

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Romanian Culture

Personal Experience

O. H. 1070

JOHN BADILA

Interviewed

by

John Muntean

on

February 26, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN BADILA

INTERVIEWER: John Muntean

SUBJECT: Romanian culture, church, parking lot

DATE: February 26, 1976

M: This is an interview with John Badila for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program regarding Romanian culture in Mahoning County, by John Muntean, at 1932 East Midlothian Boulevard, on February 26, 1976, at 7:00 p.m.

Mr. Badila, could you tell us what part of Romania did you or your parents come from, sir?

B: I was born in Campanish, Romania.

M: About where is that located in Romania, sir?

B: In Transylvania.

M: In Transylvania. Were your parents born in that same area also?

B: Yes.

M: How old were you when you came to this country? Do you have any idea?

B: Well, I was born July 4, 1912. We came to this country in April of 1914.

M: I see. So you don't remember too much about Romania at all then?

B: I don't remember anything about Romania.

- M: Did your parents ever tell you about how it was like in Romania or what a typical day was like in Romania at all?
- B: Well, they would say what they did as youngsters and all that, but I don't recall.
- M: Did they ever mention about the way people lived over there? Were they farmers in that area in Transylvania?
- B: Yes.
- M: Did they have their own farms?
- B: Well, they had a plot of land that they worked.
- M: Was it like a farm set up over here now, or did they live in villages or what?
- B: No, they lived in a village. They had a vineyard near them.
- M: It was an area in which they had vineyards?
- B: Vineyards.
- M: Did they ever mention anything about their schooling in Romania or anything?
- B: No.
- M: What motivated your parents to come to the United States, sir?
- B: Well, they were seeking a way to make a better living, I guess.
- M: Did they ever mention from what source that they heard about the United States as being a place to make a better living sir?
- B: They had heard about it from friends and relatives that had visited here or had come here. They would write and tell them that the United States was the place to be.
- M: So, in other words, this was their promised land so to call. When your parents came to this country, did they ever mention about having a difficulty in coping to the American way of life in other words, changes?

B: Yes, yes, when I was a youngster, I remember if you didn't know the language real well, people would make fun of you.

M: Do you mean know the American language, English?

B: English, yes. Now we lived in a neighborhood that had many nationalities. Well, people would poke fun at each other.

M: Was this in Youngstown, sir?

B: Yes, that is the only thing I remember about Youngstown because I had been away from Youngstown.

M: Now when you were a youngster and growing up in Youngstown, did the Romanian community offer anything in the way of social gatherings or anything, sir?

B: Yes, we had the church, and we had the Romanian society down on Poland Avenue. It used to be there the Romanian society. They would have programs. They would have dancing, and the church would have church services and so on and so forth.

M: What kind of dancing would they have at that place? Was it American type of dancing or Romanian dancing?

B: No, Romanian type of dancing. Of course, as the years went by the young people generally learned how to dance their own American-type dancing.

M: Well, who taught them how to dance the Romanian type of dances?

B: Oh, they brought it back with them. They brought it with them from Romania.

M: Did your parents teach you how to dance, or was it just that you. . .

B: I learned it from watching.

M: From other children?

B: Yes, seeing the people dancing. I would imitate them and get into a group and follow like they still do.

M: Did they have any other type of entertainment?

- B: Well, they had plays and singing and dancing.
- M: Were the plays that they performed, Mr. Badila, was it performed in Romanian, or was it performed in English?
- B: Romanian.
- M: Romanian.
- B: Romanian comedy and acting and so forth.
- M: Did people dress up for that, or were they dressed up in their usual American dresses?
- B: Well, Romanian costume--make believe Romanian costumes.
- M: At those places also did they have food?
- B: Yes, they would have banquets and dancing and plays in the foreground.
- M: Now did they have anything that you might consider Romanian type of dishes?
- B: Yes, Romanian type of food. The ladies who belonged to the organization would pitch in and serve. They had learned how to make it in Romanian.
- M: Now during this time was there a Romanian Orthodox church in the city of Youngstown?
- B: During the time I remember, yes.
- M: Where was it located, Mr. Badila?
- B: On Wilson Avenue.
- M: Could you describe that church a little bit for us from what you can remember?
- B: Well, it was not too big of a church. As the years rolled by, why, we raised funds. We raised the church and put a hall underneath there.
- M: This is on Wilson Avenue?
- B: Yes, Wilson Avenue. We put a hall, a social hall underneath the church. We had programs; we have the choir organization with the youth and young people would meet. Father Stanila would conduct classes in Romanian,

language classes at the church.

