

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Romanian Culture Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 1093

ALEXANDRA CARULEA

Interviewed

by

John Muntean

on

September 17, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: ALEXANDRA CARULEA
INTERVIEWER: John Muntean
SUBJECT: Romanian art and culture.
DATE: September 17, 1975

M: This is an interview with Alexandra Carulea for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Romanian culture, by John Muntean, at 1725 McCullum Road, on September 17, 1975, at 7:00 p.m.

Before proceeding on with the taping session, I would like to make known a fact that Sandy is the granddaughter of a previous interviewee who was Ms. Janet Jako, and is also the daughter of another interviewee, Constantine Nan. Sandy?

C: Yes.

M: Can you tell me who your grandfather was? Or I guess I should say is.

S: Yes, he is still alive. His name is Nick Tiko, and he is from Youngstown.

M: Was he from Romania?

C: Yes. He was born in Romania in 1890 some.

M: Did he ever tell you what a typical day was like in Romania?

C: Yes. He said that when he was a child . . . He left Romania at a young age, when he was about fourteen. He said that when he was a child that their day, they would get up much earlier than city people did because they were from the farm areas, and they would help around, do some chores around. He was a very young child then, and he

still had chores around in the yard and things. His mother would go out to work in the fields, and he would stay behind and play with his grandmother when he was a little boy. Later on as he became older in his teens, then he was sent to work as an apprentice where he would get up in the morning and have breakfast and begin work, probably about 8:00, 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning, and they would work until noon. Then, they would have a break for lunch and work again until probably 7:00 at night, and then while he was an apprentice, he lived with the people he apprenticed with, and they fed him and had room and board for him. Their idea of They didn't have to much social life like we know it. They would get together maybe talking with their friends outside during the week, and maybe once in awhile it was a very big treat for them to have a dance. They would meet all of their friends there. During the holidays they usually had dances and on Sundays, but it was rare. They didn't get to go because they didn't have that much money all the time.

M: I see. Could you tell me the name of your parents?

C: My father's name is Constatine Nan, and my mother in Ann Nan.

M: Are they Romanian?

C: Yes. Both of them were from parents that came from Romania. Both of my grandparents, my father's and mother's parents were from Romania.

M: I see. When they brought you up as a little girl, did they try to teach you some of the Romanian culture and heritage as you were being raised?

C: Yes, when we were little in the house, nobody spoke English too much to us, and we learned Romanian. Both my brother and I did before we went to school, and once we started in kindergarten we lost quite a bit of it. You get to an age where you don't want to speak it anymore because you are ashamed, or at least we were at that time, because the ethnic thing was not in. It wasn't popular to be different, or to speak a different language. I really didn't get interested, and I refused to speak when I was about 13 or 14. I wouldn't speak in Romanian at all. When I was about 15 years old or so, 16, my grandmother was talking, and she would tell me We would sit on the front porch, and she would tell me about Romania when she was a little girl. I just decided then, I told her then I wanted to go see Romania. I started to learn the language again, and she got our newspaper, The Romania Solia, from our church newspaper, and she would have me read every evening, have me read articles to her. Of course, I already knew

the language, but it sort of brushed me up again. It came in handy later on because . . . I became aware of a Romanian program with the government, and because of that, because of my language background, I was able to go and work and was sort of a translator for the United States Information Agency because of my Romanian language.

M: I see.

C: The other folk arts . . . We learned the songs, a lot of the old songs that were popular in my grandparents day.

M: Did the church over here have any functions that might teach some of these songs?

C: Oh yes, they had Romanian schools. I know they had a big, huge Romanian school when my parents, my mother was a little girl I understand.

M: This is the one on . . .

C: On Wick Avenue, yes. They used to have a real big enrollment, and then by the time I was a child the enrollment had dropped quite a bit, but they still, they had a Romanian school. Father Stanila, he conducted some of the classes, and I know for awhile I helped him with the beginning classes with the children, the very young children. We also had folk dancing, was part of the program.

