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The Petitions of Roma Deportees as a Source for the Study of the Deportation Sites in Transnistria

Abstract: Researching the deportation of approximately 25,000 Roma from Romania to Transnistria in the years 1942 to 1944 benefits from a large amount of documents, preserved in various archives in Romania and Ukraine, which facilitate a detailed study of this historical phenomenon. A special category of documents is represented by the petitions that deported Roma sent to the Romanian occupation administration in this territory, at different levels. Some were individual petitions, others spoke on behalf of a group of deportees. The content of the petitions is very different. In many petitions, especially in the first months after deportation, the petitioners demanded the repatriation of themselves and their families. But in many others the Roma complained about the miserable conditions in the deportation sites, asked the authorities to give them shelter, food and clothes, and to ensure them a better treatment, enabling them to survive. Also, the Roma required to have a place to work or to be allowed to exercise their crafts in the villages they were placed in or in the vicinity.

In the first part, this article discusses this type of sources, with their specificity and potential. The Roma petitions are important not just for the historical information they contain, but also because they provide insights into the contemporary deportees' perspective on the deportation and the state of affairs in deportation sites. In the second part, based on the petitions, living condition of deported Roma in the Eastern part of Transnistria as well as relations with the local Ukrainian population will be discussed.

Introduction

The deportation of Roma to Transnistria is the story of approximately 25,000 Romanian citizens – of which more than 11,000 were considered ‘nomads’ and about 14,000 ‘sedentary’ –, originary from all regions of the country. The government lead by Marshall Ion Antonescu deported them in the summer and autumn of 1942 to the Soviet territory situated between the rivers Dniestr and Bug, which then was under Romanian military occupation. The 25,000 Roma were selected according to certain criteria from a total Roma population of 208,700, as estima-

ted by the Central Institute for Statistics in Bucharest.¹ This deportation was related to the population policy of the Antonescu government, more precisely to the project of ethnic homogenization of the country. The Roma were settled at the border of or inside villages located in Eastern Transnistria, on the bank of the Bug in the districts of Oceacov, Berezovca, Golta, and Balta.² The living conditions at the deportation sites were extremely harsh, which explains why until the spring of 1944, when the survivors returned to Romania, about 11,000 deported had died, mostly due to inhuman conditions of accommodation and food, cold and epidemics. Most of them passed away during a typhoid epidemic that broke out in the middle of December 1942 in the so-called Gypsy villages in the northern part of Oceacov district.³

The Roma were the second largest population group that the Antonescu government deported to Transnistria, after the approximately 160,000 Jews, almost all from the provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina, who were deported in several waves between October 1941 and October 1942.⁴ In some places in Transnistria, Jews and Roma deportees lived in the same locality and worked on the same farm or construction site.

The history of deportation of Roma to Transnistria has a rich documentary base. The most important sources in terms of quantity and information are historical documents, which are collected in various archives in Romania and Ukraine. Most of these files on the deportations were created by the authorities and institutions at the central or local level in Romania, but also in Transnistria, and have been preserved to this day.

1 A statistical study of the Roma population in Romania in its borders from 1942, based on the data of the general census of 1930, was made by the Central Institute for Statistics in September 1942. See Lucian Nastasă and Andrea Varga (eds.): *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Țigani din România (1919–1944)*, Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Culturală, 2001, doc. 207, 333–412.

2 In this article the districts and rayons in Transnistria, which were created by the Romanian occupation administration, appear with their Romanian name, which was official between 1941 and 1944. Instead, for villages, communes and towns in Transnistria, the Ukrainian names are used, from that time but also today.

3 On the deportation of Roma to Transnistria, see Viorel Achim: *The Roma in Romanian History*, Budapest, New York: CEU Press, 2004, 163–188; Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail E. Ionescu (eds.): *International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania. Final Report*, Iași: Polirom, 2005, 223–241; Viorel Achim: “La déportation des Roms en Transnistrie, les données principales”, in *Études tsiganes*, 56/57, 2015, 68–89.

4 On the deportations of Jews to Transnistria, see Jean Ancel: *Transnistria, 1941–1942. The Romanian Mass Murder Campaigns*, volume 1, Jerusalem: The Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, 2003; Radu Ioanid: *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008, 176–224.

Among the archival documents, a special category are the petitions that the deported Roma addressed in those years to the Romanian occupation authorities in Transnistria (the governor of Transnistria, the prefects of the districts, the praetors of the rayons, other authorities, the management of some state farms, etc.) or to authorities in the country (the Presidency of the Ministry Council, Marshall Ion Antonescu, the *Conducător* of the State, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, etc.). There are hundreds of petitions preserved in the Ukrainian regional archives of Odessa and Mykolaiv or in the National Archives of Romania in Bucharest. Of these, about 30 have been published,⁵ and some have been used in various publications on the deportation of Roma. With a multitude of issues which they refer to, these petitions are a valuable source for those who study the deportations to Transnistria.

In the first part of this contribution I will discuss this category of sources, with their specificity and potential. The petitions are important not just for information on historical events, but also because they show how the Roma reacted to the deportation and how they tried to survive. These first-person testimonies, written while suffering persecution, are also important because they allow us to understand the Roma's own perspective on the deportation. In the second part, the article reconstructs, based on the petitions, some internal realities of the groups of deported Roma in the villages, farms, ghettos and camps in the Eastern part of Transnistria, where these people were settled. As I will show, the petitions speak about lack of shelter, starvation, cold, epidemics, the death of a large number of people, the work that the Roma did in the kolkhoz or sovkhoz, for the local mayor's office and some construction sites, but also about the relations between the Roma and the local Ukrainian population.

