

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Romanian Americans

Personal Experience

O H 968

VICTOR VLAD

Interviewed

by

John Muntean

on

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M This is an interview with Victor Vlad for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program regarding Romanian culture in Mahoning County by John Muntean, on March 8, 1976, at 3 30 p m

Victor, what part of Romania did your parents or grandparents come from?

V My father came from Tisza in Gadishanvabrta My mother came from Faragiamare and lived there her girlhood life She was born originally in Cluj, but at the early age she went to live in Faragiamare

M: What part of Romania is that in?

V That is in the northern part of Romania.

M: When were you born? Were you born in Romania or in the United States, sir?

V I was born on the east side of New York City on 77th Street and First Avenue At the early age of ten months, my dad, mom, and I returned to Romania Mother and I remained there, and my father returned to New York and continued his job that he had in the fur industry

M What motivated them to originally come to the United States? You mentioned that you were born in the United States

V Mother had no choice She was married to a young man who wanted to come to New York, and she came with him as his bride

M Was it more or less due to the economic conditions?

V Most likely it was an individual who did honor the first marriage Then as soon as they got to New York, he abandoned my mother My mother had to live with the sisters on First Avenue in New York City at the convent My father, on the other hand, had a definite economic reason for leaving Romania and coming to the United States It took him eighteen years to get from Romania to the United States A gentleman who still lives today, had given as inass to learn how to work the cojocarie which is the traditional Romanian fur side, inside, leather side, outside leather coats at the age of seven They were supposed to remain there until the age of fourteen before they got papers to go into the trade for themselves, but he went away with this gentleman, Mr John Bombish They went to Paris They befriended some Romanian Jewish people in Paris who trained both of them on the fur business as it is known today, not cojocarie, but into the regular pelts of finer furs which are sought everywhere today Dad became, for a short time, a citizen of France

After the beginning of the second World War, he found that he still was considered an alien in France even though he was a citizen So he migrated to

England From England he was sent by a company to Argentina He lived in Argentina and Brazil at Piblo for two years, then he came to the United States In this period, my father's education consisted of probably two or three years of elementary school But during the process, he learned to read and write seven languages fluently

M He was really linguistic

V So he was a rather well-rounded person in languages He was extremely interested in politics and a very devoted church member As such in New York, he sought Orthodox which we belonged to, and I was christened into At the beginning, we did not find a Romanian Orthodox Church As that consequence, we first went to the Greek and then to the Russian Orthodox on the east side on 105th Street. Then Father Navor, who was originally a gentleman who waited on tables, became interested in pulling the Romanian people together and by virtue of his intelligence or whatever, he became a priest He was the first priest that we remember in New York City

M This is before you went back to Romania?

V. No, this is since This was in the very late 1930's and early 1940's

M When did you return back to Romania? You mentioned that your parents returned back

V In 1926 we went back to Romania

M Was this his business that brought him back to Romania then?

V No, father took me back because he thought that I was too ill to survive in New York climate He presumed that living in his own country would be more beneficial to his son

M Could you tell us a little bit about the cultural life that you remember in Romania in your stay there as a youngster?

V In cultural life, I suppose would be also the personal life that people lead That was a peasant They lived in one-room houses, but they had a closeness of family that I do not find very often today in our New York or modern living of the United States The richness of song I remember the most There was never an occasion that they did not get together that people did not sing

M You mean the neighbors would get together?

V Neighbors, family, whatever There was always some excuse for singing

Wintertime was the most pleasant time because they had--I do not know if you were ever told about claca?

M. No.

V Well, the ladies gathered together and plucked feathers to make pillows and things, and the gentlemen gathered together to make ornaments out of harness's leather cutting things out of wood for the rezvoy which was the weavers that were in the homes All those implements like the social sucala were all hand cut.

M What is a sucala, sir?

V The shuttle that takes the thread from left side to right side and from right side to left side in the weaver's net This is the thing that the men and the women did in the evening time There were always stories. Most of them did not at that time as far as I recall know how to read and write

M Were there folklore stories, or did they make them up themselves?