M: Now that church itself on Wilson Avenue, sir, do you know if that church was a house that was converted into a church or was it built as a church?

B: Oh, it was built as a church.

M: It was built as a church. Was it wooden, brick, or what?

B: Wooden frame.

M: Frame church. About where at on Wilson Avenue was it located? Do you have any idea?

B: Well, there are two churches on Wilson Avenue. On the right-hand side going from Himrod Avenue.

M: Himrod?

B: Yes, and there are two churches. One is a Syrian church, and our church was the next church that is on the corner. Of course, there is a church there now.

M: Some other nationalities have. . .

B: They have converted the church; they built a large structure.

M: Now was there any residence for the priest at that church at all?

B: Yes, they had a residence right across the way.

M: Across the street then?

B: Yes.

M: Oh, I see, and was that specially built for that, or was that an old house?

B: No, they bought it.

M: Now at that church was there any seats for people to sit down inside?

B: No, in those days they didn't have seats. They just had seats along the edges. They were called stranae, seats along the edges with little armrests. The people that

were good supporters of the church would sign up for these seats at the beginning of the year. They would pay for the privilege of sitting there, and every Sunday they had their own particular seat.

M: Now I know in the present church you are part of our treasury system. They have envelopes that they give the people now. Did they have envelopes in those days? Do you recall?

B: I don't think so. Father Stanila probably started it. But I don't think we had envelopes at that time. We would have collection of plates.

M: Because right now we have the envelope in which you put your donation, and you could write down what you are giving.

B: Well, in those days in the beginning I don't recall there being envelopes.

M: So it was probably more or less open plate collection then?

B: That is right.

M: Did the church resemble the way the present church on Wick Avenue looks, sir? I know the icons would be the same, but was the structure basically the same? In other words did they have in the back for a choir?

B: Yes, we had an attic.

M: A loft?

B: We had a choir loft at the back of the church.

M: Was there any hall in that building?

B: Like I said, we lifted up the church and put a hall in down in the basement.

M: Oh, in the basement?

B: Yes.

M: Now is that where the Sunday school would have met?

B: Yes.

M: Do you recall anything about Sunday school? Did you attend Sunday school at that time? Do you recall?

B: It wasn't Sunday school; it was a school that you would attend on Saturdays. You would learn about religion and about speaking the Romanian language and about writing the Romanian language.

M: Now the people who did not sit around the edges where did those people go in the church?

B: They would stand in church.

M: You mean stand completely?

B: That is right. Later on though, they started putting benches in the church. But at the beginning they all stood up except for people that had the stranae that they would pay for a certain amount each year. So and so would sit here and so and so would sit there; so and so would sit there. Then, of course, if they were absent and so on, then someone from the congregation would sit there in their place. But ordinarily they would come and sit in those seats.

M: Now still this is during the time of you being a young adult and more or less in the transition of the young adult. Did the church itself have any kind of activities to provide for the children other than the Romanian school itself and those plays? Did they have anything to do with that?

B: No, the church didn't have any plays.

M: Oh, it was the society then?

B: The society.

M: Oh, so the church in other words was the focal point of people just meeting.

B: That is right.

M: But the people themselves had their Romanian culture that they still attended through that? In other words it wasn't like today; the church is more or less the focal point for some of the people who want to teach the Romanian tradition.