The Phenomenon of Roma Petitions

Petitions of deported Roma are an important type of source from several points of view. First of all they exist in relatively large numbers. Romanian and Ukrainian archives hold several hundred petitions from Roma deported to Transnistria. In contrast, in Germany and other countries under German occupation or in the orbit of Nazi Germany documents from the years of the Porajmos coming from the Roma are very few. The project *Voices of the Victims*, coordinated by Karola Fings and published in 2018 at the RomArchive website, dealt with this category

⁵ Viorel Achim (ed.): *Documente privind deportarea Țigănilor în Transnistria*, volume I and II, Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2004.

of documents and published 60 pieces from 20 European countries, including three documents from Romania.⁶ These are letters, petitions, protests, appeals for help, witness statements, and some interviews taken immediately after the end of the war.

The special situation in Romania is explained by the fact that the deported Roma, as they did not lose their Romanian citizenship, were allowed to communicate with the authorities in Transnistria and those in the country – notwithstanding of restrictions which were in place. Also, to some extent, they were able to communicate with their relatives in the country, in cases where not the whole family was deported. Naturally, this situation materialized in documents written or dictated by deported Roma, in which they speak in first person.

Most petitions concern a group, not an individual. There are no petitions that speak on behalf of all Roma deported to Transnistria or on behalf of all Roma in a district or a rayon. There are only a few petitions where signers of the same petition come from several neighbouring or even more remote villages. All of these petitions ask for repatriation and were sent together with lists of names of tens of people from several villages in Transnistria.

Petitions come from places where there was a larger number of Roma, from a few dozen to several hundred, and where the Roma had a certain level of organization, i.e. in places where the Transnistrian authorities had concentrated the deportees into some sort of ghetto. This means that the group was headed by a leader appointed by the Transnistrian authorities, who had authority over the group but also some responsibilities for it, and was interested in having ‘his people’ in acceptable living conditions. Often this man was the traditional leader of the group, as was the case in Romania even before the deportations. The large concentrations of Roma with an organization of this kind were called ‘Gypsy villages’ (in Romanian ‘*sate de țigani*’) by the authorities and here the head was called, in the official language, ‘Gypsy mayor’ or ‘mayor of Gypsies’ (in Romanian ‘*primar de țigani*’ or ‘*primarul țiganilor*’). In these places as a rule the ‘Gypsy mayor’ was the person who wrote the petitions on behalf of himself as the head, or on behalf of the entire group. However, there are also petitions from ordinary people. In contrast, there are hardly any petitions coming from Roma who lived in small numbers in an Ukrainian village.

While most petitions were written or dictated by men, in the archives there are also petitions from women. Among the deported ‘sedentary’ Roma were hun-

⁶ See Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma e.V.: “Rumänien”. Available at: <https://www.romarchive.eu/de/voices-of-the-victims/romania/>. Last accessed: 30.07.2021.

dreds of women as heads of family, which can be explained mainly by the fact that their husbands were mobilized into the army. Some of these women communicated with the Transnistrian authorities or with the country's authorities through petitions.

Yet, petitions are not the only documents from those years produced by the deported Roma. There are also statements made by Roma to the Transnistrian and Romanian authorities on various occasions. These sources are quite numerous. For example, Roma who had fled Transnistria and were caught on the road or in their place of origin in Romania, were headed to the gendarmes or police precinct where they were taken a statement about their escape. In these statements Roma described not only how they managed to escape from Transnistria, but also why they did. Besides, we also find letters, postcards, and telegrams sent by the deportees. However, just few of these sources exist, because the families did not keep them. Only those pieces have reached the archives that have either been intercepted by the authorities or were later included in a file related to a repatriation request.⁷ Diaries kept by Roma deportees or other personal records kept by them are not known or have not been preserved.

The Content and Dynamics of Roma Petitions

The petitions of the Roma deported to Transnistria cover a multitude of issues. In many petitions, the petitioners demanded the repatriation of themselves and their families. But in many others the Roma complained about the miserable conditions in the deportation sites, asked the authorities to provide shelter, food and clothes, and to ensure them a better treatment in order to enable them to survive. Also, the Roma required to have a place to work or to be allowed to exercise their crafts in the villages they were placed in.

As many petitioners, when they appeared before the authorities with their requests, wrote about the difficult situation in the places where they were thrown, the petitions are thus important sources for the knowledge of the deportation of Roma to Transnistria. The fact that the petitions come from people who have directly experienced deportation makes them an indispensable sources for understanding the destiny of these people. However, there is a dynamic regard-

⁷ For a telegram of this category, dated March 22, 1943, send from Vradiivka, Transnistria, by a deported Roma to a fellow villager from Dobreni, Ilfov County, Romania, see Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 347, 153–154.

ing the content of the petitions. In the beginning, almost all petitions asked for repatriation, then the petitions addressed more and more diverse issues.

Petitions existed everywhere in Transnistria. The 'nomadic' Roma too made petitions which, because they usually were illiterate, were dictated by them and put on paper by other people: a man from the occupation administration (for example, a gendarme from the gendarmes precinct in the commune), a deported Romanian Jew living in the same place as a deportee, or another person who knew Romanian.

The problems faced by the deported Roma were about the same everywhere in Transnistria. Yet, there were some local differences in terms of treatment, food, epidemics, sanitary situation, as well as the mortality and survival rate. The deportees knew the living conditions in other parts of the region and this explains why some of them asked to be removed, under the pretext of finding the family, but in fact to improve their living situation.⁸

The latest known petitions by Roma in Transnistria were written in March 1944, a few days before the Romanian occupation administration withdrew from Transnistria. They originated from Roma on the Sukha Balka farm in Berezovca district, who asked the prefect of the district to issue them authorizations for the sale of the bone combs they made. They sold their goods in their area, but also at greater distances in Transnistria.⁹ In March 1944, the survivors had already begun to leave en masse the deportation sites. On April 10, 1944, the Red Army crossed the Bug, and the Romanian army and administration withdrew from this territory and with them Roma and Jewish deportees. However, deportees continued to petition the authorities even on their way home, in Romania, in the spring and summer of 1944.¹⁰

8 To give an example: Alexandru Păun, head of eight Roma families deported to the commune Hrushivka, Golta District, requested in October 1943 for these families to be moved to one of the kolkhozes from Birzula (since 2016: Podilsk), where they had relatives and former neighbours. See Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 520, 357–358.

