

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Romanian Culture

Personal Experience

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JUDITH SHONN

Interviewed

by

John Muntean

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: JUDITH SHONN

INTERVIEWER: John Muntean

SUBJECT: Romanian Church and culture in America,
Romanian dances and teachings to school
children

DATE: March 11, 1976

M: This is an interview with Mrs. Judy Shonn for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program regarding Romanian culture in Mahoning County, by John Muntean, at 3412 Bent Willow, on March 11, 1976, at 7:00 p.m.

Mrs. Shonn, could you tell me something about your childhood regarding the Romanian community and the church itself or regarding cultural events?

S: Okay, as a young student in Sunday school, I started when I was six. We learned a lot of religion along with learning poems, Romanian poems and Romanian dances. I learned some of the basic dances in Sunday school. Then when I was eighteen years old, I went to Detroit for religion classes and I also learned more Romanian dances there.

M: Before we get into the dances, you mentioned Romanian poems. Did you learn to speak them in Romanian or just the poem itself in English and other words in Romania?

S: No, [it was] all Romanian.

M: Oh, you learned how to talk, then?

S: We learned the alphabet in Sunday school, and we learned how to read Romanian so that we could read the words. No, to translate them, but to read Romanian.

M: You mean, it was taught in Sunday school?

S: Yes.

M: Why did that change occur in which Romanian wasn't taught any more in Sunday school?

S: Only one teacher taught it, and she must have quit by the time you started. She taught all of us. She did this on her own. There was no superintendent in those days. There were only, I think, two classes, and this was in the middle 1940s. I think she did this all on her own. We learned Romanian songs. I think we even did a short Romanian play. She was very creative and wrote a lot of things herself. We always had programs. All the children participated in programs for all of the banquets. We were the few children. We learned the poems then. We had to say them all in Romanian, and they were very lengthy. Then, we went caroling at Christmas time, the small children. We sang all Romanian songs; it was all Romanian.

M: She taught you to sing?

S: Right, to sing Romanian and to read it.

M: Were they just religious songs that you sang?

S: No, no, they were village songs. I had a nice background, which you probably didn't have.

M: You are right. When you became a little bit older in the teenage group, they used to have--and I know they still do--the AROY (American Romanian Orthodox Youth) group. Were you part of the AROYS at all?

S: Yes.

M: Could you tell us a little bit about AROYS during that era?

S: Well, I was born when it first began, when the bishop first came here. I was 15 at the time.

M: About what year was that?

S: He became bishop in 1952, and then it was just beginning. At the time when I was 15, which was in 1954, I used to play the organ for the choir. At that time, there was a group called the choir group, the Youngstown choir. That group then became our Youngstown

AROYs. Because I played the organ for them, I would stay for meetings, and I got into AROYs. I was the youngest one at the time.

M: I see. What was the function of AROY at that time?

S: Like how?

M: I mean, what was their aim at that time, basically?

S: Oh, gosh. Well, mostly it was people like parents and [people] a little younger. So it was people from my age through their 30s and 40s, probably. I'm trying to think of what it was for.

M: Was it basically to preserve culture, or was it more or less as a social gathering after Mass?

S: No, no. It must have been for culture; it wasn't that. It was just another auxiliary of the church, I know, because they did things. They had projects for the church, and they were pressing to keep the youth together, to teach the youth the things that they had known, to preserve the things from my parents, and social things along with it, but that was very secondary, tertiary, maybe.

M: Did they do any Romanian dances or anything at that time?

S: Yes. From when I was a teenager and through the AROY, I learned more Romanian dances. There was a time after Sunday school, between that period from Sunday school to when I was a teenager, when we didn't do this anymore. It would just bring this back again. I learned more of them, and learned them a little bit better, too; the ones that I had known as a child that I had forgotten.

M: Could you tell us some of the dances that they probably did at that time?

S: The most popular dance in Romania and here that our whole village can take part in and also a whole group at a wedding, which we still do, is the Hora. That is just a dance where the group moves in a couple of steps into the circle, a couple of steps back, a couple to the left, and a couple to the right. It is a very slow, graceful dance.

