

UDC 930.85(4-12)

ISSN 0350-7653

SERBIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES AND ARTS
INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

BALCANICA

XLII

ANNUAL OF THE INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES

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BELGRADE
2011



SÎNZIANA PEDA, *ISTORIE ȘI MEMORIE ÎN COMUNITĂȚILE CEHIOR DIN CLISURA DUNĂRII*
[HISTORY AND MEMORY: CZECHS IN THE DANUBE GORGE].

UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ-BOLYAI CLUJ-NAPOCA, INSTITUTUL DE ISTORIE ORALĂ,
CLUJ-NAPOCA: ARGONAUT, 2010, pp. 326.

*Reviewed by Aleksandra Djurić-Milovanović**

Contemporary research into small ethnic communities highlights several elements important to understanding the strategies of their identity building. Being small in number, these communities often lack elites of their own capable of channelling identity construction “from the inside”. As a result, public and scholarly discourse about them is shaped “from the outside”, which is a process that either does not involve the internal perspective, the voices of the communities in question, or does not do it appropriately. The study by the Romanian anthropologist Sînziana Preda presents the Czech ethnic community in the Danube Gorge in the Romanian part of Banat from the perspective of oral history. Her use of oral history in reconstructing the community’s collective identity shows that a community’s orally transmitted memory plays an important role in identity construction. The study is based on field research carried out among the Czech communities whose population of about 3,800 is concentrated in Caraș-Severin County in the southwest of Romania. Apart from the introduction, the book includes five chapters, a conclusion, an extensive bibliography and indexes. The introduction, devoted to the concept of memory as the source for creating a community’s microhistory, seeks to elucidate less-known elements of their tradition, culture and customs. Preda lays emphasis on collective memory which is not static but dynamic and reconstructive, and which is not focused on pursuing the truth but rather seeks to embed the identity of a group in the past. The research covers six Czech settlements in the southwest of the Romanian Banat, Sfânta

Elena, Bigăr, Gârnic, Eibenthal, Ravenska and Șumița, with their two hundred years long history. Although surrounded by the Romanian majority and a Serbian minority population, their inhabitants have preserved their language, religion and culture. The name *Pemii*, used to designate the Czechs in these settlements, originated among the Banat Germans, who called the Czechs “Böhmen”, which gave rise to the appellation “Bemi”, i.e. “Pemi”. According to the author, *small histories* are as important as *big histories* in preserving the identity and cohesion of a community. Thus, we can speak of “parallel histories”: one that underscores the origin of the Czechs and the settlement of their “glorious ancestors”, and another that forms part of the history of the Romanian people and of the region presently populated by Czechs.

The first chapter, “The Memory, an alternative discourse of history”, highlights the significance of the oral histories of individuals as a testimony about various events and experiences. Oral history appears as an alternative to “classical” history. Furthermore, based on oral history, on the traditions about founding and establishing settlements, the first chapter describes the migration of the Czechs from one part of the Habsburg Empire, Bohemia, to another, the Banat, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Colonizing the previously uninhabited areas of the Danube Gorge (between 1823 and 1828), the Czechs established the so-called colonies or enclaves, which have been “functioning

* Institute for Balkan Studies, Belgrade

in accordance with their own unwritten rules” until the present. The population mostly worked in mines, which would become one of their identity markers. The author notes that all traditions about the founding of their settlements are accompanied by a discourse on sacrifice emphasizing the role of heroic ancestors. The heroes of the Czech *Pemi* are the mythical ancestors who sacrificed themselves in a distant past in order to lay the foundation of the communities that have largely survived to this day. These heroes, rarely mentioned in documentary sources, live in the memory of their descendants, who thus symbolically demonstrate the awareness of their ethnic identity and origin. The second chapter, “Turbulent history of the new existence”, deals with the settlements established by the Czechs in the Romanian part of the Banat and the historical and cultural context in which the colonists built their churches and schools and organized their life in mountain villages. The Roman Catholic religion and Czech language played a major role in keeping the community together, which, along with strongly supported endogamy, prevented their assimilation by the Romanian majority population. The author notes that the available data concerning the Czechs in the late nineteenth century are scarce and fragmentary, and largely demographic and administrative in nature. The history of the Czech community in Romania during the twentieth century was marked by repatriation. After the Second World War, a large number of them chose to return to Czechoslovakia, which considerably reduced the Czech community. The image of communism in the discourse of the interviewed community members, and parallelisms between “then” and “now”, show an intertwining with their experience of their present life and their position in Romanian society. The most prominent feature of their perception of the communist past is an affirma-

tive attitude towards the communist social policy, particularly as regards the mining industry, which was the source of jobs for a good part of the Czech population. The third chapter, “The images and discourses: Autobiographical examples”, is devoted to the life stories of the interviewed community members. Personal stories are intertwined with historical events to which they testify from their own perspective. A qualitative analysis of the interviews shows how a community constructs its identity and alterity, using, among other things, autobiographical accounts. Through an analysis of “microculture”, the fourth chapter, “Culture, tradition and oral history”, highlights the understanding and transmission of oral tradition in present times. Relying on the interviews, the author arrives at the conclusion that there is a strong interest in finding out about their ethnic origin, as well as a desire to preserve the tradition and culture as they once were. Some customs long extinguished in the Czech Republic have thus survived in these isolated mountain villages in Romania. The preservation and revival of tradition through festivals plays an important role in the Czech community, acting as a “place of memory”, where reminiscences are shared and revived. The fifth chapter, “Regained or restored identity”, deals with contacts and relations between the Romanian Czech community and their mother country, as well as with their relations with other ethnic communities in the multiethnic and multi-confessional part of the Romanian Banat. In her conclusion, Preda points out that the disintegration of the Czech community in the Danube Gorge is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a result of the changes within the traditional social environment of an autochthonous rural area. Socio-economic changes in Romanian society have brought about migration from rural to urban areas, resulting in a more rapid assimilation of minority

communities. In the case of the Czech community, the pace of the processes of assimilation and acculturation has been rather slow due to the isolated location of their settlements, but also to the Roman Catholic religion. However, the isolation has prevented neither their emigration to the Czech Republic over the past few decades nor their marriages with members of the majority population. The life stories of the interviewees presented in the study reveal how they see themselves in relation to others and their perception of the past at the present moment. Apart from fieldwork, the data collecting process included archival research, as well as consulting relevant historiographical, folkloristic, dialectological, ethnological and anthro-

pological considerations, which considerably enhanced the study, placing it into an interdisciplinary framework. The strong point of the study resides in the exemplary presentation of personal biographies, through which members of this small ethnic community articulate the complex relationship between tradition and modernity. Apart from supplying numerous examples, the book offers an important analysis of the continued existence and development of an ethnic community in the diaspora, which makes it a very useful contribution to research in the field of humanities and social sciences in general, but also a helpful research model applicable to other neighbouring ethnic groups in the Romanian Banat, such as Serbs.