9 Two of these petitions were published in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 604, 454–455 and doc. 605, 455.

10 For two petitions from this phase see Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 628, 481–482 and doc. 637, 491–493.

Realities from the Deportation Places in Transnistria as Reflected in Petitions

In the following, with the help of published and unpublished petitions, I will discuss some internal realities of the groups of deported Roma in the villages, farms, ghettos and camps in the Eastern part of Transnistria, where the deportees were settled, and I will review some petitions to show the range of issues covered by this category of documents.

Repatriation Requests Describing Conditions at Deportation Sites

As mentioned above, numerous petitions deal with requests for repatriation. Usually they are individual petitions, but there are collective petitions as well, some with dozens of signatures. Most of these petitions come from the Roma from Oceacov and Berezovca districts, i.e. from the ‘sedentary’ Roma. In contrast, ‘nomad’ Roma wrote only few petitions of this kind, because the Ministry of Internal Affairs forbade from the beginning the repatriation of this category. However, there are still about 20 petitions of ‘nomads’ asking for repatriation. With the ‘sedentary’ Roma the situation was different, because they could request repatriation and, if the investigation that normally had to be done following a petition proved that the deportation was conducted in violation of the orders in force, they in fact could be repatriated, as has happened in many cases.

Especially in the first months after the deportation, among the Roma in Transnistria, and especially the ‘sedentary’, there was a lot of hype around the repatriation. Many people asked to be repatriated and even those who did not petition for this believed they would be able to go back soon. As written in a report on the deportees in the commune Velyka Korenykha, Oceacov district, from April 13, 1943, “[a]lmost all Gypsies are sitting with their luggage”¹¹ waiting to be repatriated.

Petitions generally focused on demonstrating the illegal nature of the deportation. Petitioners motivated their requests for repatriation in that they were not one of the categories which, according to the orders of the Ministry of the Interior, were to be deported. They showed that they were ‘military elements’ (Roma

¹¹ Report of the Praetura of Varavrovca rayon to the Prefecture of the Oceacov District, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 362, 170–171, here 171.

who fought in the First or Second World War, Roma mobilized and Roma eligible for mobilization together with their families), that they had property in the country (so they were not poor elements) or that they had no criminal record. In some petitions they claimed that the deportation was made through the abuse of the local gendarmerie or police, that it was a violation of the orders, and that as a result the petitioner and his/her ones should be repatriated.

Some of the petitions requesting repatriation talk about the situation of Roma in the deportation sites. These are a few lines or a paragraph in which the petitioner mention miserable living conditions in the village, camp, etc. in Transnistria where he/she was taken, the shortages of all kinds, and diseases that haunted the deportees. The petitioner sometimes pointed out that people in that place starved to death and, where appropriate, showed that members of his/her family had died because of the inhuman living conditions.

A petition in this category is that of Margareta Dodan, a woman from the city of Iași, who was deported to Transnistria with her children. On December 16, 1942, in Odessa, she submitted to the governor of Transnistria a petition requesting repatriation:

The undersigned Margareta Dodan with five children, widow for a year and six months [sic], my husband has fallen wounded by a shell splinter on the battlefield and we are now without any help and at some point we've been brought to Transnistria and we've sold everything good we had and we're now starving and dying from cold here in the village Covaliovca [Kovalivka] distr[ict] of Oceacov and I came Mr. Governor with the request and with tears in my eyes because I couldn't stand the cold and the hunger I walked for 140 Kilometers to reach you with the request to give me an authorization to go to the country with my children to my dear home. We kiss your hands and feet Mr. Governor [and] I am waiting for this answer from your Highness.¹²

As one can see, in this petition Margareta Dodan describes in simple language the desperate situation of her and her deported children. The petition, which is written by another hand, is signed only with the names of Margareta Dodan and of the children Maria, Anica and Ileana Dodan, and Iacob Varlan. Margareta Dodan and her children were deported in September 1942, when about 14,000 'sedentary' Roma were taken to Transnistria. The Police Questure Iași had put this woman and her children on the list of "Gypsies who have no means of living

¹² Petition by Margareta Dodan, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 263, 47–48. Translation by the author.

or precise occupations from which to live honestly”,¹³ and the Ministry of Internal Affairs had decided to send her to Transnistria.

The Kovalivka village, located in Oceacov district (in the middle of December 1942 it became part of the Berezovca district), was one of the so-called Gypsy villages on the Bug river. In mid-October 1942, in Kovalivka, approximately 1,100 Roma were installed in 54 houses, representing about half of this village's houses. From the beginning, the conditions in which the deported lived were extremely tough. Deportees suffered from hunger, cold and illness. In the winter of 1942/1943, about half of the deportees in Kovalivka died, most of them because of an epidemic of exantematic typhus which broke out at the end of December 1942 and lasted until March the following year. The situation in Kovalivka is documented in many sources, either petitions of the Roma, or acts of the administration, as is the report made by one of the three commissions that the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie sent to Transnistria to investigate the situation of the Roma deportees in Oceacov and Berezovca districts. The report made by the Commission III, headed by Colonelul Sandu Moldoveanu, that worked in the Kovalivka-Andriivka-Varyushyne area from December 12 to 19, 1942, gives relevant information about the Roma in Kovalivka.¹⁴

The petition submitted by Margareta Dodan on December 16 was sent by the Governorate on December 31, 1942 to the Gendarmerie Inspectorate of Transnistria, with an order to investigate this case.¹⁵ But this was not needed anymore, because in the meantime Margareta Dodan's case had been reported by the commission mentioned above. The commission put Margareta on a list with persons proposed for repatriation. She asked to be repatriated on the grounds that she had a house in Iași and that she had two sons who were earning their living as musicians. The investigation conducted by the Police Questure Iași approved the repatriation of this family. However, the repatriation was delayed until May 1, 1943, due to the typhus epidemic. Meanwhile, four of Margareta's children died, probably because of the typhus. Finally, Margareta and Anica returned to Iași after May 1, 1943.