M: Is there a special way of lining up?

S: Everyone is in a huge circle.

M: Is it all men on one side, or is it men and women?

S: No, no. [They are] all mixed up.

M: I see.

S: I don't know if there is a correct way to do it, but it is just men and women that do it.

M: Who taught you how to do this?

S: Helen. . . .

M: Oh, I see. She is the one who progressed this culture to the younger people.

S: She started it all when I was younger. When I was a teenager, she was gone then; she wasn't around anymore.

M: I see. Later on when you became associated with the church and you became a little older, did you partake in any of these types of cultural events and more with AROY"s like that?

S: Yes, I really never stopped.

M: Did you notice any changes that occurred over the years in the AROY itself?

S: It got a lot younger, but I think they are still doing the basic things that we did. They are still working on projects to earn money to help the episcopate, to help our own individual churches. They have added scholarships to help the seminarians that we have. I think they are basically doing the same thing, but maybe a little bit more. The children now are much younger than the parents. The parents started it, and then eventually the children have taken over, which is what the aim was, because it is the American Romanian Orthodox Youth.

I talked to the parents why it started after 10 or 15 years. They really dropped out of it, and the children took over.

M: You mentioned about them earning money. What is the basic method in which to earn money? Is it banquets or fund raising?

S: No, they have a national organization, and each city has a chapter. They used to use live raffles. That was the big thing, but they did away with that a long time ago. Now they have dances, and they have sporting events where they earn money. Maybe in their own individual chapters they do have banquets. I think our kids have a banquet, the Father's Day banquet. So,

whatever each chapter wants to do. . . . Then every year--I don't know if it still is that way--each chapter holds one function. We have car washes and bake sales. Each chapter holds one function, and the proceeds from that go to the episcopates for the national group. With that money, then they take in a larger project.

M: Who was the priest during the time in which you first went to Sunday school? Do you remember?

S: Yes, [it was] Father Staneila.

M: The services themselves at that time, what language were they conducted in?

S: They were beautiful, but they were in Romanian, totally.

M: Did you understand it?

S: No, but I always had a liturgy book, and on our liturgy book they have the English on the one side and the Romanian on the other side. I have always been able to follow.

M: I see.

S: I love Romanian.

M: Did he ever speak to the Sunday school children separately?

S: Yes.

M: In English?

S: Yes.

M: Would you tell a little bit about that?

S: He used to speak at our classes, too, when I was a Sunday school teacher years ago. After a while, not when I was young, but when my brothers and sisters were younger, he would have a short lesson with a little moral in English for the children, but it was very difficult for them to understand.

M: [Difficult to understand] his English?

S: Yes, his English was very broken.

M: But this accompanied the sermon itself, then?

- S: Well, yes. It would be the end of the sermon. He would do the sermon in Romanian, and then he would have a little story for the children. When I was younger, there was nothing. We didn't miss it; we really didn't. I never felt that I wished it was in English. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I first read the liturgy in English. It was just very beautiful, and it was very nice to know what it was all about. I loved it even in Romanian.
- M: When did some of the changes start transpiring in the church regarding change of language to English?
- S: There was a time when the choir and the people did speak in English. So, he started probably when I was about a teenager or so. [He started] from the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and the rest would be in English. Then, the choir would respond in English. That was probably in the 1950s.
- M: After Father Staneila retired and Father Lazar came here, did he carry on this practice of having somewhat of an English and Romanian service?
- S: Oh, yes. In fact, he had even more English. He would start at an earlier part in the liturgy and have more English focus. Then, his English was very easy to understand. That was very beautiful, because he was born here. He had to know how to speak English.
- M: Now, you have mentioned that you were a Sunday school teacher. Can you tell us when you taught Sunday school? I know you are still teaching there right now.
- S: I did for five years. I taught from when I was 13, I think. I taught for six years at that time.
- M: Have there been any changes that you have noticed in the Sunday school system from that time to this time?
- S: Yes.
- M: Could you elaborate a little bit about that?
- S: Yes, very much. I am even thinking back to when I was in Sunday school. We used the same book in the middle 1940s that I taught with in the middle 1950s. They were from the Syrian Diocese and they were mostly. . . . They had very little material; they didn't have as many. . . . It wasn't divided into age groups and grades that they are now. They really mostly had the old type of stories. There was very little about the religion itself that I got from our church. Mrs. Hannock in Cleveland at. . . . Now, those things are set up for Sunday school teachers and

that is how I happened to go there. Well, she had a lot of material, and that is where I learned it to teach the children about the saints, the prayers, the priests, the whole procedure of the liturgy, how it is divided, and why. I learned that from her in Cleveland.