V. Basically those were handed down father to son and mother to daughter Of course, the Transylvanian area of Romania is very rich in folklore of both werewolves and others

M Is that the kind of thing that was told then?

V. Yes

M Like Dracula type of stories then

V. Right

M Also in that area was there any Orthodox type of church?

V In the town that I lived in as I grew up was called Orastie Orastie was originally Romanian which was taken over by the Austro-Hungarian empire, and it had two other names, it had the Hungarian name called Soslatosh, and it had the German name of Siebenburgen Then Romanian Transylvania was returned to the greater Romania after the war Then it became again Orastie As a consequence my town was divided into three segments, Saxon, Hungarian, and Romanian. We grew side by side with Roman Catholic and the Protestant as well as with the Orthodoxy We had a tremendous gathering around our church Everything evolved around the church

M In other words even the culture was dependent upon the church

V Dependent upon the church. Holidays were an absolute must to attend churches. Everybody looked forward to the Christmas and New Year period. Some still celebrated the old Christmas. As a consequence our holidays were very long at Christmas time. There were traditions of dances and Colinda which is the holiday singing of songs and caroling. We had caluser which traveled from town to town.

M Is that a dance group?

V Professional group of dancers which perform Romanian dances, which basically I have never seen in any other country or in any other nationality group to perform.

M Did the group perform for money or just for the fun of it?

V Yes, strictly for money.

M I see, did that money go to the church?

V: No, this went to the individual groups. Whether they turned that into a fund of some kind I do not know, I do not recall. Some of the young men that migrated in this valley like my father and John Brissar and his brother Daniel Brissa and Mr. Tecom and the rest of them used to do these dances when they were young in the old country. They try to do the same thing when they are young over here and teach the children.

M When they had these dances, Mr. Vlad, did they have food in a festival type of atmosphere?

V The entire two weeks was like a mardi gras involving foods, drink, and songs.

M Was it basically a Romanian type of thing?

V All Romanian, all Romanian, sunca, carnot, stuffed cabbage, branz which is corn meal mush with cheese.

M You mentioned about your schooling over there. Could you tell us basically what you were taught in school because this is unique since most of the people who I have interviewed did not attend school over there? Could you tell us a little bit about what was taught in regards to the Romanian culture?

V The children in the 1930 time period attended kindergarten as they would in the United States. Stress was put on social graces as a young lady and a young gentleman dancing and doing ballet and the living together type of social behavior. Then we went into our primary schools, which were the first, second,

third, and fourth grade. Fifth, sixth, and seventh were for children who did not intend to go to liceu in those three last years they were taught trades such as woodworking, smithing, and being agriculturally minded because of our agricultural background in Romania. Those that intended to go to higher learning in their fourth year go directly to their first year of liceu, which as you noticed here was called Liceu Oglioglicul. Incidentally the name of Liceu Oglioglicul in Romania is synonymous to Orville and his brother Write in the United States. He was the first Romanian flyer to successfully fly a plane from Transylvania to Rigati himself. He attended Lugoj in Orastie and returned. On one of his trips he did crash into the Carpathian Mountains and died. As an honor our lyseum was named after him.

M: When did you return to the United States sir?

V: In May of 1937.

M: Now in regards to when your father came back to the United States, did he resume his fur trading?

V: Dad had been employed all his life in the fur industry, always in the fur industry of New York City in the United States.

M: Did you return back to the New York City area then?

V: Yes, I did in 1937. Mother and I because of the impending war and gathering clouds of unrest in the Balkan area, dad thought that it seemed wise for us to return, and we did.

M: Did you have a difficult time adjusting to the American way of life the language and etc. when you came back to United States?

V: Yes, yes.

M: Could you tell us a little bit about how you went about adjusting?

V: In order to say that I must preface it by telling you what happened to our lives first in Romania.

M: Okay.

V: Because of the money exchange between the American dollar and the Romanian lei my father's earning in this country was enormous in Romania. As a consequence there were periods that we were considered very wealthy, and we did have a lot of people that worked for us. Both mother and I and my sister who died in Romania. We had a very fine and comfortable life. In returning to

the United States from a large country home living high in the mountains with pine trees and all the open space in the world to be confined in a three room apartment was a hard thing to accept, even for a young person

M Yes, I guess so

V But it was novel and it was new and the first fascinating thing that I discovered was canned food We never had anything canned food in Romania Everything was fresh.

M Did you have refrigeration at all?

V None, no electricity, none at all

M So would you have to consume over there what you could or would you have to salt and put it away then?

V Everything was preserved in the method of the old way, which was salt and grind and hanging the meat to dry If summer time came and it was humid, it would be spoiled There were other methods of canning that the women perfected through the years, and we maintained that as our source of food But basically it was going to the yard, catching a chicken and having it for supper where as in New York it was an entirely different world You were stepping from one century into the other

M Getting back to the question again that I had asked, did you have difficulty in learning the American language because I presume in Romania you spoke exclusively Romanian?

V In Romania I learned Hungarian because of the necessity The town was largely Hungarian, and my neighbors were Hungarian Children who lived together learned one language and another I also learned part German So I came to the United States with Romanian, Hungarian, and a little German The English was very difficult for me I think it took the better part of two years to get pretty well .

M Your parents must have had some knowledge of it

V Mother and dad spoke English, of course

M Did they try to teach you some of that?

V They did, but they found it better to find a tutor We had a lady that was teaching in the primary school in New York who was of Romanian background. The name skips me for a moment. She was the one that came and tried to help out with the rough part of the language

- M Was there a Romanian community in the New York area in which you lived, sir?
- V No, not as we know it in Youngstown. New York was very loose. If one Romanian knew of another Romanian, he contacted him. But there was no central place to go to meet or find an individual of Romanian heritage and background until the St. Lad Church was organized by Father Hategan from Cleveland. Father Hategan had his first parish in New York and Cornelia, his wife, started first with the choir then made great efforts with great success to round the Rumanians together.
- M So they influenced the Romanian culture greatly then in New York?
- V They did. They a tremendous amount of keeping. . . Actually the two of them had gathered the Romanian background to the extent that immigrants that came from Romania knew to contact the church directly.
- M Oh, in New York?
- V In New York and the Father would place them first in rented rooms, if that was what they wanted, or into an empty apartment, find them jobs all through Romanian contacts of Romanian people. So he set up a network, and he was the one that really made it easier for an immigrant to come to New York.
- M When did you come into the Youngstown area, sir?
- V In 1958 I came to Youngstown to live permanently. Up to that time I only visited here. I met a Youngstown girl, I married her and took her to New York, and she loved it. She didn't want to return to Youngstown, but I did. I loved this community. I found it to be friendly. I found a lot of Romanian background and heritage that I dearly loved. I would like to continue the language to my son and his son and so on. I would like to continue the traditions of foods and customs and songs and history that we brought with us from the old country.
- M You mentioned about folklore and that they were more or less the Dracula-type of stories. Did they have any kind of stories which told of national heroes or anything?
- V. Yes, of course. One of the greatest that was told was Gruia lui Novac.
- M Could you tell briefly what that is?
- V Gruia lui Novac is a song or is a poem which pertains to an abnormally strong and brave man that had two sons extremely lucky at harvesting grain and at that same time, fighting the Ottoman Empire, which went back and forth over the Romanian territory in the very same way that you have Paul Bunyan of the north.



woods of the United States

M Did he actually exist?

V No

M No

V No, it was folklore that somebody made up. Of course, the name of Vladtepich (Dracula) was loved very much probably because the name was similar in our town. The people in my father's town had lived there so long that there was a great amount of intermarriage. Everybody was cousin and third cousin to everybody in the town.

M Were any of these stories retold at all in your knowledge in the Romanian communities in the United States?

V No, I do not think so. I have not heard any. I was never in a situation where we would hear about it.

M So then in other words that kind of culture has died down?

V Yes, it probably stopped right there, it was lost.