Along with Margareta Dodan, on the same day, Ștefan Feraru, another deportee from Kovalivka, who also made the trip on foot to Odessa, also a native

¹³ Fond Direcția Generală a Poliției, dosar 185/1942, Arhiva Națională Istorică Centrală, 113–119, here 116. Translation by the author.

¹⁴ Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 270, 59–64, here 61. The report dates from December 21, 1942.

¹⁵ Letter accompanying the petition of Margareta Dodan, fond 2242, opis 1, delo 1912, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Odes'koi oblasti, Odessa, Ukraine, 50, RG-31.004M, reel 6, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington.

of Iași, submitted a repatriation request to the governor of Transnistria. He was deported along with his wife, child and mother-in-law. He says that “so far what we have had as thrifty people, money, things, what we could, we sold and now we were dying of hunger and cold”.¹⁶

Petru Drângoi, a Roma deported to Nechayane commune, Oceacov district, in his petition to the governor of Transnistria, in July 1943, wrote that “[h]ere I fell ill with pulmonary tuberculosis, I am absolutely deprived of livelihood and doomed, along with my wife and two minor children”.¹⁷

On October 4, 1943, Ștefan Bejan, ‘mayor of Gypsies’, asked the governor of Transnistria for the repatriation of the Roma from the villages of Varyushyne, Novovandriivka and Yasna Polyana, Berezovca district, most of them originary from Dolhasca commune, Baia County. On this occasion he as well expressed the miserable conditions in these villages in Transnistria:

We are Romanianized Gypsies, who paid the taxes to the State like every Romanian citizen, and we are now undressed around winter, so that we can’t go out to get water, because our children laugh at us, at the way we look. We live tens of souls in one room.¹⁸

The last repatriation requests mentioned here were rejected. The three commissions sent by the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie to investigate the deportees’ complaints found that a large number of them were well-founded. Based on the reports prepared by the commissions,¹⁹ a favorable repatriation notice was given for 311 heads of families with 950 members, a total of 1,261 people.²⁰

16 Petition by Ștefan Feraru, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 262, 46–47, here 46. Translation by the author.

17 Petition by Petru Drângoi, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 428, 256. Translation by the author.

18 Petition by Ștefan Bejan, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 498, 331–332, here 332. Translation by the author.

19 For the three reports see Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 267, 51–54 (report from December 17, 1942), doc. 269, 56–59 (report from December 19, 1942), doc. 270, 59–64 (report from December 21, 1942).

20 These data appear in a report prepared by the General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, 05.02.1943, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 306, 107–108.

Petitions Dealing with the Harsh Conditions in the Deportation Sites

Other petitions address solely the situation of Roma in the deportation places, combined with the request for improvement of the living conditions. The petitioners ask to be provided with shelter, to receive the necessary food, to get clothes and shoes or to have the opportunity to buy them. Furthermore, they asked to have a place to work or be free to exercise their crafts. Some petitions describe the extremely harsh situation the Roma were living in and sometimes they even speak about the death of fellow deportees as well as abuses committed by authorities.

A significant example is a petition from September 16, 1943, sent by Ion Stan named Natale, ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ from the Farm Sukha Balka (Berezovca district), to the governor of Transnistria. The mayor shows the difficult situation of the 499 Roma, all originary from the commune Țândărei (Ialomița County) and requests the improvement of their situation:

Since July this year we have been working at the state farm Suha Balca [Sukha Balka], rayon Mostovoi, district Berezovca, doing agricultural work. By consulting the necessary information, you will see that we have only done agricultural work for the farm where we have been kept in good conditions. Since seasons have changed and winter approaches, we hereby ask you to be so kind as to examine our situation and give the necessary orders. We are naked and without clothes, all clothes we had have torn, especially since we came to Transnistria we have worked honestly and have kept ourselves out of our work, a thing that can be verified at any time by consulting the respective authorities. Please, Mr. Governor, be so kind and give the necessary orders for us to be given clothes and to be accommodated in decent houses during the winter, since it is impossible for us to live in huts.²¹

The ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ in Sukha Balka was supported in his approach by the director of the farm, engineer Teodor Apolzan, who sent this petition to the Prefecture of Berezovca District on September 17, 1943. By this occasion he emphasized that most of the Roma on the farm were naked and barefoot and that the farm did not have housing for their accommodation during the winter. He asked the prefect to intervene to the Governorate for the procurement of the materials necessary for building the huts for Roma and for solving the problem of clothing and footwear.²²

²¹ Petition by Ion Stan, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 483, 314–315. Translation by the author.

²² Letter by Teodor Apolzan, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 484, 315–316. A paragraph from this document reads: “The majority are completely naked and barefoot. In this situation,

The Prefecture of Berezovca District took the necessary steps at the Governorate of Transnistria on September 29, 1943, regarding the “tragic situation of the Gypsies from the Sukha Balka farm and the other Gypsies in the district”. In this document the prefect wrote: “The winter is not far away, and to help these miserable ones, in order to save them from the winter frost, for them, as they are now, the winter is a sure death”.²³ The Prefecture proposed the collection of old clothes from the Roma in the country.

In another petition from July 13, 1943, to the prefect of the Golta district, the ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ from the commune Yasenove Druhe, Dumitru Cristea, complained about the fact that the deportees had been given neither work, nor food:

I have come to you, with a deep feeling of respect, to complain about the fact that we, the Gypsies distributed in the commune Iașii Noi II [Yasenove Druhe], don’t have any working place and aren’t given any food by the town hall of the commune Iașii Noi II [Yasenove Druhe], being in such a difficult situation, that I am forced to come to you, who is entitled to take action, because otherwise we are forced to commit robberies, thefts and other things in order to secure our daily existence.²⁴

Thefts referred to by this ‘mayor’ were in fact a reality at that time in Golta district, as recorded in archival documents, resulting in tensions between the Roma and the locals, but also between the Romanian occupation administration and the Ukrainian communes. The authorities at communal and rayon level found that the thefts were due to the lack of livelihood and, when they proposed measures to improve the situation of the Roma, they justified them also through the need to ensure public order.²⁵

when the weather will tighten they will not be able to withstand the cold and will die of cold.” (Translation by the author.)