B: Well, in those days the people did. . . Well, there was



an Orthodox church and a Catholic church. The Byzantine Catholic church was on Prospect Street where I said earlier, and where it still is today. Our church, of course, was on Wilson Avenue. The people from both churches belonged to the society. They would have entertainment or cultural program at the society. In other words we would have play banquets, and we would have dances at the society.

M: Well, most of the banquets that the church has today is to raise money. Was most of the banquets at that time to raise money, or was it more or less well-kept social dinners?

B: No, they also had a banquet to raise money in those days. In other words they only had a few staunch leaders of the church, and they would strive and struggle to get more money together so if we wanted to move from there, we would have an opportunity. Then that is why we went to Wick Avenue. They found out that the Arms' mansion was available for us. They did us a tremendous favor. Now that property was worth something like \$300,000.

M: You mean the present property now?

B: When we got the property, we got it for \$15,000.

M: Oh, really. Was there anybody occupying that house at that time, or was it deserted?

B: Well, no, it was not occupied at the time; it was empty. It was occupied a short time before that, but then they didn't need it because they had this home and that home.

M: The Arms Museum?

B: No, but they had this other that used to be that music school.

M: Oh, you mean Dana?

B: Yes.

M: That belonged to the Arms too?

B: From what I gather. Now I didn't know them personally.

M: When the Romanians acquired the residence on Wick Avenue, did they tear the place completely down, or did they use some of it and remodel it?

- B: They used the same original structure. We put the tower in front so that it would be the old Orthodox replica of the tower. Then we added the church hall in back.
- M: But what about where the present church is in where you hold services and like that? There were rooms there. Did you just tear those completely out or what?
- B: I guess. As a matter of fact there was a ballroom.
- M: There was? Oh, it must have really been a big place.
- B: Oh, yes, yes. They had a ballroom and a lot of different rooms involved heated by fireplaces.
- M: When they worked on that place, sir, did they have a master plan to follow that was set up by the priest or by the committee?
- B: Yes, well, they had. . . No, we had a committee at that time. Then we had to hire an architect by the name of R. C. Russo. He is the one who designed what walls to tear, what walls to remain, what walls to reinforce, what needed to be reinforced. He decided. Then he was also instrumental in getting the artists to paint murals and stuff. They painted, and we still have some paintings. Now we have repainted between the designs. The mastercraftsman had taken the time to repaint, but the original design is still there.
- M: Now that wood that is by the altar I have always marvelled at it, is that original wood?
- B: Yes, well, that was the original wood from that mansion.
- M: You just carved it then?
- B: No, no, it was carved. It was bedroom suites and so on and so forth. We took the bedroom suites woodwork. For example, they had ornate beds or various walls that were trimmed in this beautiful wood.
- M: I see.
- B: And we rescued it from there and used it for the altar.
- M: So who was the priest during this transformation from Wilson Avenue to there?
- B: Father John Stanila.

M: Now when this was going on, were the services done in Romanian or English or a mixture?

B: Romanian, strictly Romanian at that time. But as the years rolled by we were becoming slowly Americanized. He would give part of the services in English.

M: Now, Mr. Badila, what people moved the church to Wick Avenue? You mentioned that on Wilson they didn't have any Sunday school or anything like that. Did they start any Sunday school then at Wick Avenue?

B: Yes, I think so.

M: Where did they hold it at? Do you have any recollection?

B: Well, before we built the downstairs, or remodel downstairs, we had Sunday school in the various rooms.

M: Do you mean in the social hall?

B: They had two rooms in the alcove; we had two rooms there for Sunday school. Then we remodeled, and we built the Sunday school for downstairs.

M: What was downstairs prior to this remodeling?

B: Just an old basement.

M: Just an old basement?

B: Old basement, yes. As a matter of fact we spent a lot of money to dig it deeper to get head space. We couldn't lift the church because it was too mammoth of a job. Then we had an excavator by contractors. The excavator dug floors for us.

M: It must have been pretty expensive then?

B: I don't recall just what it was, but I know we spend a tremendous amount of money. Mr. Tralveks was the one that was the money-man of the church. He was the real contributor. It was through his guidance, I guess, we made the progress we did. Of course, there were a lot of other people, but he was one of our staunch supporters.

M: In regards to this church on Wick Avenue there have been many changes over the years. Have you seen any changes

that occurred in this church?

B: What do you mean by changes?

M: Well, as years go by things naturally have to change because there is the older people who get older and the younger people become a little bit more mature and things like that.

B: Well, yes, we had changes; we had some pretty hectic times sometimes. Some people believed in doing things this way, and some people believed in doing them the other way. Maybe if you were on the side of Father Stanila, he was the priest, you believed in his way of doing things, then you backed him. Now if someone didn't believe that you should do it that way, they would give you a hard time. That was how it was through the years.

M: Were most of the changes in the sense of trying to keep the Romanian heritage or trying to Americanize the activities?

B: Well, there was never a question as to the way we should abandon the Romanian heritage. No, there was never a question of that. It used to be that some people would say, "Well, doggone it, we should have him give the services more in English." They also asked what our kids were going to do because the kids were abandoning the church as they grew up. They were going elsewhere; they were getting married. They would marry a girl of a different nationality or a boy of a different nationality, and they would abandon the church. Their argument was that if we didn't convert to more American way of doing things, we were going to lose the young people. Today it is still happening.

M: What do you contribute to the thing that has caused such changes? Is it news media now and the way young people see things? In other words when this church was built in 1945. . .

B: Well, do you mean the Wick Avenue church?

M: Yes, built around 1945. You say that once the services were done in Romanian. I presume that you still had some of these plays and activities going on for people to socialize Romanian ways?

B: Yes, well, the plays were in the society in the Romanian hall where we had the plays.

M: Where is that located at, sir?

B: On Poland Avenue right where the bridge crosses. . .

M: South Avenue?

B: Himrod Avenue bridge crosses. That is where it is located. Of course, we had plays. We rehearsed plays down at our church, and we put them on at the Romanian hall.

B: Do you think that if there would be another Romanian hall that might aid in bringing back such things? I know our church has tried to do some of that in their limited facilities base over there. But do you think that if they had something like this, it might help to bring some of the Romanian people who still go to your church across the street and our people back together a little bit?

B: I think so, if they had a large hall. But we never made a success with the hall. See, we had the Romanian hall, and the only time we had a doing there was on a Sunday or maybe a Saturday night dance. I mean it took a lot to keep the place. You needed to maintain the property, and it took quite a bit of financing. They converted that part of it to a bar room where they raise funds by having a bar. But they never made out and never did too good. When they moved out there, well, they had left that hall.

M: Could you tell us what your position is and has been at the Romanian Orthodox church on Wick Avenue? You have served in various capacities in which you have been a tremendous help to the congregation.

B: I haven't done much more than the average person, I guess. Years ago I became the president of our choir club. I was the president of choir club on Wilson Avenue.

M: What was the function of this club?

B: Well, choir, it was the young people's choir. In other words they would come to join the choir, and we would have social activities.

M: What was the function of this club?

B: Well, choir, it was the young people's choir. In other words they would come to join the choir, and we would

have social activities.

M: Would you sing at any special places?

B: Sometimes we would go to Erie, Pennsylvania, and one time we went to Ellwood City.

M: In other words you would sing at these social gatherings.

B: Yes, that is right, at social gatherings. Then we would have plays. We would have plays, and we would take the plays over there.

M: Were these plays old Romanian type of plays, or were they plays that people devised now in America?

B: Old Romanian plays.

M: So in other words it was passing and going back from your past generation and passing it on to the present?

B: Yes, comedy plays is what they were. In other words to help you relieve your mind of the worries of the day is what they were. People came from miles around.

M: They were written down on paper?

B: No.

M: Were people charged to go and watch it?

B: Oh, yes, and they would come to the dance. They would come to the play, and there was a dance afterwards. They would come from miles around to see. It was light-hearted.

M: We are missing something now. We have the television, but television isn't everything.

B: No, those plays were okay. But it all depends, some people, would say, "That was but a bunch of stuff." Hey, if you don't enjoy it, you don't participate in it. But it was enjoyable.

M: Could you tell us anything else regarding your role in church?

B: Like I said I was president of choir club. We moved to Wick Avenue, and I was in the service in the meantime.

When we went to Wick Avenue, I was active in there in choir club there. Then, of course, I became vice-president of council; then I became president, and I gave up being vice-president.

M: Who was priest during that time, sir?

B: Father Stanila.

M: Father Stanila, I see. Was this during the 1950's?

B: 1950's and 1960's.

M: I see. Could you tell us a little bit about how it was at that time? Do you recall anything regarding the church itself? What was the outlook of the church then? Were they thinking of the future at all, or were they more concerned about what was going on right then and there?

B: We were thinking of the future; we were thinking of, say, we have a parking lot there now. Years ago, about fifteen or sixteen or twenty years ago, I was scouting around to find out who owns what property and if it was for sale. I talked to the people who owned the property behind us. They said that they would let us have it rather than the college because they didn't care for the college. So they would rather let us have it if they were ready to sell. A year went by, and the lady died. Then her son sold us the property, the Walker estate. Then we bought Woolridge property next door. We rented apartments there for a couple of years. Then we decided that it was about time because we were having difficulty in parking across the way.

M: I remember we used to park out in the street too on Wick Avenue.

B: Yes, we had a president that was pretty good at that.

M: How did you raise the money for this? Did you have a special fund for it?

B: No, it was the church funds. For example, we pitched in. . . We had contributions from council. So and so gave \$100, and I gave \$100 and so and so gave \$100. Then we had a number of people who gave \$100 to start the fund rolling. Then, of course, a lot of people contributed \$25, \$35, \$50, you know. Then we had a fund that we could take money out of the treasury.

M: So in other words the Romanian people were thinking of the future and were willing to pay their debts to help the future debts?

B: That is right. For example, I tried to scout around to get those buildings removed, and I contacted the fire department. The captain of the fire department came in and talked about setting the place on fire to burn it down. The fire department would have recruits who wanted to join the fire department. The recruits would come and fight the fire. But they felt the smoke and flames would be so severe and the people on the north side would complain. We had just about sold them on the idea; then they changed their mind.

M: Oh, so you had to knock it down then?

B: So we had to knock it down. It cost quite a bit of money too to knock that building down. We just about had them sold on that.

M: Who did you rent those apartment houses to? Was it college students at that time?

B: Yes, college students.

M: Mr. Badila, is there anything that you would like to bring up that we haven't covered at all regarding Romanian culture or the church or anything at all that you can think of?

B: No, I don't think so. I think it is going good. Lately we have had a little bit of friction in the way about things at church, but I think it is getting good now pretty well.

M: Do you foresee in the future that the church will retain its Romanian image, or do you suppose that heritage would have to be taken over by the societies in other words to keep it going for the future, sir?

B: It is hard to tell; it all depends. The church is a pretty big organization in Youngstown. We have a tremendous following. We could get more following if we work it right. We have lots of new prospective members and lots of people that have dropped out that are coming back.

M: Should the church become a melting pot itself of different nationalities rather than be just an Orthodox



church, or do you think they should keep the heritage of Romania going?

B: I don't think they should lose the Romanian heritage. I think they can become Americanized to where they have services in English every other Sunday or every Sunday.

M: But you think they should keep some of that Romanian in the service?

B: Well, it all depends. You see, I can understand the English language. But a lot of people can't too well, but they are passing away.

M: You mean understanding the Romanian language?

B: Yes, and then after they are gone, what is the use? See what I mean? You can still have Romanian language; you can still have Romanian language through. . . For example, we had Romanian classes. A lot of people were interested in Romanian. They weren't interested in Romanian for years, but they are interested in Romanian now and want to learn more about it. I don't think they will be able to do away with Romanian all together.

M: Thank you for the interview, sir.

END OF INTERVIEW