M: Now you teach Sunday school. What is it, the sixth, seventh, or eighth class?

S: Yes.

M: What do you teach the sixth and seventh graders now than at Sunday school?

S: Continuing with the last question, now we have . . . everything is divided into age groups, and we have loads of aides and really almost anything is available to us. Everything that is put out now that we get is by the Greek Diocese. My group is learning about the life of Jesus. We start at the beginning of the year with Christmas in September and we continue it on. We are working now with his miracles. I began my Latin part now, and I will go on through the Enunciation. Then, we go on with a little bit, because that will be the end of the year. We will go on with some of the works of the apostles until a little past the Enunciation.

M: You also have a group at church that are young dancers. Can you tell us a little bit about what you teach them and how you go about teaching them?

S: Okay, I'm teaching them basically the same dances that I learned when I was a Sunday school student. I have just extended a little bit more of my knowledge into the group from what I have learned through the years, because I belonged to another Romanian group when I was in college. That was with Sonda, Marcus, her brother, and quite a few others. We had a dance event, but I really didn't get out there for a long time. I'm teaching them the sebeka, which is a dance that is done in a circle. It is done with little steps [and] mostly done with toes. It is a popular dance that we do at weddings now, still. A lot of Romanian dances come from certain parts of Romania. The enavatika and jyphadonna, which I am teaching them right now, is from my part of Romania, South Romania. Those are usually pretty popular and some of the others, the hora, [is popular, too]. But, some of them really come from other sections. Luckily, all the people here taught us everything, so we can do all the other ones. I am teaching them acloshed, which is from one particular part of Romania, and that is done with two teams. There is a leader doing a step, and the rest of the

children are lined up. After the leader does the step, the children do the step. Then, the leader does a more difficult step, and the children have to follow. There is a progression of six steps, and each one gets a little more difficult.

M: So, these steps resemble the Russian type of dancing?

S: No, not at all.

M: What type of dancing?

S: Our music and our dancing has come from somewhat. . . . Years and years and years ago, the Romanians had the Egyptians as their slaves. Their music filtered into our music and some of their dancing [did], too. Our dancing is nothing like Russia's; it is very different from the Russians. If it is like anything at all, it might be more like Hungarian, maybe a little from the Greek and the Macedonian areas. But now, I would imagine if the Romanians still dance Romanian over there--which they don't too often--maybe the little villages in the northern part of Romania may have some Russian things; I don't know. Our dancing isn't like the Russians.

M: Could you pick a dance or two and tell us a little bit about it and how you go about teaching it to the children, by making believe that we are a bunch of little children over here?

S: Okay. One dance that I have even taught girl scouts for a while is the supa, and that is done in a circle. When I have children who don't know anything about dancing [and] who have never had any kind of exposure, I have to go very, very basic. I say that we just start in a circle, and I start counting; that is all. I just tell them that the left foot and the right go down. Then, I just go "left out, right out, down, back, left out, right out, down, back." That is the supa. Oh, I count "one, two, three, four, five, six. One, two, three, four, five, six."

M: Those are the basic steps?

S: That is the basic step, yes. So we just go over it and over it until they get it. Then, after they really have that, I start teaching them the calls that go with it, because as they are doing this one dance--it is a long record, long song--then a call will come out in Romanian. Say, now we are going to go back and stamp twice, three times, or five times, or now we are going to go frontwards and backwards. As soon as they tell

this out, whoever the caller is, we wait for the caller to say "acuma," which means "now," and they go and do it. There is a certain pattern that they follow to go back, and dancing.

M: I see.

S: I go very basic with the children in the very beginning.

