîne zii spre siară/ Plecarăm spre stațiune iară/ După ce niam în cărcat/ O primejde soîn tîmplat/ Doaua Trenuri sor ciocnit/ Chtiva ficiori sor rănit/ Apoi plecarăm spre sară/ Pînă în spre ziuă iară/ La Lemberg noi am sosit/ În stație am dormit/ Iar cînd soarele au răsărit/ Noi pre picioare am pornit/ Prin stradă prin căpitala/ A Galiției Căpitală/ Soarele să rădica/ Multă căldură vărsa/ Avurăm greu a umbla/ Drumul numai prav iera/ De cocii motomobile/ Drumurile ierau pline/ Apoi și de pedestrime/ Honvezime Infanterie/ De tunari și de husari/ De dragonări și olanii/ Bosneci și Landă șitii/ Iegări și mulți alți chîtii/ Cu armele lucitoare/ Strălucind la mîndrul soare/ [...] / Luni în 31 August 1914 după Sîntămăria mare întii în foc / La Culicov/ Acuma voiesc să în cepp/ Din luptă să povestesc/ Ajungînd aici Diminiața/ Niso întunecat fața/ Căci drumul iera plinuțu/ De cocii de cei răniți/ Unii erau răi chilaviți/ Alții la mîinii ierau răniți/ Prin picioare șin alt loc/ De a dușmanului foc/ Căci Duminecă so datu'/ O luptă spre în sărat 3 oare/ În care mulți or picatū/ Căci rusul cel blăstămat/ În pămînt sau îngropat/ Făcînduși rădute bune/ Casă nul mai scoată nime/ [...] / Foaie verde de lămîie/ Ochtomvre ziua întîie/ Nici de zii nu so crepat/ Pîn rusul so apucat / Să trimiată foc spre noi/ De la revărsat de zori/ Grozavă moarte făcusă/ Mult sînge pe jos că cursă/ Numai sînge de cel roșu/ Din Feciorii de cei frumosu/ Cînd pușca cu puștele/ Viniau plumbi ca muștele/ Iar cînd da cu tunurile/ Să spargă festungurile/ Picau granate înșirate/ Ca cu



when they fired their cannons/ To shatter
the festungs [strongholds]/ The grenades
fell one after another/ Like seeds scattered
by hand/ The lads fell down/ And never got
up/ Their graves were dug/ By the cursed
grenades/ ... God please don't leave me/ If
I still have days to live/ And if my time's
come/ And my days are up/ God all I ask/
Is not to die in pain/ To wail night and
day/ Calling for ruthless death/ God please
come down to earth/ To see the people cry/
God please come down and look/ How the
country is ridden with suffering/ fine [the
end] (Boldurian 2018: 48-97)

mîna răsfire/ Ficiori picau cămară/ Și nici
nu să mai sculară/ Lor mormîntul lio săpat/
Blăstămatul se granat/ [...]/ Doamne nu mă
părăsi/ Dacă mai am dia trăi/ Iar de ciasul
miau venit/ Și nu mai am de trăit/ Doamne
numa tîta cer/ Să nu mor între dureri/ Să ma
vait și zii și noapte/ Chemînd nemiloasa
moarte/ Cobori Doamne pe pămînt/ De vezi
lumia jăluind/ Cobori Doamne și te uită/ Că
pre Țarăii jăle multă/ fine" (Boldurian, 2018:
48-97).



For those who used this type of versification in their front notebooks, loss of expressivity and feeling due to the shift from orality to writing was certainly strongly felt. Indeed, the same word can take different intonations and inflexions in speaking, depending on the moment, the circumstances. Its uttering is always accompanied by an emotion, it is never the same, because there is something living at work there—the emotion in the moment of a conversation or account is decisive. Now, when written, a word is always same, it fails to capture the nuances and emphasizes of speech. Most likely the subjects of this study, the peasant soldiers of the First World War, also felt that, once set to paper, the words seemed to lose some of their power, and the sequences of words (or communication as a whole), some of their expressivity. This is what could explain why, in these notes, the same word can be written in several different ways. Ultimately, it was an attempt at salvaging the expressivity of language, at preserving the power of speech. The authors looked for means typical of writing to express what existed in speech. For example, they doubled some of the letters, or they used accented letters—*é, ò, ũ*.

• • • • •

Conclusions

The notes from the front and from captivity stand up, I believe, to the task of reclaiming and filling in missing pieces of the cultural history of a large group, namely the community of Transylvanian peasants that in 1914, at the outbreak of the war, was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in 1918, at the end of it, was part of a different state. Studying the notes produced by the very soldiers who constituted the bulk of the troops sent to the front, we can grasp some of their cultural world and their identity. Their testimonies take an epistolary form that was quite widespread at the time, with standardized introductions, developments, and conclusions, as well as a general verse structure.

The letters or journals are fragile, silent yet valuable vestiges that capture the very transition from oral culture to written culture. The texts of the letters are not only memory facts but equally “transcriptions of oral statements,” as described by Bazin and Bensa (1979: 8).

They show us today a new face of ourselves, as in a mirror, but the time

NOTES

1. Translator's Note: What is now southeastern Poland and western Ukraine.
2. Translator's Note: All the English translations of the excerpts of letters in verse in this article aim to convey the meaning of the soldiers' writings as faithfully as possible given the specific difficulties of the Romanian original. Nuances pertaining to versification, register, and style of writing were inevitably lost in translation.
3. Translator's Note: The Royal Hungarian *Honvéd* was the Hungarian counterpart of the Austrian *Landwehr*, one of the four armies of Austria-Hungary from 1867 to 1918, along with the Common Army and the Imperial and Royal Navy.
4. Translator's Note: *Landsturm* is a term used in German-speaking countries to designate a reserve army force mobilized in times of war.
5. Translator's Note: *Jäger* is a German military term referring to specific light infantry units typically used in the early modern era.

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