23 Letter by the Prefecture of Berezovca District, 29.10.1943, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 522, 358–359, here 359. Translation by the author.

24 Petition by Dumitru Cristea, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 420, 249–250. Translation by the author.

25 Some documents that speak about these aspects, from July to August 1943, with special reference to the Roma deportees from Golta district can be found in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 439, 267–268, doc. 452, 281–282, doc. 453, 282–283, doc. 456, 285, doc. 462, 291–292, doc. 464, 293–294, doc. 468, 298–299, doc. 472, 302.

Accommodation, Food and Clothing

The accommodation of the deportees was a big problem almost everywhere. In the villages of Oceacov District, after all, almost all the Roma were housed, but crowded, sometimes two or three families in one room. In the other districts, many Roma were accommodated in barns, warehouses, or stables. There were also Roma who lived for a while in huts or even in the open air. These people complained about the miserable accommodation conditions or even the lack of shelter. A petition of this category was sent to the governor of Transnistria in early October 1942, by seven Roma deported to the villages Nechayane (Oceacov district), Tryduby and Domanivka (Golta district). They request that their families, “which at present have not been given a shelter and have to stay all day long with only the sky as a roof”, be given a shelter. They ask for an urgent solving of their request, “since, due to the cold weather, our children will die of cold before the approval of the Ministry of the Interior reaches this Governorate”.²⁶ The signators mentioned that they had already asked for their repatriation at the Ministry of the Interior.

In the villages where the Roma were placed, the Governorate of Transnistria provided food for them through the town hall, which in turn took the food from the quota that the local kolkhoz had to give to the Governorate. In this chain, dysfunctions often intervened, not to mention the fact that in some places the authorities – either the Romanian occupier or the local mayor’s office – paid almost no attention to the deportees. The food ration established by the Governorate was not small, if we take into account the conditions of war, but the local authorities reduced it. In addition, in many places the ration was not distributed in time. Sometimes there were delays of weeks. In some places in Transnistria people starved to death, especially in the winter of 1942/1943.²⁷

There are several petitions in which Roma complained that they were not given the food ration on time or that the ration was insufficient. We saw above that Margareta Dodan and Ștefan Feraru, deported to Kovalivka commune in Oceacov district, or the ‘Gypsy mayor’ Dumitru Cristea from Golta district, complained to the authorities, among others, about the lack of food. In another petition from September 1943, Ioan Stancu, ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ in the com-

²⁶ Petition by seven Roma, in Achim, *Documente*, volume I, doc. 176, 265 – 266, here 265. Translation by the author.

²⁷ This is documented not only in the deportees’ petitions, but also in documents of the Romanian occupation authorities; see for example Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 249, 24 – 29, here 28.

mune Kamiana Balka, addressed to the prefect of the Golta district and denounced the fact that Roma did not receive sufficient food:

During the day we work at the kolkhoz, but during the night we patrol at the precinct, they give us very little food, 300 grams of flour, 500 grams of potatoes and 10 grams of salt per person, without any other kind of food, we haven't been given oil for 8 months. [...] Please be so kind as to order for us to receive more food, since these quantities are not sufficient and we are not able to work.²⁸

Another head, Ion Rădulescu, *vătaf*²⁹ in the village of Burylove in Golta district, complained to the praetor of Crivoi Ozero rayon, in October 1943, that, after returning from the work they did for a few months in a village in the area, his people were not given food rations and, in addition, they needed clothes:

The undersigned Ion Mihai D. Rădulescu, *vătaf* of 25 Gypsy families with 141 souls, so far we have worked at the church in Secretarca [Sekretarka] as brickmakers, currently we are without clothes, the cold has come, we are not fed like the other Gypsies, our children die of hunger and cold. Please, Mr. Praetor, decide on us.³⁰

The situation with the food ration was difficult in the summer and autumn of 1943 in many places in Golta district. The head of the Gendarmes Section Crivoi Ozero described that, on the occasion of the inspection he made on July 28, 1943, in the 'Gypsy camp' in Krasnen'ke commune, the Roma had complained that the food ration was not enough for them and that they did not receive even the little that was fixed for them in June and July 1943. In his report, he noted that due to hunger the Roma had left the camp and invaded neighbouring communes, where they committed theft and only with great difficulty could be gathered and re-directed to the camp.³¹ The remaining products for June and July were given to the Roma on July 31.³² The mayor of Krasnen'ke commune was found guilty of delaying the delivery of food, and was punished with a three-day pay cut.³³

28 Petition by Ioan Stancu, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 488, 319. Translation by the author.

29 *Vătaf* was a traditional head of a 'nomadic' or 'seminomadic' group in some parts of Romania.

30 Petition by Ion Rădulescu, fond 2689, opis 2, delo 18, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 37. Translation by the author.

31 Report by the chief of the Gendarmes Section Crivoi Ozero to the praetor of the rayon Crivoi Ozero, 30.07.1943, fond 2689, opis 2, delo 18, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 19.

32 Report on the distribution of the remaining products, 03.08. 1943, in *ibid.*, 18.

In this case the Romanian occupation authorities took into account the complaint of the Roma. There were further cases in which some measures were taken to improve the situation of the deportees following the complaints made by them. However, most petitions remained without any effect.

Another major problem faced by the deported Roma was the lack of clothing and footwear. The clothes they brought from home were worn or sold to locals in exchange for food. We saw that the ‘mayor of Gypsies’ from the farm Sukha Balka complained to the governor of Transnistria that his people were naked and barefoot and asked to be given clothes. The local authorities notified the Labour Directorate from the Governorate of Transnistria about this issue. It was not until the autumn of 1943 that the Labour Directorate approved the sale of clothing and footwear to the Roma who were almost naked and threatened to die of cold. But they had nothing to pay with. Only a few comb makers at Sukha Balka farm had money and asked to be given clothes and shoes for cash.³⁴ In these conditions, it was ordered that the clothes be given ‘in account’ (i.e. without payment on the spot), following that their price would be recovered from the remuneration that the deportees would receive for their work in the spring.³⁵ Clothing and footwear were also very expensive: a men’s suit (made of sackcloth) cost 180 RKKS,³⁶ a women’s suit 150 RKKS, a cotton flannel 30 RKKS, a pair of boots with a wooden sole 50 RKKS and a pair of pigskin sandals 20 RKKS. To put these prices in context: in the few places where the forced labor of Jews and Roma was paid, their remuneration in the summer of 1943 was between 2 and 4 RKKS per day.³⁷ The clothes distributed to the Roma in 1943 and 1944 were made in the workshops in Balta, and the footwear in the workshop in Bershad, both belonging to the Governorate, where the labour force was provided by Jewish deportees. Such a request for clothing and footwear came on January 31, 1944, when the aid of

³³ Report by the chief of the Agricultural Office of the Crivoi Ozero rayon, 04.08. 1943, in *ibid.*, 19.

³⁴ For documents concerning the selling of clothing and footwear to the Gypsies, see Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 494, doc. 495, doc. 499, doc. 502, doc. 512, doc. 516, doc. 519, doc. 522, doc. 523, doc. 528, doc. 548, doc. 556, doc. 558, doc. 559, doc. 570, doc. 574, doc. 575 and doc. 586.

³⁵ Governorate of Transnistria, the Labour Directorate, Accountancy Service to the Prefecture of Balta District, 08.01.1944, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 574, 421.

³⁶ The official currency in Transnistria during the Romanian occupation, between 1941 and 1944, was *Reichskreditkassenschein*, abbreviated *RKKK*, also called *Mark*. This was the currency introduced by Nazi Germany in the occupied Eastern Territories.

³⁷ For the issue of the remuneration of the Jewish and Roma labour in Transnistria, see Viorel Achim: *Munca forțată în Transnistria. “Organizarea muncii” evreilor și romilor, decembrie 1942–martie 1944*, Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2015, 74–85.

the ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ from the farm Sukha Balka, Călin T. Marin, asked the prefect of Berezovca district for 38 sweaters, nine pairs of sandals and seven pairs of boots to be sold to them.³⁸

Labour of Roma Deportees in Transnistria: Petitions Asking for Work

The Romanian occupation authorities in Transnistria used the Roma for various works, especially since the spring of 1943. Usually organized in teams, able-bodied Roma did agricultural work on farms and kolkhozes. Many of those who had a trade, especially blacksmiths, were repairing agricultural tools or worked in workshops. Some of the deportees found a niche in the economy of the village where they lived, performing certain crafts and works for the locals. Some worked for local town halls. Others were sent to cut logs in the forests. In addition, in 1943 and 1944, hundreds of Roma worked on the large construction sites of military interest in Southeastern Transnistria managed by the German army.³⁹

In Transnistria, the work was important for survival. In some places and some times the food ration was given only to those who worked. In any case, where there was work and where the deportees worked in the places indicated by the authorities or on their own, the survival rate was higher than where there were no work opportunities.

There are several petitions of Roma asking to be given work in order to secure their existence. A petition of this kind is that of Preda Pavăl and Nichifor Pleșa, blacksmiths at the kolkhoz no. 48 Voroshilov from February 1943 to the praetor of the rayon Crivoi Ozero, Golta district. It contains the information that the petitioners had completed the work on this particular kolkhoz and that they asked for approval to work on the kolkhoz in Lukanivka, where they were required by the head of the kolkhoz.⁴⁰

The praetor of the Crivoi Ozero rayon did not approve the request and ordered them to stay in place. At Lukanivka and in the other villages in the rayon that did not have the needed blacksmiths for spring agricultural works the praeture sent blacksmiths from Krasnen’ke camp, located in the same

³⁸ Petition by Călin T. Marin, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 586, 433.

³⁹ For the labor of the Roma in Transnistria, see Achim, *Munca forțată*; Viorel Achim: “The Forced Labour of the Gypsies in Transnistria: The Regulation of December 1942 and the Reality on the Ground”, in *Historical Yearbook*, XI–XII, 2014–2015, 209–224.

⁴⁰ Petition by Preda Pavăl and Nichifor Pleșa, fond 2689, opis 2, delo 18, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs’koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 1a.

rayon. In autumn 1942 the Krasnen'ke camp consisted of 500 huts, and about 4,200 Roma, among them a big number of blacksmiths. This was the largest Roma colony in Transnistria. Blacksmiths were important for the local economy, they were very required at kolkhozes and farms. Thus, generally, blacksmiths and other craftsmen found opportunities to work in Transnistria and most of them survived with their families.

In December 1942, the Governorate of Transnistria set out to organize workshops for Jewish and Roma deportees in order to use skilled labour from the two communities. Decision no. 2927 of December 7, 1942 'on the organization of the labour of Jews in Transnistria' and Decision no. 3149 of December 18, 1942, regarding the Roma, were issued, which dealt with the workshops.⁴¹ In the following months workshops were set up in some Jewish ghettos in which Jews qualified in the respective profession were employed. However, the same did not happen with the Roma. In some places, work teams were set up with Roma craftsmen who worked as blacksmiths or otherwise at the kolkhoz, on the farm or for the local population, but these were improperly called workshops by the authorities. In fact, they did not have the structure of a Jewish workshop, as they were not professionally organized, for example, they did not work on the basis of tariffs, did not have a management, etc.⁴²

In Transnistria there was only one economic organization comprising a large number of Roma who practiced the same craft, the so-called comb making workshop from the Sukha Balka farm in Berezovca district.⁴³ In Berezovca district at the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, a number of 1,800 people (including their families) earned their living from making and selling combs. As Ion Stan named Natale, the 'mayor of the Gypsies' from Sukha Balka farm, wrote in a petition sent to the prefect of Berezovca district on March 11, 1944:

We received nothing from the farm or the state for four months and we live only from our work and the income we make by selling the combs. With the income we made by selling the combs, we managed to dress and feed ourselves decently this winter.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See Achim, *Munca forțată*, 40–50.

⁴² See *ibid.*, 70.

⁴³ On the comb making workshop from the farm Sukha Balka, see Viorel Achim: "The Deportation of Gypsies to Transnistria", in Achim: *Documente*, XXXIV–XXXV; Achim, *Munca forțată*, 90–91.

⁴⁴ Petition by Ion Stan, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 605, 455. Translation by the author.

The work was not paid in any way by the Governorate, but the comb makers were helped to procure the raw material (cattle horns from the Odessa slaughterhouse) and had the freedom to sell their products in the localities in the region.

From the Roma in Sukha Balka farm approximately 20 petitions have been kept, many of them written by the 'Gypsy mayor', the deputy 'mayor' and the foreman of the comb workshop. The petitions concern two aspects: some petitions refer to the procurement of the raw material for the workshop, and others refer to the question of the authorizations for marketing the combs.

In January 1944, the comb makers asked the prefect of Berezovca district for travel permits to Odessa to buy the horns of cattle needed to make combs. A request of this kind is signed by nine people, led by the 'Gypsy mayor'.⁴⁵ Others are signed by a single person, who asks for authorization for several people.⁴⁶ To Odessa they went in a group of three people accompanied by a gendarme, this being a 'delegation'.⁴⁷

Requests for an authorization for selling combs are relatively numerous because they had to be renewed. At the beginning of March 1944, when the front reached the borders of Transnistria, a military administration was installed in this territory, which canceled all the authorizations for mobile trade – a situation that created problems to the Roma there. That is why we see that on March 11, 1944, both the foreman of the comb workshop, Păun N. Marin,⁴⁸ and the 'mayor of the Gypsies' from the farm Sukha Balka, Ion Stan named Natale,⁴⁹ came with a petition addressed to the prefect of the Berezova district, requesting a new authorization for selling combs, this time in Anan'iv, a town approximately 50 kilometers from Sukha Balka.

Difficult Relations of Roma Deportees with the Local Population

The relations of the Roma deportees with the local population were not everywhere and always good. It seems that most problems were in the district of Ocea-cov. Here, the 'sedentary' Roma brought from Romania were placed in the houses

⁴⁵ Petition by nine Roma, in Achim, Documente, volume II, doc. 572, 419.

⁴⁶ See for example the petition by Gheorghe Constantin named Porumbiță, 22.01.1944, in Achim, Documente, volume II, doc. 581, 428–429.

⁴⁷ As specified by the Prefecture of Berezovca District, the Labour Bureau, 01.02.1944, when it approved a request of this kind, see Achim, Documente, volume II, doc. 588, 435.

⁴⁸ Petition by Păun N. Marin, in Achim, Documente, volume II, doc. 604, 454–455.

⁴⁹ Petition by Ion Stan, in Achim, Documente, volume II, doc. 605, 455.

of local Ukrainians. Some villages on the bank of the Bug river were entirely evacuated, the population being relocated into the interior of the district. In other places, half of the village was evacuated, the inhabitants here being moved to the houses of their villagers in the other half of the village. These compact Roma settlements were the so-called 'Gypsy villages' from the Oceacov district. The Ukrainians were dissatisfied that they were evacuated from their households. The fact that in the winter of 1942/1943 the Roma from 'Gypsy villages', being deprived of the necessary fuel for heating and food preparation, burned the woodwork from the roofs, the floors, etc. and thus destroyed the houses, complicated the relations between the local population and the Romanian occupation authorities, which saw themselves forced to compensate the owners.⁵⁰ Also, the inhabitants who remained in the village and those from the neighboring villages were dissatisfied with the fact that the Roma, not having food and heating fuel, indulged in theft and destruction.

The archival documents created by the occupation authorities refer to these problems and tensions between the Ukrainian commune and the Roma. They also express that the local administration did not give the Roma the food provided in the ration or did not give them the food on time. A report of one the three commissions of inquiry sent to the 'Gypsy villages' in Oceacov district in December 1942 said that the inhabitants "had to arrange security guards in communes and villages and not infrequently these guards mistreated to the blood the Gypsies caught in thefts".⁵¹

A petition from August 1943 talks about the problems faced by Roma deportees from the Ukrainian commune. At the beginning of August 1943, Ion Ghica, the 'mayor of the Gypsies' in Katalyne commune, Oceacov district, addressed a petition to the prefect of the district about the harsh situation of the Roma deported to that locality. Ion Ghica showed here that the Roma were forced to work on the kolkhoz hungry, because the mayor of the Katalyne commune did not give them the necessary provisions. He asked for food to be given to the Roma in time. Ghica also wrote that the mayor of the commune had told the Roma that he no longer needed them because the work at the kolkhoz was done. He also required a permit under which

50 Besides official documents, these issues are also mentioned in a 1945 memorandum of the former prefect of Oceacov district, Lt.-Col. Vasile Gorsky. He had held the position until April 1, 1943, and made several efforts to repatriate the Roma and improve their situation. See Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 641, 495–500, here 499–500.

51 Report, in Achim, *Documente*, volume II, doc. 270, 64. Translation by the author.

he could travel to Ochakiv for matters that concerned the Roma, first of all for provisions and clothing.⁵²

How did the prefect of the Oceacov district deal with the petition of Ion Ghica? After receiving the 'Gypsy mayor's' petition, the prefect sent the act to the Praetura of the Oceacov rayon, "for investigation and to take measures to correct things".⁵³ On August 19, 1943, the Praetura ordered the local administration of Katalyne commune to

[t]ake measures to ensure that the Gypsies receive in time all the food they need to feed their families, so that they do not give way to such complaints. If we receive such complaints from the Gypsies, we will take the most drastic measures to punish the culprit.⁵⁴

At the same time, the Praetura made an investigation in the sense that it called on the mayor of Katalyne commune to give some clarification about what the 'mayor of the Gypsies' complained. The results of the investigation are summarized in a report to the prefect of the Oceacov district, dated September 2, 1943, which partially acknowledges the claims of Ion Ghica, but presents more the views of the Ukrainian mayor. It does not speak of the food ration that the Roma should have received and which they were not given. And as to the lack of salt, it recognizes that the Roma were not given salt, but in the formula "[salt] could not have been distributed to them for some time"⁵⁵; although it was notorious that until that moment the Roma in this rayon had never received salt, which was often claimed by the deported from different sites. Instead, the report accuses the Roma of refusing to work at the kolkhoz ("it was found that most Gypsies refuse to work in the field"⁵⁶) and that they do not even want to dig the potatoes they need in order to cook their food. At the end, however, the rayon report says that "now measures have been taken to distribute in time all the food available in the commune for the feeding of these Gypsies".⁵⁷

52 Petition by Ion Ghica, fond 1592, opis 2, delo 38, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 22.

53 Letter by the prefect of the Oceacov district to the Praetura of the Oceacov rayon, 10.08.1943, fond 1592, opis 2, delo 38, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 21. Translation by the author.

54 Order by the Praetura of the Oceacov rayon, fond 1592, opis 2, delo 38, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 20. Translation by the author.

55 Report by the Praetura of the Oceacov rayon to the Prefecture of Oceacov District, fond 1592, opis 2, delo 38, Derzhavnyi arkhiv Mykolaivs'koi oblasti, Mykolaiv, Ukraine, 18. Translation by the author.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

The report is an obvious attempt to cover up this case. Here and in many other cases when the Roma claimed abuses from the Ukrainian communes, the Romanian occupation authorities that had to arbitrate between the commune and the deported Roma favored the commune.

Conclusions

This article primarily dealt with the historical information contained in the petitions of Roma deported to Transnistria, which helps to understand the situation in the villages, camps, farms and kolkhozes where the deportees were placed, including their daily life. Of course, other documents from the Transnistrian authorities, Ukrainian locals (individuals, local administration, kolkhozes) or other individuals and institutions that came into contact with these deportees also talk about these realities. When I presented a few petitions, I put them in connection with archival documents from the authorities, which confirm the information in those petitions, possibly offering a partially different perspective.

Some information that appears in the petitions cannot be found elsewhere. One such detail was the long march of 140 kilometers from Kovalivka, on the banks of the Bug, to Odessa, that the petitioners Margareta Dodan and Ștefan Feraru mentioned above undertook to submit their petitions. Usually, Roma travelling to Odessa with permission or illegally used the train or other means of transport. In addition, the shame that Ștefan Bejan, the ‘mayor of the Gypsies’ from three villages in Berezovca district, describes that the ‘Gypsies’ felt when they had to leave the house with torn clothes, that “our children laugh at us, at the way we look”, of course, could not be recorded in an official document, which was not interested in what the deportees felt.

There is, of course, other small and sometimes strictly local information that appears only in Roma petitions and that helps to understand the realities at places of deportation, including the hunger, diseases and death of many deportees. However, the information contained in the petitions is not likely to change the overall picture we have of the deportation of Roma to Transnistria, which is based mainly on the large amount of documents created by the authorities involved in one way or another in the deportation. Yet, there are some details that the petitions bring and which are precious, especially when it comes to studying the destiny of an individual, a family or a Roma group.

The petitions must of course be discussed not only in relation to other documents produced at the time, but also to existing oral history interviews.⁵⁸ Taken only from the mid-1990s, interviews with special documentary value – i.e. those from people who were adults in the years of deportation – are of course more detailed in describing life in deportation sites and the treatment of deportees. When it comes to sensitive issues, such as the relations that the deportees had with the local population, the two categories of sources differ. In interviews, the survivors speak almost only positive about the Ukrainian peasants with whom they came into contact. On the contrary, Roma petitions also contain descriptions of tensions between the two groups. It seems that 50 to 60 years after the deportation, the asperities mentioned in the petitions have been forgotten.

To the documentary value of the petitions is added the fact that they make known the perspective of the deportees on the deportation and on the events that took place in the Roma settlements in Transnistria, as it was in those years. As time passed, the survivors were able to think differently about the experience they went through. However, petitions must also be subjected to other types of analysis, starting with language. In general, these petitions were written or dictated under the rule of suffering, and they express pain and despair.

Nevertheless, with a multitude of problems which they refer to and by showing how the Roma reacted to the deportation and which were their survival strategies, the petitions are an incredibly important type of historical source for those who want to study the deportations to Transnistria, and the living conditions as well as the suffering of the deportees.

58 For collections of interviews with Roma survivors of the deportation to Transnistria, see Lucian Năstasă and Andrea Varga (eds.): *Minorități etnoculturale. Mărturii documentare. Țigani din România (1919–1944)*, Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Resurse pentru Diversitate Etnoculturală, 2001, 591–626; Luminița Cioabă (ed.): *Deportarea în Transnistria. Mărturii*, Sibiu: Neodrom, 2005; Luminița Cioabă (ed.): *Lăcrimi rome. Romane asva*, Bucharest: Ro Media, 2006; Radu Ioanid, Michelle Kelso, and Luminița Mihai Cioabă (eds.): *Tragedia romilor deportați în Transnistria (1942–1945). Mărturii și Documente*, Iași: Polirom, 2009, 55–264.