M When you came to this area, sir, what did you notice about the Romanian community itself? Did you notice that it had become Americanized or that it was still clinging to its Romanian background?

V One of the greatest jokes that I found about that was if a Romanian moved into a strange neighborhood two years later everybody knew Romanian. We found that our people clung to the Romanian language to the extent that they would take a foreign word and make it into a Romanian verb or noun or whatever.

M Like they would take an English word like bucket and add an a at the end-- bucketa.

V Now in the early 1940's there was a man in Cleveland or Detroit that used to write in one of the Romanian periodicals, the Romanul American, in which he would put words like spectacles, glasses, and bucket like you mentioned before of the Romanian working in a factory and his like. It is extremely funny and very interesting.

M I guess that would be. It would be almost like reading a satire.

V It would be.

- M: Victor, could you tell me about the church on Wick Avenue? Who was the minister at the time you started to attend in the 1950's?
- V: When I first came to Youngstown, Father Stanial was there. Father Stanial came from the Wilson Avenue church.
- M: Right.
- V: My father-in-law, John Opritza, was one of the members who was instrumental, I suppose, in bringing the church to Wick Avenue. I remember him telling us about the hardships they had in putting the church together on Wilson Avenue a long, long time ago. Many of them had to pass the hat around to have Father Stanial to get some money to eat.
- M: So in other words it was really an economic hardship then to build it?
- V: It was really difficult for them to put a church together. When I came to Youngstown, the church was already bought. I was there for the christening of Cornerstone Lane. The work was almost finished on the inside, and I found it to be a very rich church. I found the icons to be rich in the handwork. I would protest bitterly if any of them were to be removed in exchange for something in a modern vein. If any new church were to be built, if I am alive and able will definitely insist that those remain. They are of such great heritage and hand craft that I think is lost today.
- M: It needs to be preserved.
- V: It absolutely needs to be preserved. Our children must absolutely know where we came from. It must not be a nebulous thing and do not ask.
- M: What is the chief method in which the church raises money for functions and so forth to carry on its expenses? You mentioned that they did have difficulty before.
- V: They have banquets. They have affairs for St. John or banquets for mothers and fathers.
- M: Now you have served, I know, on Mother's Day banquet?
- V: Right.
- M: Do you usually make American food, or do you still try to serve some Romanian type of dishes too?
- V: I personally try to incorporate both. There were times that for economic reasons,

in dollars and cents, I had to resort to serving the American type of foods such as hamburger

M Do you prepare these foods yourself?

V Generally, my gang and I did

M Do you follow a cook book?

V No, a pinch of this and a handful of that

M So that is the old Romanian style then?

V If it tastes good, do it, and if it doesn't, add something else

M Oh, I see, I bet you fellows have an enjoyable time when you get together

V This was probably something that we looked forward to every year. As a matter of fact so much so that our children tried to get into the kitchen with us. Now if you noticed Johnny Corea, my boy Victor John, Lindon's son Jeff but the children do love to come help in the kitchen.

M I noticed that too. In the culture itself, in the language and the dances and so forth, have you noticed any attempt in recent years to try to preserve it either by the church or by a society?

V I noticed that our church right now is trying to do something in promoting and continuing our Romanian language by teaching it and bringing books and text books in trying to have some of the people in the non-Romanian language group learn it which I think is enormously beneficial thing. I find it to be probably the best language to learn. It is probably the most melodious language that I have heard even more so than Italian. Due to the fact that we are basically a Latin background, our language is purer today than even the Italian is to the original Latin that was spoken quite a few years ago.

M One question about language, when you came here after your spending do many years of your youth in Romania, did you find that the Romanian spoken in America was similar to the Romanian spoken in Romania, or was there somewhat of a difference over the years because of the change?

V Yes, it changed, it changed because you see I found many diverse people from many areas of Romania which had different dialects. In Romanian as I remember as a young man there were seven distinct dialects. We in Transylvania of my father's family spoke a dialect that could not be understood in Vilagos.

- M You mean if you would go from one area to another sometimes you could not understand it?
- V From one area to another, right, yes Venutani had one language that was very difficult to understand by the Romanian of this area
- M If it was written down Was it basically the same?
- V The language written down, the book language, was observed by the young people and by those people who were in business The people that lived day-by-day lived by their own language
- M Oh, and they changed their words to suit them?
- V Almoltoviand, the old ten, had a definite language characteristic The Oregontang had another definite language characteristic which one had a difficulty correlating or trying to understand because of the dialect they got had more of Quatar/Ottoman background into it where as the Transylvanians had more Latin and the Logoian or people from that area had the Saxon-Hingarian-Polish and so on
- M So when you came to Youngstown-- you probably still even notice some of that too-- among the people
- V Yes, of course, right, right
- M During the years, as the second generation has come over here, have you noticed that some of their Romanian has been the same as their parents, or has it itself changed a little bit?
- V Some of our second-generation Rumanians born here in this country have learned the language from their parents, plus adding on to that language the accent of the English As a consequence Sebesan has a different way of speaking the language than from Sebes and an Apold has a different way of talking Romanian than if you were in Apold the same way that I suppose my son will say it differently than from Orastie. As a consequence, you will find at our banquets or our gatherings a very difficult Romanian spoken.
- M So it is not the pure Romanian in other words
- V No, it is not The young people who come from Romania now are newly-arrived people They will bring with them the higher type, higher caliber of Romanian language, which the people of this country born here have a terrible time understanding because the language has changed and incorporated a lot of the foreign words to make it more civilized because of the industrialization coming to

Romania For example, in the early part of the cultural language was French, which all of us had to learn in Romanian schools So French words were incorporated into Romanian language But being a Romance language, it wasn't a very hard thing But then the German crept in and now, of course, the American language which is English, has a great dominance into the Romanian language

M. I would like to ask one thing about your stories because this is something unique. In the stories that were told, were they stories that were made up more or less by the people living in the mountains, or were they stories--like you mentioned about Dracula and like that--but were they stories that were passed down from generation to generation?

V. I would say it is passed down from generation to generation Behind the whole thing is generally great love for its people from people for the story came from its suk or its town It had to do with being proud, it had to do with being very friendly and in love with one another Very seldom do I remember a blood thirsty battle between one town and the other

M So that most of that was fictitious

V Well, they have added to it things that were completely foreign Now if you were to take some of the stories that you hear in America and go back to Romania or Transylvania, where I came from, those people would shake their heads and say, "I have never heard of anything like that " It became so distorted as the centuries and time has gone by

M That is what I wanted to clarify then because some of the stories about Dracula are so blood thirsty that I didn't think that it actually was made up by that country

V No, no, actually that particular incident of the Dracula is true to this extent There was a principality of Romania in the Transylvania area which was ruled by a gang of people called princes At that time the Vlad were the dominant one in the period of 1400 to the 1500 year. These men had a fierce love for their country and always tried to fight the invaders which were at that time the Ottoman Empire. The brutality that they extended to the invader created the stories which were distorted today by saying that Vlad Tepes, which was Vlad the Impaler, was Dracula which is far from it He was called Al Draculei which means that the devil's implement or the devil's man was fierce But it was done only for the love of the country It was not done as people say because of his

M Blood thirsting

V Blood thirsting That is ridiculous.

- M Is there anything else that you would like to add Mr Vlad in regards to this tape session that maybe you would think might be important to bring up?
- V Yes, I would like to continue. First of all the church that we have we would like to continue our Orthodoxy, we would like to continue our heritage of hymns, chants, and readings on Romania in our churches not to dissipate them I would also like to have known that we are somebody to be reckoned within this country and not an unknown quantity Our people have masters and degrees and doctors in degrees Some of our people are renowned architects and lawyers Some of us are in the better income groups in that we have without aid and help from any other people or from any other government sections done with the things that we have done to our families by ourselves We like to progress, we like to do so, and I would have to see them maligned and I would have to see our Romanian heritage disappear
- M Thank you very much, sir
- V Thank you.