M: Sandy, excuse me. How did you go about teaching the real young children some of this?

C: Well, you start, we just started out with little poems that they had. They had some Romanian books.

M: Did you teach them the phonics first, and the vowels and the constants and like that?

C: Well, Romanian is not too difficult because it is pronounced like it looks. It is very much like you are reading it. In fact, it is easier than English. So that we just started with little poems. We didn't go into phonics or anything like that, and they did it through just memorization and rote at that time.

M: I see.

C: Myself at that time, I was probably seventeen and eighteen, and I just helped with these little children.

M: You did teach Sunday school?

C: I taught for nine years Sunday school.

M: Do you teach any kind of Romanian culture or anything else?

C: At that time not too much was done on Romanian culture, and just the religious aspect of it mostly. Although we did have Romanian history, the church history, and . . .

M: Was it incorporated into the program?

C: Yes, into the Sunday school program.

M: I see.

C: Usually most of that was left to the upper classes and the Sunday school because with the little ones you have, mostly your basic bible stories.

M: I see. Now, you mentioned something about the dances and like that. Did you teach some of their traditional Romanian dances?

C: Well, I'm just trying to think. My mother used to drag us, first of all, to all these dances, and my mother probably taught me. I wasn't aware of being taught real early, I mean I can't remember when I was three or something. We went to all the weddings, and my mother had me dancing with her, and I really loved it. So then, they had dance classes, Romanian dance classes, and . . .

M: Where? At Church?

C: At our church, yes, on Wick Avenue.

M: This would be what, during the 1950's, 1960's?

C: This is during the early 1950's, late 1940's, 1949 or 1950. Helen Philomen was the teacher at that time, and we learned quite a bit from her. I probably was maybe around ten or so. After that, Mrs. Mary Sidlea, John Sidlea's wife, she took over. She was a very energetic person, and she really did a lot with us, and she taught a lot of dances. Then we would help her, like we would teach the younger children. Our folk dancing, we became very much interested in it, and our group went around to a lot of places among the American social life too. Not just among Romanians, and we used to dance, oh I would imagine, once every month at least perform somewhere. Then, when I was in college, we got involved with the Youngstown University folk dancers, and we started to dance with them, and we also taught the group Romanian folk dancing, too. So, Mrs. Judy Shawn, who teaches the folk group now at the church, she was in my dancing

class.

M: Oh, and you taught her?

C: No, we were the same age.

M: Oh, I see.

C: We were in the same class as students. Right now she isn't working, and she is at home, so she had a little more time so she could into that. With my job . . .

M: What do you use? Did you use Romanian records?

C: Yes, Romanian records.

M: Did they have diagrams or anything for you to follow?

C: No. These are things that we knew. Most of these dancers are brought down from my grandparents generation who taught . . . You know, they just physically taught my mother, and then my mother's age physically taught my age. Now, there is some variation of the dance that they used to do. It naturally changes, each person adds a little bit or so. My grandfather probably told you, he danced, he was a Coshet, and that is a dance that is very primitive. It goes back to the the time, pre-Roman days. The Coshet- is a dance of the sun, and in these pre-Roman days they would have one man who was the leader and the other . . . They would have six other men, and these men would hold a taunt goatskin, and the leader would dance on the goatskin. Every once in awhile they would crack this goatskin, and the man would fly up into the air. That is the most colorful Romanian dance there is, and today if you see it, it is just fantastic if it is done properly. It is a man's dance.

M: Now, in other words this was started by tribal people back in . . .

C: Yes, and actually it was done like, it was an honor to become one. It was almost like a club now. Say in every village they had a Coshet- group of a certain amount of men, and not everybody was invited to join this, and you were invited by invitation, and you had to be of good spirit and good character before you were allowed to do this dance.

M: Now, Sandy, you mentioned to me that you were in Romania for about two years.

C: Right.

M: Can you tell us a little bit about how Romania looked like to you compared to what your grandparents told you

about it?

C: Well, first thing, we went over in the airplane and as we were crossing the pilot naturally says, "If you look out your left window at 30,000 feet, you are passing into Romania." I was with . . . The first time I went I was with my cousin and a girlfriend of mine from Detroit and the three of us just started to cry because we almost felt like we were coming home, and I can't explain it to you. When we got there, there was no . . . You didn't feel strange, you just felt so much a part of it because you understood the language, understood what everybody was talking about. The dances were the same, the food was the same, and all I can say, it probably was more beautiful in some ways than my grandparents point of view because they left because they had hard times there, most of them. I went back and naturally being a visitor coming into a country and your relatives and people that you meet really go all out, you know, to show you a good time, better than maybe normal conditions. So, you see mostly the best of what there is. If you are there longer, then you begin to pick out and weed out what is real and what is not real. I was more than pleased. I think everybody should see Romania, It is beautiful.

M: Did you notice anything about the culture or folklore or anything over there?

C: The folklore has probably disappeared from the . . . Almost, from the way it was when my grandfather's days are. There are still some villages that are probably more isolated than others that still practice all the traditions exactly the same way as they had been for centuries, but most of them that are on the highways where there is traffic and tourism and stuff, people have modernized. A lot of the young people have gone to the cities, and they work in the factories, and they're not interested. I mean, they don't even want to have a Romanian costume. It is not an important thing to them, or any of the Romanian art. To them what's important is having modern clothes, and a car and things like are people would want.

M: In other words, they want to become westernized in their outlook a little bit.

C: Yes, very much so. Now, they do have . . . They have developed their folk culture fantastically for the tourists. In places where there are tourists they've more commercialized it, their dances, and you can buy Romanian blouses and embroideries in stores and things, but they are not the same as when the pheasants made them all by hand.

- M: I see. In other words, it is more like souvenirs and tourist attractions.
- C: Almost, right. They have villages. They have a park in Bucharest, and this was done in the 1930's where they took houses from every part of Romania and set it up for tourists so that if you didn't go to see all parts of Romania, at least you could come into this park and see each house and the utensils and the art work that was done in that area. It is very beautiful.
- M: Were the people at that time inquisitive about the United States or were they kind of leery about mentioning about the United States?
- C: Well, the first time I went they were kind of leery to even talk to me in 1964, but after that things started opening up in Romania, and working with the government then I was in a different position. We were there when the man first landed on the moon, we were there when Nixon was there.
- M: Oh, and what was their reaction when they landed?
- C: 100,000 people a day were coming to the exhibit, and they were just so thrilled to be there because we had . . . Films were flown in specially to be shown at the Romanian exhibit in Yash this happened to be at the time. People were just going crazy. We had postcards of the astronauts, with their pictures, and we had insignia buttons of commemoration of their flight, and we were passing them out for free. They had a free for all at the door our last day. Oh, it was something else, you just couldn't believe it. One little came to me one time, and he, real cute little old guy about seventy, he threw his arms around me and he said, "Finally, the Americans have come after all of this time." He was a very nice man, of course, looking at it niavly, but that was his feeling.
- M: Could you tell us a little bit about what you did in Romania working for the government, United States Government?
- C: Well, I was mostly a translator with the U.S.I.A. exhibits. They have foriegn exhibits that go to all the communist countries and dealing the American life, aspects of American life, and I was on two of them. One was Handtools U.S.A. and the other one was on industrial design. As I said, primarily, we explained and lectured to the people, and what was in the exhibit. We maybe had a certain group of objects that we had to know everything about, their dimentions, how much it cost to make them, how many hours you would have to work to buy them. Of course we had to do all of this in Romania, but

primarily the American Government just wanted us, the Romanian people, to be able to ask us anything they wanted, and you had to have sort of a broad base of culture about the Americans so that people would come up and say, "How much is a kilogram bread in America." You had to know everything. You had to know, or they would ask you, "What was Truman Capote's latest novel?" They knew more about Americans than most Americans do.