M: You say that this dance is common more or less throughout Romania? It is not a sectioned one?

S: No, it has become very common, as the Hora has become.

M: Is it a peasantry type of dance?

S: Yes, they all are.

M: Oh, they are?

S: They don't even do these in the big cities any more. They don't dance. Our people who have come to Romania now, and that is my own brother-in-law and mother's husband, and these kids who were born and live in the city don't know our dances. You will never see our young Romanian people who have just come now, dancing these. We have learned these dances from people who lived in the villages and came. Well, like John. . . . He knows his dance. They have a teacher from where he is from because he lived in a village. The people who came in the 1940s who came from villages know that, but now it isn't popular to do these dances. They do modern things.

M: Is there another dance that you could tell us a little bit about, Judy?

S: Well, there is the sevrichio that starts out to be a single step, then it goes into other steps. Many dances are done in a circle, but there are some that are done with partners and some that only men do, but not too often. It is usually the men and the women. There is this one dance that is in one part of Romania--I think it is in my section, too--called the envatita. The people can join the circle into a very slow step, and then in the center there are some people that show off while the others are clapping their heels, jumping up, and hitting their knees and their heels and the insides of their shoes. It is beautiful, just beautiful. Then after this was finished, the very next dance after that, is the hepsadona. That is with partners. The partners dance around the circle in a marching fashion. When the music changes, they hold together, join [in] a circle, and spin around in a

certain special way. It is very difficult to do, especially even when there are just two [people] doing it. It is very difficult to do. Their rhythms are very difficult for me. What they usually do in that part of Romania, which is the Transylvania section, they will play the envatita and the hepsadona and another one, and then they will stop for a while, because it is very tiring. Then, they will do the same ones again, because that is their popular dance.

M: I see.

S: But, most of the dances are in a circle.

M: In another tape session of mine, somebody mentioned a dance that he found enjoyable called tisan dance or something. Is that a peasantry type of dance?

S: Yes.

M: Or, is it a new dance that they brought over now?

S: I shouldn't really say; I really don't know for sure, but it comes from the area of Banot, which is near the Slavic area, near Yugoslavia. A lot of those and the people in Detroit and in Philadelphia, those people are Banotans, and they do dances a little differently from us, very similar to Serbian dances. That dance was brand new to me when it first came. I don't know if they had always done it, or if they did it when they brought it here. It is definitely from that area near the Yugoslavia border. Those dances are different from ours, the ones that we are familiar with. They really have a lot of Serbian influence, which is different from ours, too. They have more of a slow moving, even step, where ours is more hopping and jumping.

M: When you teach these children to do these dances, Judy, do you have music that is playing or do you first go over the fundamentals?

S: First I go over the fundamentals, because the music is very fast. After I feel they know it, then I play the music so that they can hear what they are supposed to be doing. We plow through and try to see what we can get from it. Then, I turn the music off, and we just keep practicing until we can do it with some success, in time, with the music. Then, I put the music back on, and we perfect it.

M: Where have you and your dance group appeared?

S: Oh, downtown. We are going to appear on May 10 for the Romanian Independence Day. If you are down for the bicentennial, stop in.

- M: So, you are planning something for the bicentennial?
- S: We already did. [We planned] for the opening of the mall, for the anniversary of the mall. . . . This Romanian day on May 10 is a bicentennial thing put on for the Romanians by the Romanians. We had appeared at our church, at the Stambaugh Auditorium for the International Institute, [for] Romanian Day in Farrell, Pennsylvania, and at the Canfield Fair. We have done a couple of things at the church.
- M: Now when you appear, do they dress up in Romanian costumes?
- S: Yes.
- M: Are those costumes brought over from Romania or are they made by the parents?
- S: Some are brought over from Romania if you are fortunate enough to get those. Some are our old costumes when I was young. We have passed down from our grandmothers and godmothers that made [them] for us. My daughter wears a skirt that my mother had when she was a little girl that was brought to her from Romania, from her father. Then, a lot of the blue jeans that we wear with. . . . The kids wear the aprons over the white skirts that were brought from Romania. They were brought from there. If things aren't available, they are made. Most of them are authentic, and the little boys wear their black hats. They always wear the three colors, the colors of the Romanian flag: red, yellow, and blue, around their waist. Some of the boys wear it around their legs.
- M: I noticed that when they were doing some of the dances last year, some of them had little bells around their feet. Is that for almost all of the dances they would have, or is that just more or less a type of a village gimmick or something to add to it?
- S: I don't know. It could be. When I was a young child in Sunday school, Helen and I would wear the bells on our waist, and the boys wore them on their shoes or something. It must mean something, but I really don't know. I would imagine it came from the peasants, and it could have been a gimmick, [but] I don't know. It adds a lot. All the jingling is cute, but it is something that I learned, and I just carry it on without any real knowledge of it.
- M: One dance I want to ask you about is the kutashara. Some people have spoken about it quite a bit. Could you give us a little background regarding it that you have heard yourself.

S: All I know is that it is mostly a boys' dance, and I never have enough boys, so I always put girls in there, too, which is the way that I learned it. It is a sort of dance where "anything you can do I can do better," and a leader will begin with a step. Then, children who are watching will just keep in time with the music and copy it.

M: In other words, they imitate the leader.

S: Right, and each step becomes more difficult.

M: But, were there any basic steps that they would have to do, or was it that they have to make it up as they go along?

S: Oh, no. I have taught them the steps. They know what is happening; they know what is coming. The steps that I teach them are the steps that I learned as a student.

M: I mean, the dance itself has already had steps. You don't go and make it up as modern dances today, where you do just almost anything you want?

S: Oh, no. Now, the record that I have, has six separate steps, [and] that is it. I just slip them in if I remember them, but there are even more that I know. I took away some of the first easy ones. I gave them one easy one, and then I took away the second and third that I had learned. I don't know where she got them from; this is Helen again. Then I added, so that it was very difficult at the end. There must be a lot.

M: Have you noticed that the children are eager to learn this? Is it mostly the girls, or is it mostly girls and boys?

S: Well, the kids love it. They really, really enjoy it. I have a little group of boys, the Alanola group. They sing it; they sing Romanian and dance at the same time. I only have two boys now that are in my group, I think, because we have a shortage of boys at this age.

M: Right.

S: But the boys that are at it, really enjoy it.

M: How many do you have in the group in all?

S: Fifteen.

M: Fifteen. That is not too bad.

S: No, it is great. Since I'm taller than everyone, so much taller. . . . I have a teenage girl that acts as their leader when they do perform.

M: Could you tell us who she is?

S: Melanie Roberts.

M: Oh, I see.

S: I have her come in just near the end where we are ready to perform, because she knows the dances. She is their leader and keeps them all together. She is just a tiny bit taller than they are, where I am a lot taller. I didn't want to look like a mother with a bunch of little children. So then, I just teach them, and she leads them, then.

M: Oh, I see. Is there anything else that you want to add in regard to the dances or anything like that?

S: Not really. Luckily, we were able to get out Romanian records, which has been difficult at times.

M: Where do you get them from, Romania?

S: Oh, I get them all over. This is from Romania, these records here. These are all from Romania. I have bought them at different bazaars. I have bought these in the 1950s. Every year at a bazaar, I buy a new one, which they are imported from Romania.

There are some records that are made here, and the ones that I use are ones from an old man who had a band and made the records. Luckily, he made 33s. Well, he only had 78s, and they were unavailable. He is retired. Then, he made a 33. He was born in Romania, [and] he made his records here. For me, they are the easiest to teach to the children. The dances that come from Romania are very difficult to teach, too, because they are fancy.

M: Do you have knowledge whether in Romania, now, they are doing rock-n-roll type music?

S: Oh, yes. They do a lot of our music.

M: So in other words, they have become modernized, too, as we in America have?

S: Unfortunately they have, and so we here know more of the dances than they do and the children do there, or the teenagers or young adults. We are preserving what they really never even learned, and I think that is what happened.

M: Right. Now, is there anything else that you would want to add regarding anything?

S: I don't think so.

M: Thank you, then. Thank you very much for this enlightenment.

S: You are very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW