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LIVING CONDITIONS AND (RE)DEFINING IDENTITY IN THE GULAG: A STUDY BASED ON AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS BELONGING TO PEOPLE FROM BESSARABIA AND BUCOVINA DEPORTED TO KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

This research explores living conditions in the Soviet Gulag, as they emerge from the memoirs and autobiographical texts of deportees from the former territories of the Romanian Kingdom to Kazakhstan. It focuses on recurring elements found in testimonies: the journey to the deportation sites; living conditions in exile (special settlements, housing arrangements); work performed by the deportees and their remuneration; the acquisition of food, clothes and consumer goods (available resources and supply strategies). I aim at clarifying how the new living conditions and social circumstances influenced the subjects' socio–cultural values, their vision of the world and of themselves, and, conversely, in what way their prior identity helped them in their efforts to survive.

Keywords: memory, autobiographical narrative, identity, testimonies about the Communist era, mass deportations, living conditions

Introduction

Mass deportations in Romania's Soviet occupied eastern territories: historical and demographic data

The Soviet Union occupied the eastern territories of Romania – Bessarabia, northern Bukovina and the Hertza region – in the summer of 1940 and, again, in 1944. The process of establishing the Communist regime, triggered by the occupation, involved many repressive actions.

Among these, three operations of mass deportations took place on 12–13 June 1941, 5–6 July 1949, and 1–2 April 1951.

It is conceivable that, from the very first days of the occupation, the Soviet authorities started collecting information about the population in order to identify those people who were to be socially excluded. However, the systematization and final collection of the data which would be subsequently used for deportation probably started in the late autumn – early winter of 1941.[1] The formal decision on the first mass deportation identifies and lists the categories of persons to be removed from the republic: former members and supporters of political parties in interwar Romania; people who held positions in the Romanian administration, police officers, employees of the Romanian justice system, owners of large buildings, merchants with significant business enterprises, etc. Family members of those found guilty would also be punished in compliance with the "revolutionary justice".[2]

Most of the state apparatus of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic took part in the 1941 operation: the political police, the army, border troops from some districts, state and party officials. Men, heads of households (when these were absent, their place was taken by the women running the household) and young unmarried men over the age of 18 were separated from their families at train stations where the boarding took place or on a station along the route. Many testimonies state that men were separated from families when crossing the Dniester River or in Tiraspol. According to some data, this operation saw 18,392 people detained and deported from Soviet Moldavia. Of these, 4,517 men and household heads were separated from their families and sent to forced labor camps. Few men in this contingent of people subjected to repression survived: some were executed, and others died because of inhuman conditions of detention, exhausting work, disease, cold, exposure and malnutrition. The others – 13,875 people – were placed in special settlements and subjected to forced displacement.[3]

Similar deportations took place on 22 May 1941 in Western Ukraine, on 14 June in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and on 19–20 June in Western Byelorussia. A report of the Main Camps' Administration (GULAG) from September–October 1941 showed that 85,716 people deported from the aforementioned six Soviet republics were to be found at that time in the Kazakh SSR, Komi ASSR, Altai and Krasnoyarsk regions, as well as in Kirov, Omsk and Novosibirsk provinces.[4] A significant part – 22,648 – was deported from the Moldavian SSR, 9,954 of whom were sent to the

Kazakh SSR (6,195 to the Aktobe oblast, 1,024 to Kyzylorda oblast and 2,735 to South Kazakhstan).[5]

During and after the Second World War, political exiles and POWs, citizens of several states, including Romania, could be found in forced labor camps in the Kazakh SSR. Prisoners worked in copper and coal mines, quarries and other high risk industries. Former convicts from Bessarabia and Bukovina left written recollections about their detention in forced labor camps situated in the area of Jezkazgan, a city in the Karaganda region. Some narrations contain valuable information about the famous 1954 prisoner uprising of detainees that took place in Kengir labor camp, which was part of GULAG.[6] Also, some of the people released from forced labor camps and prisons across the Soviet Union ended up settling in Kazakhstan in the 1950s, as they were not allowed to return to Moldova.[7] In some instances, people released from the Kazakhstan camps asked the authorities to allow family members deported to Siberia to settle in Kazakhstan.[8]

According to information forwarded by the Ministry of State Security in Chișinău to their superiors on the Union level, 35,796 people were deported from the Moldavian SSR during the deportation operation that took place in early July 1949, of whom 9,864 were men, 14,033 women and 11,899 children.[9]

During the mass deportation carried out on the night of 1 to 2 April 1951, 16,255 Jehovah's Witnesses were deported from six Soviet republics: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Byelorussia and Moldavia; 2,724 of them were from Moldavia.[10] Deportees were forcefully resettled in the regions of Tomsk, Kurgan, Novosibirsk, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk and Krasnoyarsk. Over time, some of them settled in other regions of the USSR, including Central Asia.[11]

The present study examines the mass deportation of June 1941 and its impact on and traces in the memoirs of the victims. The focus of the analysis on the first mass deportation is due to the fact that most of Bessarabians and Bukovinians that we know for certain to be exiled to Kazakhstan were victims of the first operation of mass deportation, organized by the Soviet authorities in June 1941. In cases where the article addresses issues of the mass deportation operations carried out subsequently in Soviet Moldavia (1949, 1951), further details are provided.

Sources of research and interviews

The issue of mass deportations initiated by the Soviet authorities in the former territories of the Romanian Kingdom played, for the last three decades, a central place in the remembrance of communism and in the Republic of Moldova's public debates. Accounts about population displacements and deportations to Central Asia are less numerous, when compared to narratives about deportations to Siberia. It is this dearth of information that makes sources so much more precious for the researchers of the Communist regime. In some cases, life on the deportation sites is thoroughly presented by the ex–deportees in books or extended interviews, while, in other texts, the forced settlement in Kazakhstan is only mentioned incidentally.

Some of the questions that I raise are: How did the deportees perceive their exile experience? What are the recurring elements of their narratives? The project attempts to clarify how the new living conditions and social circumstances influenced the subjects' socio–cultural values, their vision of the world and of the self, and, conversely, in what way their prior identity helped them in their efforts to survive. It is important to identify the factors that enable physical survival in extreme conditions and coexistence in multi–cultural and multi–religious environments, since even today one can witness massive forced displacement of populations, accompanied by humanitarian tragedies, suspicion and culturally motivated hostility.

The list of sources includes articles and (auto)biographical interviews drawn from various periodical publications; volumes written by former deportees, which deal with their forced labour camp or deportation experiences; letters addressed to the media (printed press, radio stations or TV channels). Voices and discourses are not only multiple, but also extremely varied. Subjects come from a broad range of social and professional backgrounds (writers, politicians, teachers and peasants), and belong to different age and gender groups. The subjects are either direct witnesses or pass on second-hand testimonies. The study also entails the comparison and complementary analysis of the narrative discourses and the official sources (archival documents, press publications, images, etc.).

A preliminary analysis and sequencing of the information gathered from testimonies made it possible to highlight recurrent topics. This research focuses on some of them, namely: the journey to the place of deportation (Kazakhstan); living conditions in exile (special settlements, dwelling arrangements); work performed by the deportees and their remuneration;

acquiring food, clothes and consumer goods (available resources, supply strategies). The first two rubrics are intended to circumscribe the historical and social context of forced population resettlement, which we refer to in this study.

Three related families deported from the village of Ciuciuleni, Lăpușna County, and their memories

Among the Bessarabians deported in June 1941 one can find members of three related families – Scafaru, Pojoga and Ciobanu – from the village of Ciuciuleni, Lăpușna County, all exiled to Terenozek, Kyzylorda region, Kazakhstan.[12]

The Scafaru family consisted of Grigore Scafaru, his wife Alexandra and the couple's children, aged between seven and fifteen: the daughters Maria and Valentina, the sons Toader and Victor. In the interwar period, Grigore Scafaru was mayor of Ciuciuleni commune (1931–1938) and a Liberal Party MP in the Romanian Parliament. At the time of the deportation, Grigore Scafaru's mother, Vasilisa Ploscaru, born in 1886, and Toader Ploscaru, the adoptive father of Grigore Scafaru, born in 1873, were members of the same household. Both elders were deported together with their son's family. In Tiraspol, Grigore Scafaru was separated from his family, and then sentenced to death, a sentence commuted to detention. He was initially imprisoned at the Ivdel Forced Labor Camp in the Sverdlovsk region, and then moved to several other camps during his detention. Being released from detention in the mid–1950s, he joined his deported family in Kazakhstan, where he spent the next decade, after which he returned to Moldavia.[13]

The Ciobanu family comprised the National Peasant Party member Ion Ciobanu, the household head and a former mayor, his wife Maria (Manea), who was Alexandra Scafaru's sister, and their children, aged between 11 and 20: sons Dumitru, Vladimir and Petru, and daughters Elena and Alexandra.[14] The Pojoga family included the head of household, Teodor (son of Ștefan) Pojoga, who was the brother of Alexandra Scafaru, Teodor Pojoga's wife – Sofia, and their sons Constantin (aged 13) and Vasile (aged 10).

Olga–Elena Grigoraș, another sister of Alexandra Scafaru, together with her husband Vasile and their six children, hid in the Hâncu monastery, and thus, avoided deportation. In 1941, the Romanian administration that returned to Bessarabia gave Olga–Elena Grigoraș the property of the

Scafaru family, of which, as was the case of other deportees' fate too, nothing was known. In 1944, the Grigoraș family fled across the Prut River. The head of the family, Vasile, decided to return to Bessarabia for a short time, but the Soviet breakthrough on the Romanian front stopped him from coming back to Romania. Thus, Vasile Grigoraș lost contact with his family until the late 1950s. He was deported to Siberia from Ciuciuleni on 6 July 1949; later on, he also settled in Kazakhstan. The reunification of the Grigoraș family eventually happened due to great efforts on the part of relatives who managed to flee across the Prut River in the first place. They helped Vasile Grigoraș settle in Romania.[15] During the mass deportation operation in the summer of 1949, another sister of Alexandra Scafaru, Sofia, was exiled to Siberia, along with her family.

The members of the three families (with the exception of the men – heads of families) were exiled to Kazakhstan. After a few months, they all escaped from Terenozek, in Kyzylorda region, claiming to be evicted refugees, and were allowed to stay in the houses of Volga Germans (in the town of Shved), whose owners had also been deported in 1941. Subsequently, they followed the front westward, and, in 1944, returned to their native region. They resumed their lives in their native village of Ciuciuleni, the authorities gave them back some of their buildings and lands, and the youngsters enrolled in local schools. In 1949/50, they were arrested and deported again to the location of their first exile. The Gulag escape of the three families from Ciuciuleni was not the only event of this kind. Other deportees left the relocation special settlements without authorization, but all were turned back, or would be once again deported in 1949.[16] Cases are known when deportees had legally returned to Moldavia, but soon fell victim to the second wave of mass displacement.[17] Some were able to avoid the July 1949 deportation, when the authorities, although having had exact and detailed information about them and having conducted thorough searches, failed to locate them during the operation.[18]

The deportees who were children in 1941 had grown up in the meantime (by 1949); some had set up their own families. Maria and Valentina Scafaru were married. Valentina, her mother Alexandra, grandmother Vasilisa and grandfather Toader went through a series of prisons before returning to Terenozek. Maria, a student at the Chișinău Medical Institute, did not wait to be arrested, and followed her family to Kazakhstan of her own accord. According to Valentina Scafaru, her sister's husband, who remained in Chisinau, came to Kazakhstan to ask Maria for a divorce, arguing that the authorities would not allow him

to complete his studies because of having a deported wife. Valentina's husband, Nicolae Sturza, although a free person, moved to Kazakhstan to join his consort.[19] Their cousin, Elena Ciobanu, also married, had a daughter, and was pregnant with her second child, but was nonetheless transferred from prison to prison, the final point of her hard journey being the Terenozek train station.[20]

Most of the members of the three Ciuciuleni families returned to Moldavia in the 1950s and 1960s. In the post–Soviet period, they gave interviews, published articles in periodicals and books, and shared their experiences as deportees. The recorded dialogue of a journalist with Dumitru Ciobanu was one of the first materials about deportations and repressions organized by the communist regime published in Chișinău.[21] Writer and journalist Alexei Marinat (1925–2009), a former Gulag prisoner, married Maria Scafaru on 1 June 1957. During the last years of the USSR, this writer born in Transnistria and highly regarded in Soviet Moldavia began publishing documentary prose, based on his experience as a political prisoner in the Stalinist camps.[22] In some texts, he also discussed the destiny of his deported relatives from Ciuciuleni. Maria Scafaru (Marinat), Valentina Scafaru (Sturza), Elena Ciobanu (Mămăligă) and her daughter, Marcela, all testified about the deportations. Moreover, people who became relatives through marriage with the Scafaru, Ciobanu and Pojoga families from Ciuciuleni (Elizaveta Andronic, Ion Savin, Maria Sajin and Liubov Pojoga) were also interviewed. These marriages were concluded during exile, when the concerned subjects were already settled in Kazakhstan.

The Journey to the Place of Deportation

The journey to the place of deportation, in cattle cars, hopper wagons, etc., all dirty, with small windows, lasted from two–three weeks to a couple of months. Trainsets with deportees were often pulled into dead–end tracks, which made the trip even more agonizing. Several deportees state that the trains were not stationed in railway stations, but somewhere outside the settlements, in the open field. The convoy did not allow the doors to be opened, at least that was the case until they reached the Ural Mountains or Asia. Deportees would fight for breath and suffocate, particularly those suffering from asthma, young children would faint. The daily water ration was 200 ml per person. Some have described the travel as "hell on

wheels". Valeriu Harabagiu, deported from the small Bessarabian town of Komrat to Kazakhstan along with his mother – the father being separated from the family and sent to Siberia – provides a detailed account of the deportation operation:

> On 13 June 1941, however, the fateful day came for us and others. By dawn, a convoy of empty carts was formed. We were "invited" to get on those carts. I do not wish anyone to live through such moments. [...] They took us to the railway station. The convoy was accompanied by KGB troops with guns and dogs. Once we got to Comrat Station, the convoy was split into two. In the first group, only able–bodied men, fit for work, like my father, were selected. Mothers, children and elders ended up in the second one. Final destinations: my dad was sent to Siberia, my mother and I – to North Kazakhstan. Those like my father were taken to the Sverdlovsk region. We were headed to Kazakhstan, crammed in compartmented freight carriages.
>
> ...We were on that train for about 20 days. They would simply leave us in various stations for hours or even days. In our carriage, hay was laid on the floor. We lived our perpetual nightmare on that straw, cramped for room beside one another. All of us were hopeless, exhausted, our souls decimated. At one of those stations, someone, perhaps a railroad worker, slipped us a newspaper. This is how we learned that the war against the USSR had begun. [...] when the train stopped, we were given soup in nesting canteens, a piece of bread, and, after finishing the soup, our water ration – a ladle each – was poured in the same unwashed canteen. Our train was a special train. For example, it stopped in the open field. And they shouted: Get off! Do your business! (Horrible! And so we did, "collectively", about one meter away from each other).
>
> On one such occasion, a colleague of mine from primary school, Tolea Smiridov was his name, twelve years old, same as me, had an idea. The open field had bushes growing here and there. And he hid in such a bush, with the obvious intention of staying. The misfortune is that he was spotted. When the order was given "up in the carriages!" – my Smiridov remained in the bush. What was he thinking? God knows. The KGB released the dogs and set them on him. The dogs rushed toward the bush like a pack of wolves, and, in a matter of seconds, mauled the poor child. This is something I will never forget: one dog was pulling on a foot; another one had a severed hand... No words can describe this. His mother screamed, and then fainted; we were all terrified when the security guards pulled the shutters to the carriages. They locked us in – we stood there for half an hour, the KGB must have had a hard time gathering the dogs that had done their duty with such zeal.

> ...The train continued going east, always east. [...] After we got out of the carriages, we waited for half a day for the trucks to come. "Up!" – they shouted the order to us. They took us further for 200–300 km, deep inside Kazakhstan. Desert all around, as far as the eye can see, sand, more sand, a reddish Sahara, sandy clouds forming behind the trucks. The ordeal of that infernal journey ended on a similar note, on a certain open field in the vicinity of a small town. "Down!" [...] My mother and I were assigned to the 31st stake. Others were randomly assigned to stake no. 30, 29 ... and so on.[23]

Not only the heads of the households, but also other family members were taken from the carriages without any explanation. Underage children were left in the train without parents or relatives – later they were assigned to orphanages. Children from the same family were taken to different orphanages. Ties were broken, some of them found their siblings after 40 or even 60 years, after lengthy searches and multiple inquiries directed to different authorities.[24]

Another deportee, Nina Pănuș (Prodan), wrote the following about the journey to southern Kazakhstan: "Finally, on 29 June, the Holiday of Saints Peter and Paul, we reached our destination, in the heart of Central Asia. We were at the foot of Kyzyl–Kum, next to one of the largest "building sites of Communism". All the eye could see was sand, not even a blade of grass. We got into the carts and the luggage was loaded onto camels. The caravan brought us to the place of settlement in the "Pahta–Aral" sovkhoz ("sea of cotton" in Kazakh) […]".[25] The deportees were welcomed by representatives of the local and NKVD authorities. The population also wanted to meet the newcomers immediately:

> The Kazakhs looked baffled upon seeing us. We were in tatters, barefoot and scared of the situation we found ourselves in. My mother tried to embrace us all so we would not be afraid.[26]

> We were taken to the Terenozek district center in Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda region. We arrived at night. They pulled the train into a dead–end track and told us to get off. We could see nothing. We walked in darkness. It was like we descended from Bessarabia to hell. Nobody knew what was there or where we were... We sat on our rummage like a bump on a log. God knows what will happen next. When dawn came, I saw children with oriental faces, men, and women. They had probably gathered out of curiosity. Their clothes seemed strange to us. Our children were scared…

> Finally, some dignitaries arrived there and brought carts pulled by cows, and we were told we would be housed here. […] Over the next few days we were all registered and they started allocating us to kolkhozes. We were close to the Syr Darya River. Our family, the Pojogas and Scafarus (who were also related to us) remained in Terenozek.[27]

The special settlements were subordinated to the NKVD and to local executive bodies. Deportees were not allowed to leave the settlement without authorization. Violation of this legal provision was considered an escape attempt. As a result, the deportees were to be held criminally liable in case of fleeing from the settlement. Exiles were required to report regularly (at least once every two weeks) to the local government authorities and sign in a special registry. They could not be enlisted in the army and could not hold or be issued passports. Theoretically, deportees had the right to live with their family, to work, to have access to social services and decent living conditions, like the free citizens did. In practice, however, things turned out to be completely different.[28]

Living Conditions in Exile: Settlements, Housing and Dwelling Arrangements

The Soviet state confiscated without compensation the houses and most of the possessions deportees had had in Bessarabia and Bukovina. Most victims testify that they were not allowed to take anything from their households before being deported. Some managed, however, to take food with them, but in very limited quantities, and a few personal belongings.

From a legal point of view, deportees from the western regions of the Soviet Union in the spring and summer of 1941 experienced different circumstances compared to other groups of deportees. For example, certain rights were provided for those resettled in 1936/37 (Germans and Poles dislocated from Ukraine, Koreans from the Far East): to be compensated for the goods they had had to leave behind when deported (grain crops, cattle, houses, fodder, etc.) or to have those goods replaced; to receive long–term loans for housing construction; to enter into kolkhozes and agricultural artels, etc. Similar rights were granted to deportees resettled in 1944 from the Caucasus. In the case of the 1941 deportees from Moldavia, the state declined to take any responsibility regarding their housing. The deportees were to solve this issue on their own, either by convincing the

locals to accommodate them in their homes, or by building shelters using their own resources.[29]

Initially, deportees were accommodated in public or commercial buildings (schools, cotton dryers, warehouses, cattle stables, etc.). Also, they were assigned to houses whose tenants had left, or to huts of the cattle keepers who had traveled away with their flocks. In the autumn, the latter would return to their homes. In many cases, they were left under the open sky.

> Together with other Bessarabians, my parents and relatives were assigned to the village of Semionovka. Some were left in deserted houses or in barracks; others had to build pit–houses. Stoves had to be built for warmth because the temperature could get as low as minus 42 degrees Celsius in winter.[30]

> Seventy families were living in a doorless, windowless cotton dryer. Mosquitoes tormented us by night and heat tormented us by day. When winter came, it did not bring much snow, but it was cold enough to freeze the tail off a brass monkey. We lived in plywood sheds with windows, doors and a single stove. 12 families were packed there. Everybody used the stove for cooking and drying their frequently wet feet.[31]

> We were taken to a kolkhoz situated 25 kilometers away from that train station. They gave us a hay shed for several families to live in, and there we lived, summer and winter alike […].[32]

Despite the official rhetoric asserting that the Soviet government was providing adequate living conditions for the resettled, both memoirs and official documents reveal that the infrastructure for the deportees was virtually non–existent. Everything was improvised, and the results could not have been different. The deportation operations were kept secret, with only people from the top echelon of the organization being informed about them. For the necessary houses to be built, local administrations (on the republican, regional, and rayon levels) would have had to receive the necessary funds from the central government. Information about the arrival of a large number of people would have reached the population long before the deportation; it would have raised unwanted attention and would have jeopardized the resettlement operation.

After a period of temporary accommodation, the deportees were housed, wherever possible, in recently built sheds – some of them unfinished – or were put in a position to quickly build their own shelters before the onset of winter. It was extremely important for these rooms to

have stoves. Otherwise, it was impossible to endure the low temperatures of the winter season. At that point, as well as later, certain materials necessary for construction (glass, nails, wood, etc.) could not be found in sufficient quantity or were even completely absent. Materials such as reed, clay bricks sometimes mixed with straw, dung or peat were used for construction purposes. Valeriu Harabagiu remembers:

> This is where you shall build a pit–house, they told us. Look, you have water nearby, reed, everything you need. Build the pit-houses now, while the weather is fine, because when the cold comes... God save you! [...] There was a river next to us, Kyshim they called it – a narrow but very deep river that ran very fast. It was swirling all the time. On the bank of that river there was reed. [...] We manufactured "chirpici" [adobe]. That is, we were molding earth mixed with straw taken from the kolkhoz into bricks. We had a "mould" and worked in a Stakhanovist rhythm. The mould could make four [bricks of] "chirpici" at a time. Next, we would dig for about 1,5 meters. One would be descending into that heaven on stairs like in some kind of underground palace. A half–meter–high "wall" would be raised above the pit. Down in the pit–house, on a sort of platform, a straw rug would be laid. On that improvised rug we would lay one next to another, about 20 people for each pit–house. During the winter nights we would wrap ourselves in whatever rags we had left. The stack of the pit–house did not rise straight up, it was somewhat "cranked" – its flue functioning as some sort of air shaft in the nights the snow simply entombed us.[33]

Over time, some of the deportees built their own homes. First, they had to get permission from the authorities to build a house. For the construction of a house, all family members who shared a household pooled together resources and income. Sometimes two or three families would build a house together and split it into several dwellings dedicated to separate families. Relatives helped each other with the building process.

> In Akmolinsk, my grandpa's family lived together with ours. My father was a woodworker, and my mother was a nurse at the hospital for infectious diseases. Together, they built a large house, which then became a true meeting place for Gagauz people, who all stopped by whenever they had business in town. On long nights, they were talking about the relatives left behind in Moldova, about our native hearths. They were longing for it...[34]

Acquisition of resources on a scale large enough to allow the construction of a house was, however, part of a range of practices officially qualified as illegal. Several subjects assert that they obtained cash from selling the meat of the livestock raised in their own household. The state could try them both for the way they were gathering food for their animals and for price gouging, called "speculation" in the Soviet Criminal Law. Overall, the best that the first deportees could do was simply to survive, save their children, and it was only the next generation that was able to have better living conditions and proper homes. The subjects describe the houses they built in Kazakhstan with a sense of pride – but only since the 1960s/70s – as being neat and well–arranged:

> We had a house there, I built it with my husband, a nice place with a big garden and a summer kitchen.[35]

> We built a fine house downtown (in Kyzylorda – A.F.): four rooms, a porch, a kitchen, a bathroom, a beautiful garden, I grew grape vines from Moldova! [...] The plot around the house was treated with organic fertilizers of all kinds, with sawdust, I made the soil like we had it in Moldova – chernozem.[36]

It is generally believed that the exiles were forcibly taken from their original location and detained somewhere for good. However, memoirs, coupled with archival data, reveal a certain logic of the deportations involving a continuous process. Authorities could always dispatch deportees to neighboring or remote localities in the same district, or to other regions of the Soviet republic than those where they were initially brought, or even to other republics. There have also been numerous transfers from farm work to industrial activities and vice versa.

> After a while, they took my husband to the "trudfront" in Siberia, to a mine. After the war ended, he returned to Kazakhstan. They took us both to work in another kolkhoz. Both of us were in a foreign land, without papers.[37]

Deportees became a mobile labour force based on the legal status assigned to them by the state authorities. This unskilled and therefore extremely cheap labour force – unskilled not because deportees did not have education or training, but often because there were no jobs suited for their training or they were not allowed to work according to their qualifications –, could be sent at any time to carry out whatever economic

and social projects the authorities conceived of. After settling down somewhere with great efforts, people were forced to start over somewhere else. Even the Soviet state recognized that such transfers were not always carried out for economic reasons, but that they could be dictated by the personal interests of local leaders.[38]

After the death of Stalin, the Bessarabians who were deported to Siberia began moving to other regions of the USSR. The main problem to be taken care of was, once again, that of housing: "We were in contact with my mother's sister, who was in Kazakhstan, in the city of Kyzylorda, writes a former deportee to the northern territories of the Soviet Union. She urged us to go to her. Chechens, who had also been deported, were starting to leave the place, so houses were pretty cheap. In June 1955 I left for Kazakhstan and lived in Kyzylorda until 1959, and then we returned to Bessarabia".[39]

In the regions of Kazakhstan, to which the deportees were taken, combustion materials were hard to come by. Extremely poor living conditions in overcrowded, under-heated dwellings, where personal hygiene standards were impossible to maintain, must have been responsible, at least in part, for pediculosis and contagious diseases such as typhus, diphtheria, scarlet fever, measles, malaria and trachoma.

Work and Remuneration

Some official documents point to the obligation of the military authorities – integrated into the NKVD structure – to help deportees in finding a job when they had trouble doing so.[40] This does not mean that the authorities guaranteed employment for the deportees. They also did not consider themselves obliged to take into account the qualifications of the deportees. Instead, if the local managers were in need of workforce, they could mobilize them to work at any time. It is clear from the analyzed testimonies that the Bessarabians and Bukovinians found jobs with great difficulty, especially during the first years of exile in Kazakhstan. This was a conundrum not only for deportees from Bessarabia and Bukovina. Other groups of deportees were struggling with the same obstacles, which threatened not only their integration into local society, but also their survival. A document produced after an NKVD inspection carried out in the autumn of 1940 reveals the plight of Polish deportees at that time:

> 1. A considerable part of the special deportees is currently unemployed and cannot find even temporary jobs; 2. Housing is not provided for the special deportees, their work is arbitrarily remunerated, and, in some places, is not remunerated at all. 3. Families with many children are unable to provide the children with material support – in addition, there are many orphaned children. 4. It is almost impossible for elder people and those who are not fit to work to make a livelihood. 5. The regional party committees, the district councils and the Soviet bodies act hesitantly on the issue of placement on the labor market, considering the special deportees as a group under the jurisdiction of the NKVD.[41]

Prior to arriving in Kazakhstan, most of the Bessarabians and Bukovinians were employed in agriculture and made a living from their farms. The memoirs mention people practicing other professions too: doctors, people with higher degrees in philology, economics, etc. Many of them came from families of farmers, they knew the kind of work farming implied, and they did it themselves while living in the countryside, but they were not as tough and skilled as the peasants.

In the first years of exile, deportees were engaged mainly in seasonal or temporary work. Remuneration consisted, at best, of a little food. During times when work was scarce, they had no option but to starve. Because of travel restrictions, they could not go to places where work force was needed.

> We had no work and no food. [...] People from sovkhozes would come up in the summer and take us, the youth, to work, they would take us for the whole summer, until 7 November. [...] We went to a kolkhoz once [...]. There were five girls and a boy. [...] they got us on a bullock cart and took us to the steppe, we traveled the whole day. They left us there. There was steppe as far as the eye can see, no trace of houses or barns, nothing! Steppe, steppe and steppe! Instead, there was hay. We gathered some hay, raised a small haystack, climbed on it, and slept. [...] We gathered hay all summer long. An elderly man would come once a day to bring us food.[42]

> In this district center (Terenozek – A. F.) there was a basic brick factory, where all the work was done manually. And there was a sovkhoz with wild olive trees scattered across the fields. We and the kids were assigned to remove the thorns. They gave us spades... That was our job. Very hard work and very low–paid.[43]

The work of deportees was used in agriculture, field extraction (especially in coal mines, where women would be employed too), construction, forestry, wool working and tailoring workshops, etc. In constructions, they were molding clay bricks, brick burning: working the kilns, plastering the sheds and the state buildings with clay; more precisely, stretching the clay paste on the surfaces, perhaps with the aid of an improvised trowel (a small wooden plate with a handle), as they used to do it back home.

In agriculture, they were employed in cotton growing, in grass mowing and fodder preparation, in livestock care (sheep, horses) on kolkhoz and sovkhoz farms, and in the growth of silkworms.

> We were brought to cultivate cotton, working from dawn till dusk, with a break between 12.00 and 15.00, when the heat is unbearable. There were no resting days or holidays, we worked the whole year round. Whoever did not work properly, did not get any food. The mosquitoes were literally eating us alive, passing tropical malaria to us. It so happened that everybody got sick with malaria, indigenous people, newcomers, and NKVD employees together. Moscow sent a commission of physicians with large powers and special funding to fight the epidemic. They were looking for physicians among the deported, so my parents were called to work. We were allowed to go to the district center, Slavianka, where father had to organize a malaria control station. It was our salvation from certain death. My mother was hired according to her training – a gynecologist. Still, death was decimating all those around us. I was looking for any job, so I could get the daily ration of 600 grams of bread.[44]

> I worked in the coal mines for the duration of the war, where I caught tuberculosis. To keep us from starving, we went to the train station at night and collected the beets and frozen potatoes which had fallen from the passing trains. People died by the hundreds, with bodies being simply piled up.[45]

> We were taking care of sheep, because the collective farm was specialized in sheep breeding and was called «Ovțevod» [in Russian «Овцевод» - shepherd - A. F.]. Every day we would herd the sheep eight kilometers away, to water them at the Syr Darya river.[46]

> Mother was working for the war effort, spinning Karakul wool, and weaving gloves, stockings. The work was hard: spinning, balls of thread, dust, weaving all day long for the needs of the army. She was working at *raipotrebsoiuz* [the district consumption union] and was paid through the ration card system: for us [the children – A. F.] – 200 grams of bread and

> for mother – 400 grams, because mother was working. I would go to the district center to pick up the bread in the early morning, before sunrise, and would wait in line till noon, when the bread was given.[47]

> We were working in the field, and the boys scythed the hay. The payment for our work was barley, grain, wheat, which we turned into groats and ate. We had no clothes, nothing to keep us warm.[48]

During the rationalization period, the deportees with jobs were given ration cards. The cards were used to acquire bread, other foodstuffs and essential goods. The goods received on ration cards were resold or exchanged for other products. If the family had an adult male, the ration included a bottle of vodka, that could be sold for 500 rubles to soldiers leaving for the front, a former deportee remembers.[49] Workers were also paid with goods produced in their workplace: a woman deported to the Kurgan region, who worked as a milkmaid, was paid with half a kilo of bread for a day of work (the other workers received a kilo of bread) and skimmed milk.

Because, for a long time, deportees living in villages were not accepted into kolkhozes as full members, they were discriminated against when it came to wages and distribution of goods.

Deportees who retrained themselves to practice more demanding jobs – usually, young people – would get higher wages over time, but such cases were probably rather uncommon. Nina Prodan, who had studied philology at the University of Bucharest, became an engineer in hydro-amelioration and, as she writes, designed channels on Syr Darya.[50] Those who were children at the time of the deportation and those born in exile had better prospects than their parents. The first displaced people were forced to do all sorts of work – mostly unfamiliar to them – to feed their close companions: children, elders, other deportees. Older children in the family worked to support younger siblings or incapacitated parents. Because of this, many were not able to pursue secondary school, let alone higher education.

During the war, the life of the deportees was very difficult. The living conditions of deportees originating from Bessarabia and Bukovina could not have been decent given the local context: a large number of deportees brought from a huge area through several mass operations organized by the Soviet government in the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s (69,283 Poles and Germans deported from Ukraine in 1936, 95,526 Koreans in 1937, about half a million Germans in autumn 1941, etc.). Besides, taking

into account the Soviet–German war that had begun, in the Kazakh RSS there were 137,900 people who had been evacuated in October 1941 from the front and from large cities like Moscow and Leningrad (10,227 in Aktobe oblast, 8,479 in Kyzylorda oblast, 14,401 in Akmolinsk oblast, 16,100 in South Kazakhstan and 8,942 in Karaganda oblast). The number of evacuees would increase in the following months.[51] It is understandable that the local economy could not absorb the growing labor force in such a short time, and the social infrastructure was under huge pressure. For the population, all this translated into malnutrition; diseases caused by malnourishment, lack of sanitary conditions, premature deaths.

It was only after the war was over that the Bessarabian and Bukovinian deportees began to be assisted by the state authorities: they were given cows, land plots on which they grew millet, potatoes, cucumbers, carrots, etc. The kolkhozes helped them work in the fields, providing traction animals for agricultural work and seedlings.

At retirement, the work done during the deportation was not taken into account for a state pension, although the deportees had been released in the meantime. Thus, children would provide from their own wages for the parents who were no longer able to work.[52]

Acquiring Consumer Goods: Available Resources and Supply Strategies

Given the extremely modest pay, how did the deportees acquire things required for living: food, clothing, and footwear?

At first, the deportees who were able to take with them items from their household, jewelry and gold objects, traded them for food. Men's suits, towels and mats were valued commodities, but these things ran short pretty fast.

For the purchase of food, the most realistic solutions were working in local households and begging. These activities were common for all groups of deportees in difficult times – especially in the early years of exile.

> My grandpa would help the local fishermen and they would share with him some of the catch. We would not eat the best fish; instead we would smoke it and sell it to passengers at the train station.[53]

> My sister and I were employed by Kazakhs; we would work the hand–mill for a handful of groats, from which mother made porridge…[54]

Children were usually the ones to beg – this is confirmed by multiple testimonies. They would also be the ones to gather the grain ears left on the stubble after the harvest. They were beaten by the guards and the bosses, though it was obvious that the cereals were left to rot in the field, but their parents could have been sent to jail if they were to do it themselves.

In regions with a richer fauna and flora, people hunted, went fishing, collected edible plants (leek, wild carrot, etc.).

> It was turtle soup and orach that saved us from the Grim Reaper.[55]

> There was a forest next to our dwelling. Men were hunting rabbits, boars. Kazakhs do not eat pork, so they did not stop us from hunting.[56]

A former deportee said that at the age of five or six, she and her younger brother would catch ground squirrels, and their mother cooked the small rodents for the large family.

In order to feed their children, parents brought home products taken from the ration of the animals they looked after at state farms (a handful of barley or porridge meant to feed the pigs). If caught, they faced years of imprisonment.

In winter, the most suitable footwear was felt shoes and the best outfit – padded coats. Production did not meet demand, though. The population made footwear from machine tires and from coats' arm sleeves.

Deportees bought dung bricks from the locals. This kind of fuel was not always for sale, and even when it was, money was tight anyway. They were gathering cattle dung, mixing it with grass, for the straw had to be brought from great distances, dried the mixture in the shape of bricks, and fueled the fire with it.

With no fire, no shoes and nothing to wear, some would take jobs as animal handlers, and lived in stables.

> The temperature reached minus 40–50 degrees Celsius in winter. And when they gave us 20 kg of potatoes, we put them near the stove, but they still froze. We did not have much fuel for the fire, and the winters were very long. The cold would come early in the winter and it would not get warmer until May. That is why, when asked to take care of some old man's oxen, I accepted and went on to sleep in the manger, because it was warmer.[57]

Starting in1948, living conditions began to improve to some degree – some cases were reported of deportees helping their relatives in Moldavia during the famine of 1946/47 by sending them food. Parcels from Moldavia were also sent and delivered to the deportees in Kazakhstan, but the families of deportees sent food to the heads of families detained in labor camps instead.[58]

The greatest support seems to have come, however, from the local population, including from the deportees resettled in earlier waves, but especially from ordinary Kazakhs. The texts devoted to this subject are full of warmth and sincere gratitude.

> […] if it were not for the Kazakhs – we would have died of starvation.[59]

> We were not quite alone, other people had been deported here: Turkmen, Tatars, brought from the Volga as early as 1933–1936. Both the Turkmens and Tatars treated us very nicely. They helped us with food and let us sleep in their huts for weeks. People under duress help each other whenever they can.[60]

These interactions are all the more noteworthy as the Kazakhs and other deportees did not understand Romanian, the Bessarabians did not speak Kazakh, and neither the one, nor the other group spoke any Russian at all, or when they did, it was quite basic. Deportees from the former territories of Romania followed the rites of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, the Mosaic religion or other Christian denominations, while, before the process of Sovietization, Kazakh society officially followed the Islamic teachings. However, when it came to local bosses, deportees expressed more critical views.

Conclusions

The deportations carried out by the communist regime transferred their victims into a very different geoclimatic environment than they had previously experienced, and into a society with a completely new property regime. The deportees were not only totally unprepared for the changes, but they were almost completely deprived of any means of subsistence, clothing, food supplies. Their identity reference points – the relationship to property, the family affiliation, the emotional bond with the geographic environment in which they were born, which was both

familiar and friendly – were severely undermined and distorted. Some, perhaps having the intuition of a enclosed horizon, took their own lives. There are numerous testimonies about suicides and suicide attempts, and even mass suicide, that occurred both during the journey toward the place of deportation and in exile. Some deportees are reported to have lost their minds. In the early years of deportation, the number of premature deaths was very high.

The inability to find a job and to make a living was the main problem of all deportees. When jobs were available, they worked hard, even for a minuscule pay, the subjects report. The situation of the deportees slightly improved when they were granted individual plots, on which vegetables, herbaceous plants and other foodstuffs would be cultivated. Youngsters began to attend various classes and took up the necessary crafts in the village economic system, such as: tractor drivers, combine harvester drivers, accountants, etc. From the testimonies, it was obvious that the deportees did their best to save their children and, then, to send them to schools: the narrators frequently point out cases of their children receiving higher education. The values shared by the deportees concerning labor, property, family, the desire to live with others and to be held in high regard do not seem to have undergone essential changes.

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