M: Oh, I see.

C: It was really interesting.

M: In other words they were very inquisitive and put you sometimes on the spot.

C: Right. You had to think fast, if you didn't know you would have to say, "Wait a minute." Then the other one I did was Atoms in Action which was a program that the United States Government had, an atomic energy exhibit. I was like a personnel director for the exhibit, and I stayed quite a few months at that time. I was in charge of the Romanian personnel there, and I had to . . . They had Romanian lecturers this time, and I had to go to the university. They were all Ph.D. students, aspiring Ph.D.'s in physics and things like that, and I felt very foolish talking to them in some cases, but I had to explain to them how we wanted the lectures and the talks presented. Then I had in charge of . . . Being an atomic installation, we had to have checks on atomic energy sources and radiation levels, and we had the Romanian fire department, and we had the Bucharest militia there, and the Army. They would make these periodic checks, and I had to deal with those people, too. Special groups would come in before the exhibit would start, and I would usually have to take them around or after hours. Usually groups from the Romanian Government or from different institutes from within Romania.

M: I understand that you are an art teacher now. Did you notice anything about the arts in Romania in particular? Are they coming across with the modern aspect of modern art, or are they still clinging to the older aspects?

C: Well, they are probably, they are definitely behind the American art as the popular arts of today and the abstracts. They are really . . . I have some cousins that are artists in Romania and professors of art too, and they are very comparable in a lot of aspects. Maybe not quite so avant-garde as some of the American artists are today, but most of their things, they are quite modern I mean, you can't say . . . They are not in the old Russian style.

- M: Who are some of their famous artists in Romania, either previous to this time or now?
- C: I'm just trying to think. I know his name, and it is stuck on the top of my head, and I can't think. It is just weird. Today their artists are . . . Some of their good artists would not be recognized if I told you their names, most of them. This one cousin, as I said, was . . . His name is Philese Giano, and he has exhibited abroad, and he has exhibited in Japan and Western Europe and . . .
- M: Do they deal with the abstracts now?
- C: They deal with the abstracts now, yes, but they are still not, I mean they not Andy Worhal, or pop, and going into the nouveau arts and the photo-realism. There was a very good painter in New York that has painted portraits, but he has been in this country, and he has been deceased for the last five years or so. He was born in Romania and most of his life he spent in Romania. He did President Eisonhower. He did many famous portraits. He was Professor of Art at Columbia University. So, there is quite a few of them floating around, and I think it is born into Romanians. Even with the dancing. When Romanian music starts most of my friends that love to dance, you can't sit still once you hear the music. You just can't.
- M: In their orchestra in Romania, do they have the violin, and saxaphone like that, or do they have drums and everything else?
- C: Well, it depends I'm sure. They have drums, they have everything like here. If you have gone to a place that is going to play strictly Western, they have the same thing like the guitars.
- M: No, no. I mean in . . .
- C: You mean folk art things? Well, it depends. Each village, I mean, they don't have all the instruments maybe. You know, who knows how to play what, you know.
- M: Do they still have gypsys going around?
- C: Oh, yes. Well, the gypsys of course are famous, you know, they are tremendous with their violins, and most of the musicians are gypsys. They also . . . I mean most of the professional musicians, let's put it that way, are gypsys. Now, Romania has other instruments that aren't found in a lot of places, and maybe you won't associate with. For one thing the Romanians have a bagpipe.

M: Really.

C: Most people don't realize that they play bagpipes. They think only the Scotch play bagpipes.

M: Does it resemble the Scotch bagpipes?

C: It looks very much the same. Same thing, same construction. Of course, usually it doesn't have the tartan plaid or anything like that on it, but it is made out of the stomach of a sheepskin with the pipes the same way.

M: I see.

C: A lot of people hear it in some of the music, but they are not aware that that is what it is. In this country our people aren't aware of it then they don't see it because it is a rare thing even in Romania.

M: What is the Nia?

C: The Nia which is the pan pipes, it is made up of a series of maybe eight or ten different pipes, and they are very difficult to play. It is the only . . . That is an instrument that is only found in Romania.

M: Is that a woodwind?

C: Yes. It is a woodwind. The music that comes out of it tremendous. If you've ever heard the chalkolia music, the music of the chalkolia, you will hear the bird. It is a flute like sound. It's beautiful. It really is. They have an instrument that's called the colbsa.

M: This is the colbsa?

C: That's the flute, the wooded flutes. They have a lot of those.

M: I see the designs here.

C: Right.

M: It's wood.

C: That's wood. They're all wood. They have a colbsa which is pretty much like, I would say probably like a bellow like. It has a round bottom, guitar sort of, you know. It has it's own special sound. Mandolin, something like that.

M: When the Russians came over, did you know that they tried to change the culture to the Russian method at all, or did they leave the Romanians to cling to their culture?

- C: They even changed the name of the cities to Russian names. You know how they have now Stalingrad, they had Brashool which is a very famous city in Romania. They called it Orashustalin, which is the city of Stalin. Let me interject this too, that most Europeans that go to a European school, high school, will be given almost two years college credit in this country. Their high school is far above ours, and the subjects that they have to take are far more advanced. What they know, the material they know when they come out is much greater than our students now at the same age.
- M: So, in other words, a Ph.D in Europe over there might even be a little bit higher than some of the Ph.D in some of the schools here.
- C: Right. Although I'm sure here too, you have very strict schools in certain areas. But it is mostly their high schools. When you get to college, they start leveling out. But their high schools . . .
- M: Sandy, when you were in Romania, did you notice that the food that the people ate over there was more western style or was it the traditional Romanian food in which your parents and your grandparents use over here?
- C: Well, first of all, you have to understand the way Romania was divided. Now, the western half of Romania was under Austria-Hungary empire for 1000 years just about; therefore, their much of their cooking, and this is the area where my parents came from, much of their cooking is close to German and Hungarian cooking. The eastern portion and southern portion of Romania was for 500 years under the Ottoman Turks, their empire. In that area you'll find a lot of cooking that is very Turkish. They drink a lot of the Turkish coffee in that area. Their desserts are like baklava and these sweet desserts that are typically Turkish, shishkobobs and some other things. You find very spicy type foods. In the other portion they eat a lot of cabbage and a lot of potatoes. Of course, when my grandparents came, they brought their traditions over here, and then they adapted them to the foods and the vegetables and the things that are here and the spices and such. I felt absolutely no discomfort. I mean, they're not over spicy that you can't eat the food. Some places you go probably the foods are greasier than your used to. It depends. Everybody cooks a little bit different, so you can't . . .
- M: Coming back to your art in the United States, have you seen any changes over the years that have occurred regarding Romanian culture?

- C: Oh, yes. I would say that when I was a child, it was quite prevalent to more or less hide, not hide, but not to exbound too much that you were Romanian or any other ethnic group, and tradition. Yes, we had folk dancing and things like that, and we did go out somewhat, but I think there is a rebirth of interest, and people are more curious now about their heritage than they were before.
- M: Do you think that the younger generation today, the Romanian generation, is proud of their Romanian heritage as you people are?
- C: I think so. I would say so, yes. I've gone to a lot of Romanian affairs in my whole life. When I was in my teens and twenties, we would go to dances, every dance. There would be a dance in Cleveland, we would be in Cleveland. There would be a dance in Detriot, we would be in Detriot. If it was here, we would be here, and our friends would come from other places. So, we went to a lot of the things. I see today, I know, when I go to some of the dances and things in the different area, there are so many young people and I don't even know who they are. I don't know their names. I never saw them before, but as soon as the Romanian music comes, you can't get on the dance floor. So, in that respect, yes. Now, I don't think very many of them speak Romanian, and people are real surprised when I tell them my daughter is bilingual.
- M: Thank you very much for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW